

Get Lucky

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by Nathan Alderman

## Chapter One

### The Shot

I woke up in a car trunk, on my way to trouble.

If I'd known where I was headed — toward the spacemen and the creature features, the stainless steel scalpel and the silver knife, and that mangy sack of hell someone mistook for a cat — I might have started screaming.

But I didn't. Not then. Not yet.

I just lay in the stale, close darkness, listening to the housefly buzz of the motor, feeling the last lingering kiss of the booze slide away from me to make room for the hangover. Waiting for all the things I didn't want to remember to crowd back in and eat me alive.

The floor of the trunk sloped, bumped, leveled off. The motor snapped off, neat as a lightswitch, and I heard a door open and shut. A key turned in the trunk latch. The sun burst in and punched me in the eyes.

First I saw a shadow over me. Then I saw a man. Well, mostly a man. Everywhere except the face.

And then in my mind he was me, and I was standing over an open trunk looking in, and a single fly on a patch of blue rubbed its legs together —

The mostly-man saw it coming and moved just in time. I splashed my most recent meal over the rim of the trunk onto white concrete, and a little bit onto his perfect black shoes. There was nothing solid in it. Nothing that even used to be solid.

“Christ,” the mostly-man said, sounding none too familiar with the owner of the name. He took a step back from the mess. “Now I gotta get the hose.” He frowned at me, and the things on his face frowned with him. “Henry Pearl.”

I wiped one wooly, stinking sleeve of my jacket across my lips. “Pleased to meet you,” I lied. I still wasn’t sure what I was looking at.

“No, rummy.” The mostly-man gave me a little open-handed love-tap on the side of my jaw that didn’t quite knock my back fillings loose. I don’t think he meant anything by it. “Henry Pearl is you.”

“Oh,” I said. “Nice to meet me.” I lay there and thought for a moment, waiting for it to make sense. The sun pressed flat and hot against my face. My eyelids sagged. Unconsciousness reached up from the dark.

Warm rusty water slapped my face and stung its way up my nose. I jerked and coughed and banged my head against the side of the trunk. The pain sobered me, but only a little.

“The hell you do that for?” I spat. Water without any whiskey in it was just an insult.

“On account of the smell,” the mostly-man said around the throb in my skull, and

tossed the hose aside. His fist reached down and made friends with my shirtfront, and then I was out of the car and vertical, or close enough to it. Close enough to get a better eyeful of him.

His face looked carved out of granite, none of the edges sanded down, and some nicks and scars where the chisel had slipped. Blue eyes like a swimming pool on a hot day, serene and glassy and unreachable. Maybe he was good looking, once. Before somebody did that to him.

He had ink on him. Not like you'd see on a sailor's arm or chest — not a heart, an anchor, the name of some sweetheart who stayed under his skin. His ink covered his face in fat stripes of black, wild tiger-tangles of curling knifepoints, blood-spatter sprays of dots. Ancient, tribal. Maybe I'd seen something like it in a book once. Maybe I'd actually ever read a book.

"Jesus," I said, to the weird, inked-up face.

"Wrong again." His smile made the shapes on his face move. It gave me the creeps.

I heard a fly buzz. Or just thought I did. That sick feeling started to crawl up my back on six little insect legs. The man with the ink must have seen it in my face; he took a step back. But his fist didn't budge from my shirt.

"Easy," he said. "I just got a shine on the shoes."

I felt my guts roil. "I need a drink." Sweat ran down the back of my neck. "Please. Be a pal. Say you got some whiskey."

"Got some in the house." I followed the twitch of his head up a long curving drive of blazing concrete, lined with statues, to a big white house at the top.

"I know this." I said, before I even realized it was true. "I've been here." The reason started to come back to me. I started to wish it wouldn't.

Then the big man moved and I moved with him, up the drive toward the house, my heels dragging on the concrete. I looked off to the right to the swath of green lawn, expecting a neat little cottage. Instead I saw a black pit in the ground, the grass around the edges burnt, a concrete foundation cracked and crumbled and scorched, and bits of wood sticking up around the edges like a prizefighter's last few teeth.

Something clanked against the tip of my left shoe. A lidless can of cat food, stinking in the heat, bled mashed-up meat onto the pale concrete of the driveway.

Then we passed from the blind wall of the sun into the blue shadow of the house's awning. The man with the ink fiddled a key in a door and dragged me inside, down a hallway as still and quiet as a mausoleum, and almost as bright.

The first room on the right smelled cool and musty; a bed waited in the middle on it, the sheets crisp and new when the man with the ink sat me down.

"Whiskey?" I asked, without much hope. Heavy bars blocked the windows. I saw a big desk, an overstuffed easy chair in the corner by the door, and no refreshments.

"Lie down." The man with the ink didn't wait for my answer. He looped thick leather straps around one wrist, and then the other, and then both my ankles.

"Not on the first date." I tugged uselessly at the straps. My lips felt dead and mushy when I spoke. "Not even on the third."

"Sit tight." He chuckled a little, and went out through the open door.

My curdled guts and I lay there and waited. The bed didn't feel so steady.

I heard two sets of footsteps coming down the hall. The man with the ink filled the doorway for a moment, then stepped aside to reveal a round little man.

He had a fat childish face and a comical little Christmas wreath of graying whiskers fringed under his nose and around his mouth. He peered at me as if I were on the business end of a microscope.

“Yes, I see,” the round little man said. He set a black bag down on the desk and snapped its clasp, and took out a hypodermic. He held it up to the light, thumped the side of it a little, and squirted a bit of liquid jauntily out the end of the needle. When he turned back to me, I saw dark circles under his eyes and a little sweat filming his cheekbones. None of it seemed real.

“Mr. Pearl,” he said, “I am going to help you.”

“Will you get me a whiskey?” I asked. My mouth was the Sahara.

The little man chuckled. “Something better.” That’s how I knew he was lying.

I started to pull against the restraints. “Hold him, please,” the little man said, his consonants too sharp, his inflections all wrong. The man with the ink came over and put his hands on my shoulders. When he held you, you stayed held. I watched the little man roll up my sleeve and probe my arm to find a vein.

“Don’t do this,” I said. “I didn’t do anything to you. I didn’t do anything. What did I do?”

It was a stupid thing to ask. I knew what I’d done. What I deserved.

“Now, now.” The little man’s smile would’ve been a lot friendlier if he’d kept it behind his lips. “This is a good thing. This is a gift I give you.”

The needle stung my arm. I watched the plunger glide all the way down, felt something strange moving into me, mingling with my blood. Then the little man pulled the needle out and stuck a plaster on.

He gave me one last jack-o-lantern smile and stood up. The man with the ink let me go. They moved together toward the door.

“How long?” the man with the ink asked, not quite low enough to be out of earshot.

“Three days,” the little man said. “Perhaps two, two and a half. This is if he is strong. If not ...” The silence went on longer than I liked. He looked back at me, appraising, and finally shrugged. “He comes from healthy stock, I think.”

I opened my mouth to say something, and the world fell away under me. Through a whirling funhouse tunnel, I saw the man with the ink looking back at me as he shut the door. I opened my mouth but the words came out topsy-turvy, as dizzy as I was. Someone sat in the chair by the door now, someone who hadn’t been there before. Looking at me from a face that writhed with flies. His lips moved.

A single fly on a patch of blue skin —

Somebody started screaming and didn’t stop.

If I have to think about it, I guess maybe it was me.

## Chapter Two

### The Note

A million years and another life ago, I stepped out of the unmarked car onto that same curving drive, gazing up under the brim of my hat at that same white house. I had a badge in my wallet, a .38 automatic in my shoulder holster, and a conscience clean enough to eat off.

Joe Vasquez unfolded himself from the passenger side and let out a low whistle as long as the driveway. "I'll take it." He wore a suit whose sleeves hung down a half-inch too long, and a gun he'd never fired outside the range.

"Easy enough," I said. "Just marry a million bucks."

"The rocket science probably doesn't hurt," Joe said.

"You can ask him about your flying saucers." I grinned.

He scowled at his freshly polished shoes, and jammed his hands in his pockets past the wrists. "Weather balloons. That's all they're saying now."



He followed me up the drive, the July sun bouncing off the dazzling white paving up into our eyes. Just past ten in the morning, and under my jacket a creeping film of sweat already stuck my shirt to the small of my back. Off to the right of the house I saw a tidy little white wooden cottage amid the ocean of lush green grass.

We passed a small fountain, a stone satyr pouring out his cask of wine, and stepped into the shade of the front awning. I had to lean into the bell before it could be bothered to ring. It was testing me.

A geologic age passed. Insects droned and rattled in the gardens around us. All the way down the drive, in the street, I just heard the faint brush of a passing car.

A shape moved behind the frosted glass of the door. Joe and I had our shields out and waiting by the time the latch clicked.

“Police,” I said. “I’m Detective Pearl. This is Detective Vasquez.”

The butler looked like they’d shipped him over from the old country in a box filled with his native soil. His waxy yellow Droopy Dog face got a little tighter when I said “Vasquez.”

Joe took off his hat and nodded courteously. “May we come in?” he asked, in that polite way he had, just to show that he’d gone to school and learned his manners and didn’t have anything so unsavory as an accent anymore.

“This way,” the butler said at last, and stepped back. I let Joe go first, just to watch the old man’s left eyelid twitch.

We stepped across the threshold, and right away the hush drifted down on us like a blanket from the very top of the vaulted ceilings. The butler shuffled glacially beneath the arch of a high curving stairway, toward a long white hall. “The lady of the house will see you in the

solarium.”

“We’d like to see the boy’s room first,” I said. “If it’s all right with you.”

“The lady of the house,” he repeated. His tongue slithered out to wet his lips.

“We’ll just be a minute,” I said. It wasn’t a request.

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The boy’s room faced east from the second floor. Through a window set into the slanted roof, you could see the gardeners in white, picking their careful way down the rows of hedges, shears shining as they snipped away the dark green leaves. It looked like pleasant work from up here. It would, from enough of a distance. Dustmotes danced in the sunbeam, angels on the head of a pin.

The baseball glove on the dresser had been someone else’s once, well-worn, bitter with the tang of oiled leather. On the comforter of the small wooden bed, patterns of identical cowboys chased identical Indians across identical plains. A cowboy hat, too small by half for Tom Mix, slouched upon one post of the headboard.

The butler hovered at the doorway, occasionally making small polite noises at the back of his throat. The badges were all well and good, but our tax bracket was too low for his liking. We’d pinch something shiny the moment he looked away.

The print boys and the photographers had already been here; traces of black dust smudged the windowsill, and the burnt smell of flashpowder lingered. Joe opened the closet door with the tip of a pen; row after row of blue jackets, white dress shirts, and khaki trousers hung neat and pressed. It hurt me to look at them, empty, waiting. They were so small.

Everything seemed neat and orderly. Nothing upturned, nothing disturbed. The bed

had been slept in, one corner of the comforter turned up, hanging out like the tongue of a friendly dog.

“Anyone been in here besides the police?” I asked the butler. “Anyone touch anything, move anything?”

The butler shook his head. A bead of sweat had formed on his stiff upper lip. Later, when he was alone, he would shut himself in a small windowless room and shamefully dab it with a handkerchief.

One of the boy’s drawings hung by a thumbtack from the blue wallpaper over the bed. A row of crude figures, arms splayed wide, eyes and nose and mouth in the wrong places, but sweetly so. And in a child’s writing, under each one: DADDY MOMMY WHIT BEVERLY ME.

Daddy stood the tallest. Mommy’s arms drooped slightly. Whit frowned. Beverly stood closest to the drawing of the boy, and held his hand.

Far away in the house, someone started playing the piano. Prokofiev. *Peter and the Wolf*, one of the cheerful parts. Far too cheerful for this.

The butler cleared his throat again.

“All right.” I nodded to Joe, and we followed the butler creaking down the hall toward the back stairs.

“Okay, Watson,” I murmured to Joe. “Speak.”

“No signs of struggle,” he said. “Nothing missing, nothing broken. Lab boys said they didn’t find any prints on the doors or the windows — none out of the ordinary.”

“Which means?” I waited, testing him.

“Could just be gloves,” Joe said under his breath. “But the room’s so neat. Even the bed. Nothing knocked over, nothing out of place. So it could be the snatch was someone he knew.”

I tapped one finger on the tip of my nose, and nodded.

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The solarium shone with bright glass, the air warm and dry, furniture white and wicker and elegant. Electric fans chased themselves lazily overhead, never in a hurry to catch up. Outside, beyond the windows, a swimming pool coruscated, sapphire in a white square of shimmering concrete. A brown man in a white uniform swept the surface deliberately with a net on a long pole, scooping up fallen flowers.

“Madame,” the butler said, “and young sir, these are the detectives.” The last word sounded like it had crawled onto his tongue.

From a chair by the window in one corner of the room, a million dollars stirred beneath a white knit blanket, and looked up at us with eyes far older than they had any right to be. “Thank you, Coles,” said Mrs. Madeline Whittier, from the far end of a long tunnel. “That will be all for now.”

The old ghoul hovered behind us. Somewhere, good silver sat in the open, unsecured.

“Beat it,” the young man in the rumpled white suit said to the butler. It made the brim of the hat pulled down over his face dance. He looked about an inch or two away from slipping out of his chair completely. His manicured hands dangled, the fingertips stained nicotine yellow.

The butler creaked away. Back to his box.

“Mrs. Whittier,” I said, taking off my hat. Joe did likewise. “I’m Henry Pearl. This is

my partner, Joe Vasquez. They sent us from Central about your boy.”

I should have known it was the wrong thing to say. I could see it in her pale porcelain face; the best idea and the worst idea occurred to her all at once. She clutched at her blanket and sat up a little.

“Have you — ?”

“No ma’am,” I said quickly. “We’re just beginning the investigation. Whatever you can tell us will be a big help.”

“Oh,” she said, and sat very still. “I’m sorry.” Somewhere inside her, a phonograph spun around and around. Finally the needle found a groove. “Would you like to sit down, please?”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said. Joe and I found seats and took them. The wicker creaked and shifted under me. The arms of the chair felt smooth as polished bone.

“Oh,” she said again, to no one in particular. She looked a well-kept forty-five, lean and birdish with auburn hair. Once upon a time, she had been pretty. You could tell that from the bones of her face. But they stood out a little too sharply now, and the dark patches under her eyes, the ones foundation couldn’t quite conceal, hadn’t gotten there in a single morning. Her makeup, even and perfect, looked less like Max Factor, and more like the mortuary.

“This is Howard Junior,” she said, after a few more skips of the needle. She pointed at the young man in the opposite chair.

“Whit,” he said. The hat brim bounced again, and then he lifted it, squinting at us with bloodshot eyes. He was out of his teens, but not too far. He had dark hair, brown eyes, and a face that would have been handsome, if he weren’t having the really bad morning that follows a

really good night. From the looks of him — and the society columns, and the clippings in our file back at Central — it wasn't his first. He sized us up in a few seconds, then lifted one hand to encircle a sweating glass on a little table next to him. Nothing left in it but the ice cubes. He shook one into his mouth, and sucked on it.

"Mr. Whittier," I said, and nodded to him. That got me a little amused snort from under the hatbrim. I let it pass and turned back to the mother. For her sake I took a second to sand down the edges in my voice.

"When did you first notice he was gone?" I asked.

"I didn't," she said, and bit her lower lip. "It was about six o'clock. Doris — she always wakes him — Doris came in to get him ready."

"How long has Doris worked for you, ma'am?" Joe asked. She looked at him with a little start, as if the grandfather clock or the sofa or the side table had suddenly spoken to her. It took her a second to think.

"Three years," she said. "Since Billy turned two. But you mustn't think — she loved Billy. Everyone loved Billy."

Whit gave another little snort, and crunched on his ice.

"It's just routine, ma'am," Joe said carefully. "We don't assume anything. We just have to ask."

I took a pad out of my jacket pocket and opened it to the notes I'd scribbled down at Central. "You called the Plumeria Heights station at half past eight, is that correct?"

She nodded.

"May I ask why the delay?"

“We thought maybe he was hiding. Sometimes he gets up early, on his own. We had everyone checking the grounds, and the house. We called the neighbors all along our street, and the drugstore down at the corner.”

I wrote that down. Joe did the same on his own pad. “I saw a guard at your gate when I drove in. Did he see anything last night?”

She shook her head. “That’s not our usual man. He took the evening off around nine last night. His wife was giving birth. She was a few weeks early, you see. The service couldn’t send us a new one until this morning.”

“And what time did he arrive?”

“Seven. I think seven. Coles will know.” Her eyes unfocused. “A little baby boy.”

“Mrs. Whittier,” I said, leaning forward. “I realize you may have been told to say otherwise, but this is very important. Has anyone called you about your son? Has there been a ransom demand?”

She shook her head. “No. No one has said anything. No one has told us anything. If only—” Her knuckles went white around the fringe of the blanket.

“All right,” I said, calm, steady. “That’s good. That’s good news.” It wasn’t. “What was he wearing when he went to bed?”

“His pajamas, I think,” Mrs. Whittier said. “I ... I wasn’t feeling well last night. I retired early. Doris put him to bed. But he likes his pajamas, the ones with the cowboys. Most nights I tuck him in. I give him a kiss goodnight. I do.”

“It’s all right, Mrs. Whittier,” I said, and Joe nodded in sympathy beside me. “Now. This part is important, too. It may be embarrassing, but the truth could help us get your boy back.

Your family is ... it's well-known that you come from resources. And your husband's been in the papers his fair share. His company. Do you know of anyone who might want to hurt you?"

She shook her head quickly. "No, no. No one. We're very well-liked. We give lots of parties."

"Does Sol Lavender come to those parties?" I asked.

She stiffened a little in her chair. She didn't like that question — not because she had something to hide, I thought, but because she felt she clearly didn't. She opened her mouth to speak, but then her eyes shifted focus behind us. I turned and saw a sweet-faced girl of maybe twenty-three, a little plump in the cheeks, but nicely put together. She waited with her hands folded on the white apron of her gray maid's uniform. Just like in the movies.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Whittier," the girl said softly. "I just — it's time for your rest now. Like the doctor said."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, of course. Do you gentlemen need anything else?"

"No ma'am," I said. Joe and I stood up. Whit stayed seated. "Thank you for your time."

"You'll call me," she said. "You'll call me if you hear anything."

"We will," I said. "Straightaway."

She put one hand on the arm of her chair and pushed, rocking a little. The girl in the gray uniform hurried past us — her perfume reached out and stroked my cheek — and carefully took Mrs. Whittier by the arm and helped her stand. Together they moved back toward the cool of the house. Mrs. Whittier took small steps. Any one of them might topple her sideways, and send her breaking into bits across the floor.



In the doorway, the girl paused and flitted a quick, uncertain look back at Whit. He was leering at her from under the brim of his hat. He winked and opened his lips, revealing an ice cube wedged between his upper and lower front teeth. She flushed and frowned and turned away quickly. Joe and I shared a look before we sat down again.

“We need to ask you some questions, too, Mr. Whittier,” Joe said to him.

“How come I get the Mex?” he asked, looking past Joe at me. I didn’t have to look at Joe to know that his mouth would be tight, the line of his shoulders rigid under his jacket.

“I’m last year’s model,” I said calmly. “Joe here, he’s in factory condition. Listens better than I do. You talk to me, my broken-down old ears might hear something wrong. Maybe something that puts you in the cooler.”

Whit’s laugh got halfway up his throat and lost interest. “Not for long it wouldn’t,” he said. Somewhere, a small army of expensive lawyers instinctively leaned toward their telephones. But when he turned his eyes back at Joe, they were only mostly amused.

“Where were you last night?” Joe asked him.

“Out,” Whit said, and shook the last two ice cubes in his glass. “With pals.”

“Where?”

Whit sneered. “Where wasn’t I?” He closed his eyes and put a hand to one temple, rubbing it. I could practically feel his head ache from here. “Let’s see. It was a Tuesday, so ... probably the Cabana Club. The Flamingo. Ludovico’s. Then a nightcap at the Red Shoe, and home again, home again, jiggety-jig.”

“What time did you get home?” Joe said, writing in clean, tidy cursive on the pad.

Whit exhaled slowly. “Search me. Three. Three-thirty. I had a girl with me, so I

wasn't exactly looking at the clock."

"This girl have a name?" Joe asked.

"I expect so," Whit shrugged. "I hear they're giving them out at birth these days."

"Cute," Joe said, in a low and even voice.

"Cute as a pet Mex with a badge," Whit said, and ground it in with a nasty grin. I could see Joe's hand clutch the pen.

"Last time I checked," I said quietly to Whit, leaning forward a little, "that's exactly one more badge than you had. Be nice."

"I got one on me somewhere," Whit said. "From a Cracker Jack box." He waited for me to see how funny that was. When I didn't, he deflated a little, and frowned. We were taking all the fun out of his morning.

"I saw her out at four," he sighed. "All the way to the gate. We had different ideas of a good time. She wasn't very friendly about it."

"You see anyone else?"

"Only the man in the moon."

"These people you were out with," Joe said, and then stopped and phrased carefully. "I'm gonna need you to tell me their names."

He did, indifferently, with his eyes shut. Joe and I wrote them all down.

Before we could ask anything more he pushed himself up out of the chair, slowly. Paused a second to steady himself. "Is that all?"

"For now," Joe told him. "We'll let you know if there's anything else."

"You do that," Whit said, and snorted again. He looked right through Joe for a

second, and then made his way with slow and deliberate steps for the doorway back into the house.

“You don’t seem too busted up,” I said as he passed. “For a guy whose kid brother just vanished.”

“Half,” Whit said, looking straight ahead into the house. There it was lovely and cool and dark, and the world wouldn’t hurt his poor head so much. “Half brother. So I guess I’m just half upset.” He left. His glass sat on the table beside his vacant chair, slowly forming a ring of moisture.

Joe made a face. “Piece of work.”

I just nodded, and folded up my notepad and put it back in my jacket. “Don’t get sore at me,” I said, “but I need you to talk to the help. See who saw what. See who maybe didn’t show for work today.”

“They all think I look like their little grandson,” he said, shaking his head. “Or their nephew. Or their favorite cousin.”

“Chin up,” I said. “Maybe they have sinful granddaughters who need to meet a nice respectable boy.”

“I live in hope,” Joe said. “What about you?”

“I’m going to try to exhume the butler. You notice anyone conspicuously absent on our little tour thus far?”

“The man of the house,” Joe said. “Careful he doesn’t shoot you to the moon.”

“Maybe that’s what happened to the boy,” I said. But the joke died in my mouth.

Ransom meant someone cared at least a little about the kid, maybe enough to keep

him fed and breathing. No ransom meant maybe they had something else in mind. Maybe they'd already done it.

We split up inside the house. Joe headed back toward the kitchen. I meant to find the butler. I really did. But I heard the sound of piano echoing through the cool, dim, lavish rooms. And on a hunch I followed that instead.

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She looked tall and gangly for her age, barely into her teens, her legs skinny like a new foal's. Behind her big round glasses her eyes shut tight, rimmed in red. The single braid of her straw-colored hair swayed slightly against the back of her dark red sweater. The tune was happy. She didn't play it that way.

Down went her shoulders, pistonlike. Down went her long fingers, paler than the keys they struck. She left dark smudges on the ivory. One of the print boys had inked her fingers — to rule out false positives, or just so she could feel helpful. Possibly both.

She struck a wrong note and stopped, and her mouth tightened.

"You could've kept going," I said, from the doorway. She gave a start, and looked at me with big blue bloodshot eyes, and I felt like a heel. I showed her the badge and she calmed down a little.

"Sorry," I said. "My name's Henry. I'm with the police. I'm here about your brother. I'm guessing you're Beverly."

"Miss Whittier," she said. Her eyes swept back down to the keys.

"Miss Whittier." I nodded at the sheet music. "Does Billy like that?"

Her voice was a little mouse, sticking its head out of its hole, twitching its whiskers.

“It’s his favorite. He played the record again and again until it broke, and then he cried until Father bought him a new one.” She started to play again, from the beginning. But softer this time, to allow for conversation. “He doesn’t like the part with the wolf, though. It scares him.”

“I saw a drawing of you up in his room,” I said. “Do you spend a lot of time together?”

“I have piano lessons in the mornings, or sometimes tennis or dance,” she said. “Not today, though. Mother had Coles call them to say. In the afternoons I do riding. That’s when I’m not in school. But when I can, yes.”

“Doris takes care of him, right?” I asked her. “Does he like Doris?”

“Well enough,” she said, and pressed her tongue into the corner of her cheek as she got to one of the tricky parts. “She isn’t mean to him or anything. I know what you’re trying to ask.”

“You do?”

“I hear those programs on the radio. I read books. Doris isn’t like that.” She played well. It had the beginnings of feeling in it. “He just likes me better,” she said, and just for a second, a proud little smile curled one corner of her mouth. “Sometimes we read together in the solarium. Or play cowboys and Indians. I make a very good Indian.” Under the piano bench, her brown loafers worked the pedals, the laces looped in tidy, symmetrical double knots.

“Does anyone else like Billy? Is anyone friends with him?”

“He likes Jaime. The gardener. One of them. Jaime lets him dig in the dirt when Mother is away.”

“Is Jaime here today?”

“I don’t know. But Jaime’s nice. He not like that, either. Not like you’re thinking. That’s not his problem.”

“What’s his problem?”

“It’s not polite to talk about these things,” she said quietly. “Mother says.”

She made another mistake, and froze, the sound souring and dying quickly in the wooden guts of the piano. Her hands trembled on the keys.

“He doesn’t know how to tie his shoes yet.” A chill breeze rippled over her voice. “I always have to do it for him. He won’t let Doris.”

I had my hand on the handkerchief in my pocket. But she took a deep, wet sniff, and set her lower lip, and with dry eyes flipped back a few pages in the sheet music to try again.

“So Jaime’s all right,” I said. “Is there anyone else? Anyone who isn’t?”

She pursed her lips, like she’d just taken a swig of sour milk. “Eli.”

“Eli who?”

“Lavender. From next door.”

Sol’s boy. That made him trouble right out of the gate. He was one of the names Whit had given us, tucked snug in the notebook in my pocket. And he rang a buzzer somewhere far back in my memory, for reasons that had nothing to do with his father.

“What’s so bad about Eli?”

“He pays attention,” she said. “To Billy. Shows him magic tricks, every time he’s over. Sometimes I see him looking. One time Whit had a party, and Eli was here. I saw him at the foot of the stairs —”

“Miss Whittier,” the butler said behind me. I didn’t jump out of my skin, but not for

lack of trying. “You know you shouldn’t play when your mother is resting.”

“I didn’t know she was resting,” Beverly said, calm and even. A hint of sullenness, a challenge in her voice.

“Your mother isn’t well,” the butler said. “She needs quiet to gather her strength.”

Beverly shut the sheet music and started to lower the lid over the piano keys. With about two inches to go, she let it drop. The sound echoed sharply. I saw the butler flinch a little. It brightened my morning.

“I was looking for you,” I told him. He turned to acknowledge me at last, like he’d been hoping I’d dry up and blow away. “I need to talk to Mr. Whittier.”

“Mr. Whittier is not at home today,” the butler said. “He’s away on business. If perhaps you would leave your card —”

“Father’s in his workshed,” Beverly said quietly. I saw the butler give her a stare a basilisk would envy. She just sat there, her hands folded in her lap against the pleats of her skirt. “He’s been there for an hour.”

The butler looked at me again and turned an even paler shade. One more, and he’d be transparent. “Mr. Whittier does not like to be disturbed.”

“I’ll talk softly,” I said. “Are you going to show me to him, or do I go barging on in on my lonesome?”

The butler gave a short, violent nod. He turned and walked off and didn’t wait for me to catch up.

I tipped my hat silently at Miss Whittier, like the cowboys do in the pictures. That earned me a small, conspiratorial smile. We were pals now.

But even as I watched, I saw the smile quiver and crumble around the edge of her lips, and then she looked away.

#

The butler didn't burst into flames in the sunlight. He just gave it some serious thought.

The air felt at least ten degrees hotter since Joe and I had arrived, with the sun still climbing. The smell of fresh mown grass made me dizzy. Away across the lawn, near the hedges that marked the property line, I saw Joe pushing his hat up to drag a handkerchief across his brow, deep in conversation with a white-suited gardener.

A trail of flagstones set into the grass led us from the side of the house to the little cottage I'd seen earlier. It had small square windows on either side, one door facing us, and a chimney on the slanting roof, curling a cat's tail of black smoke.

The butler got halfway down the path and stopped dead. I brushed past him and turned back to see him standing ramrod-still.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked. He shook his head curtly.

"Not while Mr. Whittier is working," he said, counting flagstones with his eyes.

"Minimum safe distance." Sweat gleamed on his shiny bald scalp. It had nothing to do with the heat.

I shrugged and kept going. At the door — heavy, steel, painted to match the rest of the little cottage, featureless except for a keyhole — I lifted my hand to knock and stopped. The great man was in residence; I heard low, intent, constant chatter from inside. One voice. It didn't sound like English. The syllables were thicker, more tangled. Older.



I knocked. The chatter stopped.

“Mr. Whittier?” I said. “Police.”

I heard nothing for a few seconds, and then the sound of a heavy steel bar moving against the other side of the door. It swung inward. Howard Colquin Whittier looked at me, his face shining, slick with perspiration.

He was dark-complexioned, movie-star handsome, with a neatly trimmed mustache and a thunderhead of curling black hair piled up above his forehead. His eyes looked focused, intent. I got the sense they were taking in a lot of information in a very short time. A couple days’ growth of beard had settled in on his cheeks and chin. He’d unbuttoned his white dress shirt down to his loose-fitting black trousers. His feet were bare.

“Detective Pearl. Can I come in, Mr. Whittier?” I showed him the badge.

“I’m busy.” He sounded a little out of breath. He began to shut the door, and I sacrificed a good shoeshine moving the tip of my loafer into the gap in the doorjamb.

“I’m here about your son,” I said, quiet and level. “I’m hoping I can find him. With your help.”

He shook his head, but not cruelly. “I don’t let anyone in. Confidential material. You understand.”

“You know those detectives you hear about on the radio, with the keen deductive minds and the photographic memories?” I asked. He nodded, his brow furrowing. “I’m not one of them,” I told him. “Just another dumb flatfoot. Anything you’ve got in there is in no danger from me. But I’m going to need to look inside, for the boy. Just a formality.”

“I’ve already searched it myself,” he said, his black eyes cool and adamant. “Billy’s

not allowed in here. He knows that.”

“Just a formality.” I held up my open palms. “I wouldn’t be much of a cop if I didn’t poke my nose in.”

His dark eyes narrowed. “I could make you get a warrant.”

“You could. But that’d take a lot of my time, and a lot of yours. I suspect your time costs more than mine.”

He sighed at last, and stepped aside just enough for me to poke my head in.

My eyes were adjusted to the bright sun; at first I couldn’t see much inside the shed, just shapes and outlines. Strange writing on a big chalkboard. Greek symbols. Shelves of chemicals in glass jars and metal containers, some with the bright red kind of labels designed to be unfriendly. A kind of diagram drawn in chalk on the concrete floor. No little boy. Just a thick, stifling, ovenlike heat, enough to make the outdoors feel like a cool bath. I wondered how he could stand it.

I stepped back, and he moved out into the sun, squinting, and drew the door shut behind him.

“I’m sorry about your son,” I said. “For what it’s worth.”

“It must seem strange.” He had a rich, healthy voice. “Me in there. I should be with my wife, I know.”

He put his back against the white wooden wall of the shed and sat down right there on the grass and fished a pack of cigarettes out of his pants pocket. He offered me one; I waved it off politely. He lit up and inhaled and let out quick locomotive puffs, sending signals to the Apaches.

“The work,” he said, and stopped, and started again. “It lets me choose what I’m thinking about.”

“I understand,” I said.

“You need to know,” he said, craning his neck to look up at me. “My son is everything to me. Everything.” His eyes got a faraway look for a moment, like he’d just found himself in strange country, with no map.

“That’s only natural,” I said. I got out my notepad.

No, Howard Whittier didn’t have any enemies. His work was far enough ahead that no one in this country was matching it. He emphasized “in this country.” His company had a lot of government contracts, yes, but it was the only kind of outfit doing the kind of work Uncle Sam wanted. No rivals to get upset.

No, he hadn’t noticed anything unusual last night. He’d been out late on business, at the plant down in the valley, supervising some tests. He’d gotten back at six this morning. He didn’t need much sleep, he said. Never did. It just came naturally.

He knew of Jaime, but couldn’t say much about him. His wife dealt with all the help. It gave her something to do, he told me, as if that explained something.

I asked if anyone had made any threats against Whit — he laughed, with a slight edge of bitterness — or Beverly — he looked at me strangely, as if he wondered why anyone would bother.

Yes, Sol Lavender was a friend of his. A very good friend, and he had a sock in the nose waiting for anyone who wanted to make an issue of it. Yes, he’d heard the accusations, and he didn’t hold with them. Sol was a great man, a man of will. Great men always attracted envy.

I started wondering whether he was still talking about Sol.

Anyway, Sol was a brother in his lodge. No lodge I would have heard of. A private group. No, I couldn't get a look at the roster, at least not without a warrant. No, he didn't owe Sol money. He had plenty of that on his own. I thought of his pale porcelain wife, rustling under her blanket like a sheaf of bills.

I gave him my card. "If you remember anything, that'll ring to my desk in Central. If I'm not there, get the desk sergeant to get me at home, or when I call in." He took it between two callused fingers, his hands crisscrossed and cratered with old cuts and burns. From what I knew of his professional life, I was amazed all his fingers were present and accounted for.

"I took a noise complaint about you once," I said. "As a uniform, out in the valley. You and your boys were scaring the neighbors."

He smiled a little at that. "People hear 'rocket science' now, and they think elegance. Mathematics. Big silver beauties whooshing off to Mars. And there's plenty of that. But sometimes you just have to blow things up. Harnessing chaos. Turning it to your will." His hands clutched at the air without him even thinking, grappling with some imaginary beast. "You take something awful and destructive and you direct it. You ..." His voice shook. "You make it make sense." He glanced back at the door to the shed.

"I could use that trick," I said. He stood up, and I shook his hand. Under a film of sweat, his palm felt rough. He opened the door and went back into the shed, and for a moment he stood there in the threshold, staring down at the floor. I thought he was going to say something more to me, but no. He was just lost in thought. I waited long enough, and eventually he shut the door, and that was that.

When I turned toward the house the butler had vanished, and Joe ran toward me across the lawn. “You want to see this,” he said, out of breath.

We walked fast. Joe laid it out for me around gulps of air. “So most of the gardeners, they’re kind of afraid to mingle. All that money gives them the yips. Plus I get the feeling the family’s just so friendly, and no friendlier. Can’t get too familiar with the help. But one of the gardeners, they say he likes to spend time with the boy.”

“Jaime, right?”

“Jaime Calvera. And our Jaime has a shadow about him. Fond of the bottle, or was. He cleaned up his act a few years back. Walking with God.”

“But?”

“But this morning he’s out, and no one knows where. Didn’t even call in sick.”

“So God took a powder on him. Or vice versa. This Jaime have a record?”

“Talk is he had a family once. A wife, a couple of little hijos. Maybe they fell into a bottle somewhere and floated away.”

At the back of the property stood a little shed with a thicker chimney than the one on Whittier’s cottage, billowing eddies of black smoke. A wide-faced woman with deep tanned skin and Indian features waited by the door, nervous, shifting her feet. Joe said something to her, quicker than my night-school Spanish could keep up, but I got the gist. She opened the door and a wall of heat rolled out at us that made the sun seem downright balmy. Joe pointed to a ragged, ashy pile on the concrete floor.

“Ines here pulled that out of the incinerator around eight-thirty this morning,” he said. “She was afraid — thought someone would assume she was in on it.”

I looked closer. It was cloth, gray with soot, but I could still make out some sort of design on it. I bent down and shifted it with my pen. Then I rocked back on my heels.

Cowboys and Indians chased each other across the fabric. It came from a set of little boy's pajamas.

#

The ringing phone dragged me up from an ocean of sleep. Joe's voice buzzed on the other end of the line.

"We found the gardener."

A half-hour later I pulled into a shabby little motor court off Sunrise, all crumbling stucco and wilting shutters on the dirty windows. The uniforms who'd responded to the noise complaint waited outside the door to cabin 6, taking a statement from a woman who sized me up with a quick, hard, professional look and went back to chewing her gum. She was dressed to be noticed. Her face, once you looked close enough, made you wish you hadn't. I heard soft weeping through the cabin's open door.

On the beat-up wooden dresser, a sad parade of empty liquor bottles commiserated. A dark stain on the wall next to the bathroom door dribbled down to a glittering pile of broken glass. Joe sat in a wobbly wooden chair next to the bed, holding a Gideon in both hands.

Across from him, on the edge of the bed, sat a leather-skinned man of about 50, dressed in a yellowed undershirt and boxers, and one black sock. He ran weathered hands up the thinning black foliage of his scalp. A crucifix dangled down from his neck between his knees, jittering every time his shoulders shook.

"He's had a bad night," Joe said to me quietly.

“It could get worse,” I said. “Mr. Calvera?”

The man on the bed raised his head and looked at me with red, gummy eyes. He had a face you’d expect to see on some suffering idol in the nave of a cathedral, candlelit.

“I don’t hurt the boy,” Jaime Calvera said. With each word the booze rolled off him like an ocean breeze. “I swear I don’t hurt the boy.”

“Confession is good for the soul,” I said, and took a seat on the radiator.

“I tell your friend already. The man, he gives me money,” Calvera said, dragging the backside of one broad hand under his nose, snuffing away tears. “He gives me a bottle. A very good bottle. He says I work so hard. He says I deserve to relax.”

“What man? Whittier?”

Calvera shook his head. “Not Mr. Whittier. Not his hijo.” He said the name. I got a sick, cold feeling in my guts.

“I should not take the bottle, I know,” Calvera said. “I should not take the money. I turn from the path of God.” He was silent for a moment. He wet his lips. “It was a very good bottle.”

Out in the parking lot, Joe took off his hat and exhaled. His eyes looked distant and queasy. In the light of the motel’s neon sign, the sweat on his forehead shone red, then blue, then red. The air had cooled off some since the morning, but it stayed thick and humid.

“Jesus,” Joe said. “Eli Lavender.” I didn’t have to say anything. By now we’d both read the jacket.

Five years ago it was a chauffeur’s little girl, age 7. Complaint rescinded. Chauffeur fired. Case closed.

Four years ago it was a housekeeper's boy, age 4. Same story.

Three years ago, a mother went to pick up her son from Sunday school. She snatched him up two steps from the open door of Eli's car. She was married to the desk sergeant at the Plumeria Heights station, so this time the case got made. Eli got the royal treatment — handcuffs, fingerprints, the full-on and the profile. And one phone call.

Inside of an hour he walked out of the station surrounded by pinstripes and briefcases. The next day an anonymous tip turned up a matching set of dope bundles, gone missing from the evidence room, in the lockers of the desk sergeant and the arresting officer. The D.A. spiked the case right there. Eli walked. And the cops who'd put the finger on him got entombed out at the impound lot.

Since then, five complaints, no arrests. Not so much as a warrant. No one would touch him.

"Maybe he's got the boy," Joe said. "Maybe he's got him right now. Maybe he's ..." I saw him watch his whole career catch fire and flake away to ash. Joe was a good kid.

"He might." I opened the door to my car. "Go home. Get some sleep."

"But the boy —"

"No use bothering a judge at this hour anyway. We'll talk strategy in the morning."

"Where are you going?" Joe asked.

"To take my own advice," I lied.

#

Five phone calls and two hours later, I hunched low behind the wheel of my car and watched Elijah Lavender laugh his way out the front door of Terry's Tip-Top. A blonde coasted



along on his arm, loose-limbed and big-toothed; two pieces of farm equipment in expensive suits trailed behind him. The blonde he peeled off halfway to his Rolls. She walked away with a quickness that looked a lot like relief. The bodyguards stayed put.

He was a squat kid with a nubby little fighter's nose and a high collar of baby fat around the line of his jaw. But the thickness that filled out the arms and shoulders of his pinstriped suit spoke more to muscle. Tight curls ringed the top of his forehead, already going silver, like his old man's. I heard his hyena laugh all the way across the street, and my knuckles went white on the steering wheel. The .38 in the holster against my ribs felt like a boat anchor.

One of the guards got in the back of the Rolls with him. The other squeezed himself into the driver's seat. I waited until the taillights all but disappeared into the dark toward Hyacinth before I started my motor.

First they stopped at an all-night liquor store on La Plata, soaked in a silver puddle of mercury arc lighting. I drove a block ahead and idled by the curb, watching in the rearview as the driver went in, and after a while came out again with a little brown bag.

The second stop was a shabby block down off Castillo that the vice boys talked about sometimes, all ratty storefronts with blacked-out or soaped-over windows, and fading signs that told polite lies no one actually believed. The Rolls pulled up in front of the only store with any lights on; Eli got out of the back seat and went in alone. I didn't need to see the sign on the front. It would say "Rare and Imported Books." Possibly "Antiques and Collectibles."

Maybe he'd go from here to the kid. Probably he wouldn't. Probably he'd stay away for at least a day. Sometimes these types liked to build up the anticipation. Time was against me. The longer the boy stayed gone, the greater the odds he wouldn't come back. Not in one piece. I

had to chance it.

I killed the headlights, made two quick turns into the alley behind the block, and cut the motor, coasting until I'd counted the right number of doors.

Places like this always had a back door. It wouldn't be locked; no one wanted to rob a place like this. No respectable crook even wanted to be seen in it.

The back door opened on a dim room full of shelves bearing paper boxes. A thread of golden light shone under a heavy curtain across a doorway. I heard voices beyond.

I pushed through the curtain with my badge in one hand and my .38 in the other. The shop was dimly lit, lined with shelves of fraying books covered in an inch of dust. The only stuff anyone ever came in to browse stayed in the back, or under the counter.

A fat, fleshy man in a sweater vest, sweat sticking his combover to his scalp, had just bunched a wad of Eli Lavender's bills into his fist. He stared at me with big frightened eyes through a pair of little glasses on a chain around his neck.

Eli Lavender had his hand on a brown paper parcel, thin and flat and just the right size to be a magazine, resting on the glass counter. His eyes were a striking purple; he regarded me with faint, bemused wonder, as if I were a bluebird who'd just come to perch at his window.

"Eli Lavender," I said. "Police. You're coming with me. Quietly."

"Well," he said, in a slow, lazy voice. "My night just got so much more entertaining."

The proprietor fuffed and flustered and licked his lips as I put Eli in cuffs. "This is a respectable —" he began, and stopped. "You have no right—"

I cut him off with a glare. "Let's not even pretend that you or this shop or whatever you've got in all those boxes back there are going to be here by morning," I said. "Let's just not

waste each other's time.”

He swallowed and nodded. It made his chins jiggle.

Eli laughed softly to himself as we went out the back. I checked both ends of the alley for sudden looming shapes. None appeared.

“What’s so funny?” I said.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet,” he said. I pushed him in the passenger seat of the car and dropped his brown paper parcel on his lap.

#

I took him in the precinct the back way, through the motor pool. This hour of night there was almost no one on duty at the station; the dispatcher on the top floor, the sergeant at the front desk. Robbery Homicide would be out making cases, the uniforms out in their cars, making lonely ladybug patrols of the floodlit streets. No one saw us.

We did interviews in a cramped, soundproof little room on the second floor, with a heavy steel door and blinds on the one window. I drew them shut as I escorted Eli Lavender inside. I sat him down, undid one of his cuffs and chained it under the desk to the leg of the table. I stood opposite him and tossed the brown paper parcel down between us.

“Am I under arrest?” he asked, as if wondering when the menu would arrive.

“You?” I said. “No. You don’t get arrested, Mr. Lavender. We both know that. This is just a friendly conversation we’re having here, man to man.”

He held up the hand with the bracelet and shook it so the chain jingled. “You have quite a definition of friendly.”

I smiled at him. It took effort. “That’s just a precaution. In case you hurt yourself.

The department wouldn't want to be held liable."

"To protect and serve," he said, and his shoulders shook with a pleased little laugh.

"How long have you been a cop, Detective?"

"Six years," I said. "Ten, counting the war."

"Six years." Eli whistled. "You know, my pop knows where I am. If not right now, he will soon." He made a show of checking his watch. "That gives you six years and ... oh ... an hour more, give or take."

"You're playing this wrong, Mr. Lavender," I said. I took off my jacket and hung it on the back of the empty chair. "I'm not trying to pin a rap on you. I don't care what kind of reading material you've got in there."

"You sure?" he said. "You ought to take a look. Maybe you'd like it." Beneath his choirboy eyes, he smiled, small and sickly.

"I just need one little thing from you," I said, "just one thing, and you can walk right out of here. You were never here. I was a passing phantom."

"What's that?" he asked, leaning back. I sat down opposite him and put my forearms on the table.

"I need to know where you've got Billy Whittier," I said.

He was good. He didn't blink. That little smile stayed put on his face. He'd probably had a lot of practice. Or maybe he really just didn't care.

"Don't tell me you don't know him," I said. "Little neighbor boy. Lives next door to you, same house as your good pal Whit. Blond hair, blue eyes. Five years old."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "I remember him. Sweet kid. He likes magic."

“He wasn’t in his bed this morning,” I said. “His mother’s half gone worrying. His pop’s out in the garage, trying to blow himself up, maybe. I don’t think they much care where he’s gone, as long as he comes back.”

“I hadn’t heard,” Eli said. He traced little circles on the scarred wood of the tabletop with one finger. The nails looked rough, bitten-down. “I’ll have to send some flowers. A card.”

“Just an address,” I said. “I don’t even want details. I don’t care how you did it. It wouldn’t stick to you anyway. You can walk away. Save your old man some trouble.”

“What do you have?” he asked. “What makes you think I’d do such a horrible thing?”

“Not a lot,” I said. “Not much at all. A pile of old jackets you managed to slip out of. A drunk Mexican who probably won’t have a job tomorrow. And the boy’s sister. She notices things.”

“Beverly. Huh.” He raised one eyebrow. “Yes, she’s rather inquisitive. I wish I could help. I really do. But you’ve clearly made some terrible mistake. So I think I’d like to just sit quietly here for another...” He checked his watch. “Fifty-seven minutes.” That crooked little smile again. “Then maybe I’ll get to see them throw the book at you.”

I stood up. “Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Lavender,” I said, and walked out into the squad room. A ball of ice weighed down my stomach. My legs shook as bad as they ever had in any foxhole.

In the top left drawer of my desk I found my copy of the police rules and regulations, hardbound. I tested it in my hand, and put it back. We had shelves along the wall next to the windows, and there I found the unabridged edition, twice as big and dense as a quarry rock. I

tucked that one under my arm, went back into the interview room, and closed the door behind me.

Eli sat with one leg crossed over the other, chewing idly on an unlit cigarette. He looked up at me with mild interest.

“What’s that?” he asked, his eyes flitting to the book. Not even a little afraid.

“It’s the book,” I said. “The one they’re going to throw at me. Which hand do you write with, by the way?”

He looked at me funny, waiting to get the joke. “Left. Why? You want my autograph?”

I put a hand on each side of the book and got a good firm grip. My legs stopped shaking. The ice in my stomach melted into steam. The world felt right.

“Something like that,” I said.

I cracked him hard across the face with the book. I put my shoulders into it. The hit traveled all the way up my arm.

I stepped back and let him take it in. He touched his lip; a little blood started to well there. Then he looked at me like I’d just stepped out of one of Joe’s flying saucers.

“You can’t do that,” he said, in the calm of disbelief.

I hit him again. His head popped back like a jack-in-the-box.

“You can’t do that!” he said, but higher this time, and rawer, with an animal whine.

“I’m unarmed! I’m, I’m defenseless!”

“Now you know how it feels,” I said, and swung again.

We had rules in the station, unwritten, unspoken, and understood. Where you could

hit so it wouldn't show. What you could use to do it. Where you drew the line.

I let myself forget every one of them. I broke him so easy.

I left him one eye unswollen, so he could see. And the index finger and thumb of his left hand, so he could hold a pen. I held his head up by the hair so he wouldn't get blood on the brown wrapper as he wrote out the address. There wasn't much on me; just a few dark spots on the sleeves of my shirt, and a little blotch on my necktie. He made a soft whining noise the whole time he wrote, like an air raid siren just starting up and stopping, over and over.

I looked at the address, memorized it, and pushed the brown parcel across the table and out of his reach. No matter what, there'd be evidence, in his own hand. I put on my jacket started out the door.

"I swear," he whimpered through puffy lips. I turned and looked back at him. I'd knocked a hole in the front of his smile, and the rest was painted red.

"You swear what?" I asked slowly.

"I swear," he said. "On my mother's grave. I never touched h—"

I took two quick steps across the room and drove my fist into his nose. His chair toppled back and his head hit the wall and made an awful sound. He slid down the bricks and didn't move.

I didn't care. I was out of the room, walking fast, not looking back.

#

I found the little house in Monteverde around dawn. Half the lots on the block sat vacant. The other half would have been better off that way. Distant dogs in distant yards howled greetings to the amber glow in the east. The air still held a slight desert chill as I got out of the

car.

Once upon a time the house had been painted yellow. Now the paint peeled off like old scabs. Dust choked the windows. Half the front porch had collapsed. A little tin garage slouched off to the side, at the end of a dirt drive.

I busted out a window with my hat over my fist, and reached around to unlock the front door. I went in with my gun out, in case he maybe had a friend there waiting. Part of me wanted the trouble.

The house sat dark and still, and only the floorboards made any sound. I tried the wall switches as I moved from room to room. No current. I saw a few bottles of liquor in the kitchen, mostly empty, and an old ashtray on the table that no one had emptied in a while. None of the butts felt warm. I looked out the frayed curtains into the little fenced-in back yard. An old icebox loomed crookedly amid the weeds, the prow of a sinking ship.

In a back room I found a dirty mattress in one corner, and a bucket that stank even though someone had hosed it out. The heads of rusted nails sprouted from the windowframes. Ratty comic books splayed on the floor, their covers half torn off, along with a few empty candy wrappers. But no Billy Whittier.

I came out the front with the anger boiling in my guts. All that and he'd still lied to me. I looked down at the dirt path that led to the garage. I saw tire tracks. They looked fresh.

"Oh, no." I said it like a prayer. "No, please. You stupid bastard."

The lock on the garage gave with one kick. A green Chevrolet hunkered inside, lightly filmed with dust, five years old at least. I bent down and knocked on the lid to the trunk. No one answered. I saw a crowbar in one corner.



The lid opened with a shriek. A wave of stink hit me, but I didn't move. The boy lay there still and small, in his blue jacket and his white shirt and his stained khaki trousers. A single housefly crawled across the blue skin of his cheek.

Asphyxiated by the exhaust. Broiled by a hot day in a small metal space. Maybe both. It didn't matter.

Somehow I was back in my car, sitting in the driver's seat with the door open and my legs out on the pavement. In the distance I heard sirens, growing louder.

Later they would tell me Eli Lavender was dead, his skull cracked open against the wall. By that time I had a bottle in my hand and a warm cloud in my mind, somewhere far beyond caring. I stayed there all through the suspension and the disciplinary hearings. The day they took my badge, I walked out of the station and straight into a bar. The first of many.

I built myself a coffin, one bottle at a time. Then I climbed inside, closed the lid, and waited to drown.

## Chapter Three

### The Collar

I was saying something, but the words didn't make any sense. Maybe they weren't words at all. Then I had my eyes open and it was morning. Again.

I still lay in the bed in the room with the barred windows, but the light seemed different. The fresh crisp sheets had gone rumpled and sour with old sweat. I wore silk pajamas that hung too big against my clammy skin.

No one sat in the chair by the door.

I moved my right arm and found the restraints gone. Instead a little needle stuck with tape ran from the crook of my arm up a long rubber tube to a bottle of clear liquid on a metal stand by the bed.

I felt hollowed out and stuffed with straw. The world came at me too sharp, too clear, too clean.

Sober. I'd forgotten what it felt like.

I swallowed. A garden rake went down my throat. My cracked lips stung. I pushed myself up into a sitting position. It took me a while.

I sat on the edge of the bed and waited for my head to stop spinning. I was tired and sore, with a mouth full of sand, but I didn't feel sick. I felt clean inside. I could think straight.

Bruises ringed my wrists where the restraints had been, and around the edges of the purple the skin looked raw and chafed. Someone had put something greasy on it, which seemed to help.

I pulled the needle out of my arm with a swift sharp sting and wrapped one hand around the metal stand. Ahead of me, to the side of the bed, a small door stood ajar; I could see the porcelain curve of a sink inside. I was so thirsty.

I climbed Everest, one step at a time, all the way to the bathroom. I had to sag against the doorjamb for a few seconds while a wave of seafoam crashed and fizzed over my eyes and inside my skull. Then the fog cleared and I had a head again.

I turned on the tap and cupped my hands and drank. The water felt clean and sweet and cool all the way going down. I let the tap run, just because I liked the sound.

A few more mouthfuls got me brave enough to find the lightswitch. I saw a toilet and a shower and a little mirror over the sink. Tile designs like Greek mosaics covered the walls. A squat little man with goat legs, playing his pipes, dancing with women whose gowns just happened to be falling off in all the right places. I should've been a musician.

Better to look at the mosaic than the mirror. The face was mine, more or less. Apparently I'd lent it to someone else, someone who'd left it out in the rain too long. You could

fall into the circles under my eyes and hurt yourself. I opened my mouth; my teeth were yellow, but they all seemed to have stuck with me. That was something.

I heard noise from the other room. The man with the ink loomed at the far door, still in a dinner-perfect tuxedo, a tray in his hands. Steam curled from a bowl.

“So,” he said. “The doc wasn’t wrong.”

“Good morning, Frankenstein.” My voice was full of pine cones. I came at him with a balled fist, but only made it as far as the bed. I like to think I rolled over defiantly, though. It only took me two attempts.

“Easy, killer.” The man with the ink towered upside-down against the high vault of the ceiling. “You had a bad couple of days. And a worse couple of nights.”

“Whose fault is that?” I rasped, and gagged a little from the pain of it.

I heard him set the tray down on the desk under one of the windows, and raised myself on one elbow. He came over to the bed and helped me sit up. He had a light touch when he wanted to.

“Start with the broth,” he said, still with one huge hand propping up my shoulderblades. “That’s my advice. And slow, unless you want to see the same meal coming and going. I’ll be back with a towel and a razor.”

“Supposing I’d rather skip the meal and check myself out of here?” I said. I could hear the faint outlines of my voice starting to come back.

The man with the ink laughed a little. “No can do. We’re both of us on the clock.”

The tray held broth in a bowl, with a little round silver spoon, and a plate with a silver cover, and a tall glass of orange juice just starting to bead with sweat. I lifted a spoonful of

the broth to my lips and blew a little too cool it.

By the time I'd scraped the last drops out of the bowl, I only felt half dead, and warm all the way down my esophagus. I took the lid off the plate and saw scrambled eggs and toast, and for about ten seconds I was a religious man.

I ate it all in small, careful bites, with slugs of the juice to wash it down. The acid burned my throat, but after a while it started to feel better.

The man with the ink came back as I was finishing and dropped a bundle on the bed. "Clean yourself up."

"What, do I have an audience with the queen?" My voice was back in town. It had stories to tell.

He laughed again, short and sharp and low, like small arms fire. "Something like that."

I showered hot and scrubbed hard. I'd gotten softer around the middle; softer everywhere, doughy and slack. Lifting a glass to my lips was the most exercise I'd gotten in some time. The question of how much time — that started to eat at me.

I didn't think about the boy. The thought was out there in the dark, prowling the fenceline. I wouldn't let it in.

I smeared the fog off the mirror and attacked my whiskers with a razor. They suffered most of the casualties, but not all of them. I watched a round bead of blood swell on my chin, and just for a second, I saw the wreck I'd made of Eli Lavender's face. My stomach turned over, and I had to grab the edges of the sink. But my breakfast stayed put, and so did I. I let my chin bleed.

When I came out of the bathroom, clothes lay waiting on the bed. The suit looked new, charcoal with pinstripes. It fit well enough. The necktie was a deep blue with small white diamond patterns. It smelled of dust and mothballs, and someone else's cologne.

I had just laced up the shoes when the man with the ink returned. "Huh," he said. "You almost clean up human."

"That makes two of us," I said. He smiled, making the zebra-stripes on his face dance, with no apparent malice. I guess from up there, all us bugs looked just adorable.

The man with the ink led me out the door and down a hallway I started to recognize. I had to look up to speak to him. "You're taller than the last guy who gave me a tour." I felt pretty sure of it, anyway. The details were a work in progress. He didn't say anything, so I tried again.

"You do that to impress the girls?" I moved my hand in a circle around the vicinity of my face. That got a chuckle out of him, but a thin one, and sour.

"You ever been in the merchant marine?" he asked.

"Just the Marines, full stop."

He cocked an eyebrow at me, like he wouldn't have guessed. "I had a really strange time once," he said. "In the merchant marine." He let it drop, and I could tell by the silence he was daring me to pick it up. I didn't.

He led me into a dim, open room, across soft silent carpet. White drapes made ghosts of the furniture. A leather easy chair hunched like some grazing animal in the center of the room. A sideboard sat back against the wall, under a pale square on the wallpaper where a painting had hung. On the sideboard rested a black leather bag and a small black briefcase. The little round

man who'd given me the shot bent over them.

Before I knew it, the man with the ink had circled my upper arm with one hand. He still had room in there for a dozen roses and a Sunday paper. "Sit," he said, tugging me toward the toward the chair. I sat.

The little round man had his back to us, removing a series of small bottles of liquid out of his bag.

"You about ready, Doc?" the man with the ink said to him. The force of him weighed me down as sure as gravity.

The doctor fluttered one his hand at us, irritated, like he was swatting a fly. I saw him take out a case from the bag, open it up, and remove another hypodermic. Bigger. I started to sweat into the starch of my collar.

The doctor turned around. He looked even worse than I remembered; slightly yellowed, with a rabbit twitch in one cheek that made his whiskers jitter. His hands shook as he plunged the needle into one bottle after the next, carefully drawing out measured quantities, checking them against the lines on the outside of the hypodermic. When he finished he shook the needle a little, making the mixture swirl. He tapped the side, squirted out the air bubbles. I waited for the big man to roll up my sleeve. Whatever this one was, it didn't look like a gift.

Then the doctor stuck the needle straight into his own neck, quick and deep, and drove the plunger home. He made soft, happy little noises, his eyes flashing semaphore slivers of white under half-closed lids. I looked up at the man with the ink, incredulous. If he had an opinion, his face didn't show it.

After a few seconds the twitch went out of the little man's face, and his whole body

slackened. He drew the needle out of his neck dreamily, with a hand as steady as Calvin Coolidge. His eyes opened, slightly hazy and unfocused, and he seemed to see me for the first time.

“Ah!” he said brightly. “The patient. You look well, I think.”

“Guess that’s my healthy stock,” I said. He didn’t seem to recognize the sarcasm; he just nodded, his smile wide and a little manic.

“The treatment has purified you of your physical dependency,” he said in a voice a little too quick and a little too loud. He turned back to the black briefcase, fiddling at the catches. “But the mind, the psychology, yes, that still remains. No little needle for that. Not yet, you understand.”

He lifted the lid of the briefcase and took out a round black band about an inch in height, open at one end, with a round clasp at one end. He peered at it intently for a moment. “For the mind we have this. Hold him again, please.”

The man with the ink let go of my arm just long enough to clamp down on both my shoulders. He knew just the nerves to hit. My arms went dead. My feet kicked against the floor, but the chair’s legs were wide and sturdy, the carpet deep and thick. The doctor had the band around my neck before I could even get a word out.

I felt it click shut. Something in the clasp ticked and hummed, like a music box, and the band closed until it just fit the circumference of my neck.

“Ah,” the doctor beamed, pleased, and stepped back. “This is my latest model, you know.”

The big man let me go, and sensation tumbled back down my arms and into my



fingers. I shook my neck like a bull in harness, but the thing was on good and sturdy.

“And now,” the doctor said, “we test.” He bent down and opened the sideboard. Out came a cut crystal decanter full of amber liquid, and a glass.

I could smell the booze the moment he popped the lid. The thirst had left my limbs, my nerves, my guts. But my mouth went dry, and that sweet familiar voice started whispering in my ear. Wondering where I’d been.

The doctor splashed a little into the glass. I ran my tongue over my lips. He carried the glass over to me, and held it out toward my mouth, and the octane aroma filled my nose —

The clasp of the collar ticked. The band drew tight around my neck. I couldn’t breathe. I clawed at the cold smooth band with half-numb fingers. It didn’t budge. Brilliant spots bloomed like mold over my vision.

The doctor moved the glass away. The band slackened.

“Wonderful!” he said, and drank the shot down himself. The son of a bitch. “It detects the distinctive vapors, you see. Also its presence exuded in your sweat, although the effect is somewhat less dramatic then, understandably.”

“Adorable,” I growled, my throat a little ragged. “How does it come off?” He just chuckled a little at that.

“I would not advise to tamper with it,” he said, tidying up on the sideboard. “The device ... does not appreciate that. It is quite popular, yes. Had I not been made to sign agreements ... well, let me just say that you are in very good company. Think of yourself as like a movie star, almost.”

“And what did you do during the war, Doc?” I asked him. I didn’t even try to be nice

about it. I had the satisfaction of seeing his shoulders tighten.

“Research,” he said quietly, not turning around.

Somewhere in the house, not far, music began to tumble from a piano.

“Ah,” said the doctor. “I believe I have another engagement.” He looked expectantly at the man with the ink. The big man reached into his dinner jacket and pulled out a stack of crisp new bills, thumbing them one at a time into the doctor’s open palm.

“Always it is a pleasure,” the doctor said, stuffing the money into his little black bag. He looked at me again while he gathered up his things. “My treatment ... you may perhaps notice some effects, some minor and curious effects. I envy you, really. A unique opportunity. Most unique!”

He scuttled out of the room before I could break his nose. It would have taken me a week, with the big man holding me down, but I felt motivated.

Without a word, the man with the ink lifted me to my feet and led me out toward a part of the house I knew I’d been to before. The music got louder as we approached. He opened a set of double doors and led me into a bright open room. A familiar piano filled the center of the room; an unfamiliar girl sat on the bench, her hands doing ballet across the keys.

The music flooded over me, lush and complex, dissonant notes leaping up at odd places in the melody. The girl had her back to me, a cascade of blonde hair twitching and swaying halfway down her back. She wore a black dress with half sleeves; her feet on the pedals were bare except for dark stockings. The legs that connected them to the rest of her looked built to be noticed. Her elbows shone as clean and smooth as fresh cream.

She finished playing, letting the sound echo and mellow and fade. Only when she

turned around and I saw her blue eyes did I recognize her.

“Miss Whittier,” I said. Before I realized it, I’d taken off my hat.

“Beverly,” she said. “Please.” She gave me a smile I felt all the way to my shoes.

“Hello, Mr. Pearl. It’s been a long time.”

#

I stared hard at the photo, squinting a little. “That’s a cat?” It looked like a Picasso drawing of something that might be a cat, if Picasso was coming off a three-day bender.

“He answers to Lucky.” Beverly had a voice as finely tuned as her piano. “When he feels like answering.” The room had stayed bright and sunny, but most of the furniture I remembered from the solarium was gone now. We sat on mismatched chairs around a little table someone had draped with a white cloth. A tarp shrouded the swimming pool out back, dotted with pools of rainwater and dead flowers. The hedges needed work.

Beverly looked up as the man with the ink appeared in the doorway, carrying tea service on a silver tray. He set it down between us, and his eyes flicked first to me, and then to the girl. She laid a hand upon his forearm, like a sparrow alighting on a tank. “Thank you, Mr. Kuru.” Her hand stayed there maybe a half-second too long. Then he straightened up and left the room with nothing more than a nod.

“Where’d you dig him up?” I asked. “Jumbo there, I mean.” I turned the photo upside-down and squinted again. That didn’t help.

“Father hired Mr. Kuru as our driver a few years ago.” She poured the tea with slim white graceful hands. “He’s very loyal. Lemon and sugar?”

“Please,” I said. I lifted the cup and saucer and let the steam rise into my face. I

almost felt civilized. Except for the band around my neck.

“Where is your old man?” I asked. “Was he a part of all this?” Her face darkened.

“There was ... an accident last week,” she said. “Father moved a lot of his more volatile chemicals here, after the troubles with his company. He worked late hours, on little sleep. His hands would sweat. We had a closed casket. And few mourners.” She looked up at me, her eyes sharp and focused. “How much do you remember since you left the police?”

“You put it so nicely.” I tried not to grimace. “Not much. A big blurry wad of nights on barroom floors. The taste of whiskey. The taste of beer. Sometimes gin. I think once or twice I might have slept in a car.” I finished my cup of tea, working up the nerve to ask. “How long has it been?”

“Five years,” she said, taking a small tidy sip. I just sat there, my brain on a merry-go-round. All I could remember were the things I wanted to forget.

“Mother was the next,” she said, “after Billy. You saw her. She was ... delicate to begin with. After Billy she was just a shadow. And then not even that.” She toyed with a rind of lemon, pinching and twisting it in her fingers.

“Whit and Father never got along, but Mother kept the peace,” she said. “Without her ... Whit had means. After he sued for them, anyway. He only moved to Encendio, but it might as well have been the moon.”

“And then it was just you and your father?” I asked. Against my neck, the collar had begun to itch.

“And the cat,” she said, a smile flitting for a butterfly’s moment over her lips. They looked redder than I remembered, lusher than the curtains at a movie palace. “Father found him

on the doorstep of his workshed about a month after Billy ... after the service. He was missing the eye and the leg already. I think Father liked that Lucky was damaged. Compromised. He spoiled him terribly. We both did.”

“I can see why,” I lied, looking again at the picture. I thought I saw something that might have been a mouth. Maybe the cat had been moving when they took the snap.

“We’re still settling the estate,” Beverly said. “More?” I shook my head; she poured herself another cup. “I haven’t seen Whit. I’m not sure he knows, although he must have read it in the papers. I don’t even know if he’s still in town.”

“And you want me to find your brother?”

She looked at me with a small, bemused smile, stretched out a hand, and tapped one painted nail on the surface of the photograph.

“No,” she said. “I want you to find my cat.”

That took me a second to process. Then I snorted. “Do I look like the dogcatcher?”

“You look like a man in need of a purpose.” She said it like she’d read something like it in a book.

I leaned back in the chair and folded my hands in my lap. “We said a handful of words five years ago. Now you send your golem to peel me off a barroom floor. Pump me full of some black-market dope cooked up by Dr. Mengele’s third cousin. Wring me out like a dishrag, dress me up in doll’s clothes, and stick a bear trap around my neck. The phone book’s full of private dicks who’d take your case for a lot less trouble and expense.”

“You really don’t remember anything, do you?” she said. “All that drinking you’ve been doing for the past five years — would you like to know who paid for it?”

I opened my mouth and shut it again.

“Father was grateful that you tried,” she said. “He said enough words in the right ears to keep you out of jail.”

“Including Sol Lavender’s ear?” I asked. She cast her eyes down to the scum forming on the surface of her cooling tea.

“I was grateful, too,” she said. “I had a little trust set aside — more than enough for anyone to live on. And one of the many lawyers my father knew liked me enough to humor me. He pushed through the paperwork to get you a private license. He even found you a place to live. Said you were very congenial when he explained it to you — after you’d taken a swing at him.”

My memory swung empty, like a set of saloon doors.

“I set you up on a retainer,” Beverly said. “I’ve been paying your salary since junior high. I can show you all the receipts, if you like.” She smiled a little bashfully, but it could have been a put-on. “I wouldn’t like to say I own you, but phrasing it that way is ... helpfully clarifying.”

“Why me?” I asked. My voice sounded a long way off, down a distant hallway, connected to me by a string.

She looked me in the eye. “You never even met my brother. You could have let the case go cold. But you didn’t. You found him.”

“Not alive,” I said.

Just for a moment the blue in her eyes turned to ice. “But you found the animal who did it,” she said, as if she were discussing the weather. “And you took him apart.”

“Look where it got me,” I said. I felt the collar press against my windpipe when I

spoke.

We sat there in silence for a few long seconds. I got tired of fiddling with the photo and tucked it into my pocket.

“Why the cat?” I said.

“I was born in this house, and it still never felt like a home,” she told me, running one slim fingertip along the edge of her saucer. “As soon as the estate is settled, I’m putting it on the market. The furniture, the cars ... none of it’s ever been mine. Not really. Lucky’s the only living thing left on the planet that ever gave a damn about me. Before him, the only other one was Billy.”

I thought about the man with the ink. But I kept my mouth shut.

“You lose everything,” Beverly said, “and there’s some human impulse that makes you want to find at least one thing, and put your hands on it, and say, ‘Still mine.’” She shook her head a little, and straightened up in her seat. “Besides, Lucky’s not well. He doesn’t breathe too easily. And he tends to eat things he shouldn’t. I don’t like the thought of him out on his own.”

“How long’s he been gone?” I said.

“Since the night of Father’s accident,” she said. She finished her tea and set it down in the saucer, and dabbed at stray drops on the saucer with her fingers. “Father’s work suffered, after Billy. He started to fight with his partners. Eventually they bought him out. He never said anything to me, but I think it stung him. He did odd jobs after that. Mostly picture companies that needed something or other blown up. And he was active in his lodge. But in the last few months he’d started working again, working all the time. He said Billy was speaking to him from the other side. Dictating. Said it was Billy’s idea.” She shuddered.

“Any chance the cat’s just run off?” I asked. “Or he’s hiding somewhere?”

She shook her head. “I’ve had Kuru check all his favorite spots. Left cans of tuna on the grounds. Nothing. Besides, if you ever saw him, you’d know he wouldn’t exactly run. He was more of an ambler.”

“You think someone took him?”

She brushed a tangle of golden hair from her face. “I’ve called all the neighbors. Asked the milkman. Kuru put up signs. If he’s gone, someone wanted him that way.”

“Any ideas who?” She just shook her head.

“Father didn’t make a lot of friends in the past few years. But I can’t think of anyone who’d go after the cat for that.”

It didn’t make sense, not for a missing pet. Especially not this one. The whole thing felt like too much trouble.

“Suppose I find this cat of yours,” I said. “What’s in it for me?”

She waved a hand in the vicinity of her neck. It didn’t help my concentration any.

“Dr. Tochs — were you introduced?”

“He seemed a little preoccupied.”

“Dr. Tochs has provided me with a chemical solution,” she said. “Proprietary, he assures me. It’ll undo the fastener on your collar.” She paused, chewing thoughtfully on her lower lip. “I needed you sober to hear the case. I need you to stay sober to solve it.”

“And if I do?”

“Your life is your own,” she said. “If you’re happier in the company of Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker, I won’t stop you.”



“And if I just tell you to go to hell?”

She just smiled. “You’d be well within your rights. But it won’t get that collar off. And Jack or Johnnie won’t have anything to say to you until you do.” She sat back in her chair and crossed one leg over the other and watched me carefully.

Part of me wanted to upend the table right into her smug little lap. That would send the big man running; I’d already worked out three different ways I could suckerpunch him. At least one of them might actually work.

But every time I looked at her, I still saw a skinny kid gummy-eyed over her little brother. And the hollow ache in my gut, the impression of a phantom fist, told me I owed her.

“Hell with it,” I said at last. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She favored me with another smile. Then her eyes slid down to the gold watch around one ivory wrist, in a way she wanted me to see. “I have to pack. I’ll be out of town for a few days, settling some of Father’s holdings in Nevada.”

“What if I need to reach you?” I asked.

“I’ll find you,” she said. “I’ll be back late Sunday. I’ll call you Monday morning for a progress report.” She stood up, leaving the tea and cups and saucers on table. Presumably Frankenstein would get them later.

“One thing,” I said, staying put. She pursed her lips and waited. “After this, we’re quits. I’m off the gravy train.”

She lifted an eyebrow at me. “Quite a lot of people in this town would kill to have a Whittier in their client list.”

“Let them kill. Are we clear?”

“As a bell.” She put out a hand and I shook it, gently. The bones felt fine and delicate under her skin. I stood up and put on my hat.

I heard the man with the ink coming before I saw him. He made the floorboards underneath the carpet groan.

“Kuru will see you out,” Beverly said, pleasantly but firmly. She gave him a look that clearly indicated that he wouldn’t have to crease his jacket on this one. “He can take you back to your office.”

“Last chance,” I said, standing my ground. I heard the big man shift his weight behind me. “Anything you haven’t told me yet, now’s the time.”

She flashed me one corner of a small, bemused smile. “Lovely to see you again, Mr. Pearl.”

I tipped my hat to her, and followed the big man out.

## Chapter Four

### The Brush-Off

I sat in the back of the long black car all the way down into the city and chewed over everything Beverly Whittier hadn't said. The man with the ink sat behind the wheel with the partition down and didn't look back at me. Every so often, over the purr of the motor, I'd hear him humming along to the radio.

If he'd hung signs about that cat in the Whittier's neighborhood, some martinet from the neighborhood association had made short work of them. I hadn't seen a single one on a lamppost, tree, or mailbox in the first six blocks after we pulled out of the Whittiers' gates. After that I stopped looking.

Miss Whittier wore black, but she wasn't grieving. Either that ran in the family, or she'd just hated her pop. He hadn't seemed any too fond of her, but five years could have changed that. Possibly for the worse.

Still, what they'd managed to scrape up of her father was still cooling in the ground, and she didn't want to investigate him just happening to go up in flames. She didn't want to find the brother who might be ahead of her in line for whatever was left of the family fortune. She just wanted her cat. Bad enough to put a collar on my neck.

We drove down out of the hills and into the city. I watched the buildings slide by, and tried to figure out which ones I remembered, and which ones I might have forgotten. My watch read five to noon as the car pulled up to the curb on a block of storefronts in the shadow of City Hall.

"This is you," the man with the ink said, turning around to brandish his face at me. We idled out front of a nondescript three-story office building, tile circling the windows, red brick slowly turning gray from all the auto exhaust. "Second floor up." He tossed a set of keys and a wallet back through the partition into my lap.

I got out slowly, stretching my legs. The man with the ink rolled down the passenger-side window and leaned over to grin at me. "You be good now," he said.

"Same to you," I said. "Stay away from lakes and little girls." It took him a second, and then he chuckled.

"She told me you were a funny guy," he said. "I still don't see it." He rolled up the window and steered the car away from the curb into traffic. I found myself staring directly across the street, at a storefront with big tinted windows and a sign reading "The Hi-Hat." Of course there'd be a bar.

I dropped the key in my pocket and checked the wallet. It reminded me vaguely of one I thought I used to have, except this one had taken a few trips under a steamroller. The wallet

held a P.I. buzzer, and behind a little scratched-up celluloid window, a license with my name on it. I had to double-check the photostat to make sure the picture was me. It could have been taken on a coroner's slab. A sheaf of crisp new bills traded dead-President gossip in soft papery rustles in the pocket. More of that retainer.

I reached up and tried to slip a finger under the collar. It held flush with the skin and wouldn't budge. There had to be a gimmick to it, some way around it. There always was. That's what I told myself.

I wanted to go see this office of mine. I intended to. I did.

But I was thirsty, and I had money. And there was a bar just across the street.

#

At this hour, the joint held almost no one — just a few piles of secondhand clothes slumped at tables in the back, just hands poking out of sleeves to clutch at empty shot glasses. I felt right at home. I hiked up the collar of my shirt to hide the band around my neck and walked toward the bar.

A balding little barrel of a man stood behind the bar in a white shirt and a black apron, working over the battered wood with a dishrag, as if it had said something about his mother. On the counter behind him, in front of a pitted mirror with nothing worth reflecting, a radio gibbered, excitable voices spitting out a horse race so fast the words tripped over one another. The bartender glanced up at me under a pair of birds-nest eyebrows, went back to giving the bar what for, and then did a double-take.

"I didn't know you better," he said slowly, "I'd say you were sober."

"Funny," I said, sliding onto a stool. "I can't say I know you at all."

“Nobody knows nobody,” the barman said. “I read it in a magazine once. You know you still ain’t allowed in here, right? Going on two years now. Don’t think I don’t recollect you.”

“Must be thinking of someone else,” I said. “Like you said, I’m sober as a judge.”

The barman made no move toward the shelves of bottles behind him. I opened my wallet and slid a five across the counter toward him. I let the wallet sit open in my hand on the bar, so that when he looked at the one bill, he saw the rest of them waiting.

“Huh,” he said at last. “Things are new all over with you, aren’t they?”

“Shiny as a new penny,” I said. My stomach felt steady. I wasn’t sweating. Not a tremor in my hands. But a single fly still crawled on six little legs across the dead boy’s cheek. Eli Lavender’s head still made the same wet melon crack against the wall.

“And just waiting for a tarnish,” the barman said. But he poured me two fingers of whiskey and slid it across the bar.

I put my hand around the glass. It felt easy. Familiar. I picked it up.

“It ain’t my business,” the bartender said. He had moved down at the other end now, washing glasses. He made a point of not looking at me. “But in general I get two kinds of guys in here.” He stopped speaking for a moment, and I thought he was done. But then the radio drawled the results of the race, and his eyebrows drooped, and he shook his head a little and started talking again.

“The first kind, he walks in off the street, has a drink, maybe two,” the barman said.

“Then he gets up and leaves. Maybe I see him again sometime, maybe I don’t.”

“And the second kind?” I asked. Look how in control I was. I could go a whole thirty seconds without downing this drink in my hand. I could handle it now, better than before. I’d had

practice.

“The second kind is them over in the back,” he nodded. “They walk in one day, and they don’t walk out. Stumble out, maybe. Get carried out a lot.”

“You coming to a point?” I said. A solid fifteen seconds, at least. I could do that much. That wasn’t so bad, was it?

He looked at me now, a great big horned owl in a stained apron. “I don’t see nobody from the second type ever get his walking legs back. Not once in twenty years.”

“Maybe I’m the first type,” I said, lifting an eyebrow.

He just shook his head. “The first type never look at the glass like you do. Like they want to take it down the aisle. Or maybe just to bed.”

“It bothers you so much,” I said, “why stay in the business?”

The barman shrugged. “It’s a free country.”

I lifted the glass to him. “Here’s to free countries.” Then I put it to my lips.

The band made a fist around my windpipe.

I got the booze to my lips. I got it in my mouth. It was right there, that sweet oaky burn all down my tongue. But the collar had my throat locked up tight. I gagged.

“Jesus, buddy,” the barman said, looking up. “It go down the wrong pipe?”

I held on to it as long as I could. I fought for every second of it in my mouth. But the band didn’t tire, didn’t let up. I spit the booze across the bar. The band let up enough that I could just barely breathe. Like it knew the taste was still on my lips, my tongue, the inside of my cheeks.

I looked up, coughing, and saw the bartender’s wide fearful eyes fixed on my neck.

He snatched the glass from my hand. "I ain't seen it." He crumpled up the fiver I'd given him and all but threw it at my chest. "I ain't seen that when you came in, you understand? I ain't liable. You wanna strangle, do it in some other guy's joint."

I sat there with my elbows on the bar, sucking in air in thin reedy gasps, feeling the band slowly open as the taste of the booze evaporated and died away from my mouth. White flecks flitted and danced around the edges of my vision. I looked up and saw myself in the mirror opposite the bar, my face still flushed, panting like an animal.

Behind me, in the mirror, a little boy with a blue face stared at me.

I turned, my heart trying to tunnel out through the back of my rib cage. I saw no one. I looked back at the mirror. Just me and the barman.

A "unique opportunity," the doctor had said. The son of a bitch.

I left the crumpled-up bill on the bar and stood up. The bartender looked me, wary. Maybe I'd start something. "You forgot something there," he said.

"No I didn't," I rasped, and turned toward the door. "It's a free country."

#

The lobby to my office building felt slightly more inviting than a pharaoh's tomb, and nearly as modern. The potted palms died slowly under light fixtures in desperate need of new bulbs. Or any bulbs at all. My throat ached, but I'd almost stopped coughing.

The directory next to the elevator listed HENRY PEARL, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR as the only second-floor client. I was upstairs from someone listed as an importer, and downstairs from a bail bondsman. I wondered whether they ever exchanged Christmas cards. Or client lists.



The elevator shaft waited dark and empty behind the grating. A hand-lettered sign dangled from a piece of twine, telling me it was temporarily out of service, with all the big words misspelled. I took the stairs.

Up two narrow flights that stank of antiseptic and cigarettes, I pushed open the fire door and found myself at one end of a short hallway, staring at my name on a frosted glass door. Someone had at least done a nice job with the lettering. A sheaf of envelopes stuck its tongue out at me through the mail slot.

I turned the key and pushed the door open through a small snowbank of circulars and mail-order come-ons. The waiting room was small and tidy, three small chairs huddled optimistically together along one wall opposite an empty receptionist's desk lightly furred with dust, with the door to what I presumed was my office just beyond. One of the chairs had a dog-eared copy of *Life* on the seat, four years old and growing whiskers.

I poked around in the drawers of the receptionist's desk, just for curiosity's sake. I found nothing, except for a spider or two in the corners, and the same sentence in ink on the plywood inside the top drawer, written over and over in a woman's neat, tight, tensely coiled cursive: *I hate this place I hate this place I hate this place.*

The first thing I noticed about my office was the desk — specifically, the letter opener wedged point first into the blotter, standing straight up. It pinned in place a note neatly typewritten on yellowed, curling paper, dated four years and change ago:

#

*Dear Louise,*

#

*I quit.*

#

*Sincerely,*

*Mildred Harrison*

*Distinguished Graduate, Pinnacle Secretarial Academy*

#

*P.S. Burn in hell.*

#

*P.S.S. In lieu of promised payment, I am keeping the typewriter.*

#

That seemed reasonable enough. I wedged the letter opener out, wondering whether that made me king of anything. Underneath the top memo, I found a geologic record of previous correspondence, steadily decreasing in vehemence and hysteria as I went through the stack. By the time I reached bottom, the notes got downright optimistic. Story of my life.

The rest of my office wasn't much cheerier. The chair behind my desk creaked ominously when I sat in it. Two more waited in front for hypothetical clients, along with a shabby couch, a few empty filing cabinets, and a whole lot of nothing else. Miss July of four years ago winked at me from the calendar on the wall, while what you could generously call "wearing" what you could generously call a "bathing suit." I wondered if she'd aged well. Her smile already seemed stale.

My desk contained an old phone directory, three empty fifths of gin, and a notebook filled with obscene doodling. It seemed I'd cultivated a taste for art. The phone on the desk still

worked. Miss Whittier had kept up on the bills.

A second door next to the calendar, marked PRIVATE, opened to the sound of clinking glass. The air inside tasted thick and stale, the whole of the floor covered in empty bottles. Like migratory birds, they perched on the dresser and the wardrobe, crowded around the dirty hot plate, and filled the sink in the kitchenette. I could even spot one or two on the toilet tank through the door to the shoebox of a john. An empty pint flask curled up in the sweat-soured nest of sheets on the Murphy bed pulled down from the wall.

It took maybe fifteen trips to the garbage chute out in the hall to clear out the bottles. A sixteenth for the mail, and a seventeenth for the sheets, which were officially a lost cause. I sat on the bare mattress of the Murphy bed, listening to the springs creak, and tried to remember anything at all about this room. When that came up empty, I decided to be glad I didn't.

As I pushed the Murphy bed groaning into the wall, a strip of photographs fluttered out from the underside. I picked it up and saw four flash-lit portraits of myself, unshaven and bloodshot and in decidedly high spirits, getting awfully cozy with a girl whose dark bobbed hair fell into her face and covered her eyes. Her smile beamed wide and dazzling; even in black and white, I could tell she didn't skimp on the lipstick. I wondered who she was, and how long ago the photos were taken. I never did find out.

I stood in the middle of the newly empty room, listening to water hiss through the pipes from upstairs, and felt my stomach growl. It felt like a decade since breakfast.

Down the block I found a coffee shop I remembered from my days on the force. It had a new sign out front, and a new skinny beanpole of a counterman, but the menu hadn't changed any.

The counterman couldn't be too new; he gave me the stinkeye when I walked in. I took a booth and got my order in around the snapping of the waitress's gum and watched the cars go by. I ate a ham and egg sandwich on toast, slow like the man with the ink had said, and two cups of black coffee. Almost like a regular human being.

I broke a dollar at the counter, watching the surprise register on the counterman's face when he noticed my shirt was clean. Life's little victories. I'd halfway finished dropping coins on my table for the waitress when I saw the phone booth in the back, the thick directory in its leather cover dangling off the wall. I left the change and took the placemat off my table and into the booth.

Under veterinary clinics, I found 15 listings. With the little pencil in the booth, I wrote down the names and numbers of all of them on the back of the placemat, even the one out in Monteverde.

One name I expected to see, but didn't. I made a note of it anyway, from what was left of my memory, if only as a last resort. The number had gotten away from me sometime in the last five years, but I felt ninety percent sure on the address.

Before I closed the book, I looked up the city pound. And then a Mr. Howard Whittier Junior, 2327 Burning Springs Road, Encendio. WALnut-5761.

Back in the office I gave my dialing finger a workout. The city pound came up empty. Five of the vet's offices thought I was pulling their leg; the lady at one of them gave me a piece of her mind for wasting the time of medical professionals. None was any help. One, a Plumeria Heights address, remembered treating the cat; the nurse got that distant tone in her voice I'd heard in guys after the war who'd had it worse than me. Like she was seeing anew

something she could never unsee. But the cat hadn't been in for a checkup in more than a month. She sounded relieved.

I had no better luck with Whit Whittier. A houseboy answered, his English clipped and nasal like the drone of a passing airplane. Mr. Whittier was not at home. He didn't know when Mr. Whittier would be back. Yes, he'd take down my name and address. No, Mr. Whittier would contact me, thanks.

At one point I heard a burst of raucous laughter behind him. Whoever wasn't home seemed to be having a grand old time. I thanked him and hung up and sat there for a moment, watching the afternoon light slant through the blinds.

It was a slim lead; more like the outline of one. But maybe the brother would spill something the sister wouldn't. And if that didn't pan out, I had one more card to play.

I saw car keys dangling on a little hook by the door to reception.

The tag on the keys led me to the street and around the alley in back of the building, down into an underground lot. I had to check the number on the tag a couple of times to make sure I'd gotten it right. Then I checked the thing sitting in the corresponding space to make sure it was actually a car. One of the hubcaps had long ago departed, and the front fender dangled slightly, like a palsied smile. By some miracle, the fuel gauge showed three-quarters of a tank.

I cleared out a nest of old racing forms and more empty bottles from the seats, front and back. In the glove box, under a misfolded map, I found a .38 revolver and a box of bullets. It hadn't been fired anytime recently, if at all. The box still had the seal on it. I left them alone.

The engine hacked and shuddered and finally turned over. I drove out of the lot and onto streets as familiar as a half-remembered dream.

#

As my car wheezed up the hillside into Encendio, the houses got larger, and farther apart, and more set back from the street. They started to vanish, first behind prehistoric thickets of palm fronds and hibiscus, and then behind stone walls and iron gates. I counted house numbers and kept going up, up, up.

Whit Whittier's house stood all the way at the top, at the end of a drive wide enough to accommodate an armored division. He'd chosen a sleek modern job, all angles and edges and silver metal, like an airliner had chosen just this spot to fall apart in the most artistic way possible. I let the car take a breather halfway around the circular end of the drive, on the far side of a central fountain ringed with broad-leafed ferns, and let myself in through the low metal gate.

A flagstone path led me around to a broad concrete terrace on the side of the house. From here you could look out across the gardens and see the sheer drop of the cliff face. Part of the house, a slanting box of glass, leaned out on metal struts over the edge.

It took real money to live this dangerously. I wasn't sure the Whittier family resources would stretch quite this far. And for a punk kid who kept all his abiding passions in or close to his hip pocket, I didn't like to think about what line of work would.

The houseboy answered the door in a red velvet jacket and a black tie. I felt suddenly underdressed. Between the look and the accent I pegged him as Filipino, with thick black hair greased back over a high, pimply forehead, and eyes that stared out keen and intelligent and ever so slightly fearful. The top of his head came to the third button down on my shirt, maybe.

"May I help you, sir?" The syllables pinged, bullet ricochets. It took me a second to

find my wallet and fumble out the private dick's buzzer.

"I called earlier. I'm looking for Whit Whittier."

"I'm sorry, sir," the houseboy said. "As I said before, he is not at home."

"I'm not a cop, and he's not in trouble. This is strictly private. I've got a few quick questions, and then I'm out of his hair."

The houseboy shook his head. "I will be happy to leave him a message."

"Do you know when he'll be back?" I asked. Another shake of the head. I sized him up. He didn't look the greedy type, but not everyone does. I slipped a ten out of my wallet, folded it in half, and held it out to him sideways between two fingers. "It's easy to let these things slip your mind. I understand."

The houseboy looked at the bill for a long time, and slowly began to reach out a hand for it.

"Pinoy!" someone bellowed behind him. He snatched his hand back as if it had been burned, and tried to shut the door in my face. A big pale pudgy paw curled around the edge of the doorframe and stopped it. The new man had six inches on me, and at least fifty pounds, and probably several hundred dollars in the wardrobe department, judging by the sheen coming off his suit. The thick, bony contours of his bald scalp showed beneath pink flesh. He looked at me and narrowed his gray eyes.

"Take to your heels, bud," he said. "We don't want what you're selling."

"I'm a P.I.," I said, holding up the buzzer. "I just need to —"

Baldy gave me a little shove in the chest. Not much, for him. Just enough to send me halfway to China. I gave myself credit for staying upright.

“I know exactly who you are,” he said, and hawked a gob of spit on my shoes.

Now I remembered. He’d been one of the combine threshers shadowing Eli Lavender’s little shopping trip, the night I’d grabbed him.

“You ever been out to a little yellow house in Monteverde?” I asked. “Ever do any entertaining there?” Baldy went a little white at that, then flushed an even angrier red.

“I got an itch to break you in half,” he said, cracking one set of knuckles tectonically. “But we got skirts coming in tonight. And blood on this thing —” he tugged at the cuffs of his suit — “means dry cleaning. Take a long walk, shamus, and don’t come back. Before I call myself the cops.”

He smirked and slammed the door shut. Somehow, the house remained standing.

When I came back, I told myself, I’d come back armed. I figured a howitzer would just about do it.

#

I’d tried every vet clinic in the book. Now, with nothing else to go on, I figured I’d try the one that wasn’t.

For most doctors, the rule is “First, do no harm.” For Jimmy Pitts, it was “Close enough.” He graduated medical school with a bright future and a taste for prescription pills. The latter pretty much took care of the former. By the time Joe and I met him, on the trail of a ex-jockey from Barbarosa, “Doctor” was just something he went by to make himself feel better.

Along the way he’d slid all the way down from people to animals. When too many rich widows’ pedigreed purebreds wound up more than playing dead under his knife, and the ink



on his vet's license proved surprisingly fresh and smudgy and unverifiable by the state, he'd taken his business completely under the table.

Needed something to shut the neighbor's barking dog up, maybe for good? Wanted to encourage a favored horse to place out of the money? Jimmy had an answer in his little black bag.

He kept a shabby little office in West Windward, at the end of a block where the city started petering out into the desert. I parked at the old gas station across the way. It had finally given up the ghost since the last time I'd been there. Now the pumps stood empty and rusting, dead as the dinosaurs slowly disappearing beneath their fogged glass globes. I crossed a stretch of cracked asphalt and saw a tidy yellow coupe parked out back of Jimmy's office. Either he'd gotten himself some new wheels, or a new client. Either one would have surprised me.

The surprises kept coming. The place actually looked clean inside; someone had mopped the floors, tidied the front desk, and taken down the smutty calendar behind it. But the office still had that disinfectant smell, and I could hear soft yaps and whines and the rattle of cages through the swinging door that led into the back.

"Jimmy?" I called out. No answer. I crossed the lobby and pushed open the heavy door. "Hey, Jimmy —"

I felt the barrel of a gun press hard into my cheek.

"Jimmy's not here anymore," a woman said.

"I'm starting to see that," I said, and slowly, slowly raised my hands.

## Chapter Five

### The Brace

“What is it you’re looking for?” She had a nice voice, sharp and musical, with the faint twang of a banjo string in it. I would have liked it a lot better without the gun in front of it. “Trying to scratch out a re-up? Got a fresh load of strays for the quacks in Chinatown? Go on. Tell me a new one.”

I handled each syllable like a stick of dynamite. “I’m looking for a cat.”

“Live or dead?” she said. I still couldn’t see her — just a faint movement at the very edge of my vision, white and red.

“You’d have to ask Schrödinger,” I told her. I was so proud of that. “I’m a P.I. I’m going to reach into my pocket now and show you the buzzer that proves it. And I’m going to do so very carefully, because I like having a face.”

“Your face says otherwise,” she said. But the barrel dug a little less sharply into my

cheek. I dug out my wallet and opened it to the badge, along with the picture I'd gotten from Beverly Whittier.

"This the cat?" she said. I nodded, in increments. "Christ on a crutch. I hope the owner's paying." The barrel moved away from my face, and I heard a slow, shuffling step backing away, and the clatter of metal. "OK, Mr. Pearl. Turn around slowly, and keep 'em high."

She had hard green eyes and a little round nose, peppered with a buckshot spray of freckles across the bridge and onto both her cheeks. She'd pulled and stuffed her bramble of red-orange hair into a bunch at the back of her skull, but a few stray tangles had slipped free. She stood maybe a head shorter than me, in a clean white coat with "Dr. Kelly" embroidered on the lapel. Under that she wore a man's flannel work shirt and dungarees. She kept the shotgun leveled in the crook of her right arm; even one-handed, the barrel didn't shake. Her left hand held a cane, to go with the metal cage around her left leg. The leg seemed smaller, the dimensions wrong, the foot bent inward. I saw absolutely nothing wrong with the other leg, and quite possibly a few things right.

She looked old enough to be married. But I didn't see a ring.

"Let's have a quick chat about how you know Jimmy," she said.

"I'll bet you've never even fired that thing," I said.

"You want to test that wager?" she said.

I didn't. I told her so. She thought about it for a long moment, then lifted the shotgun up to rest on her shoulder, like hunters do.

"Don't get sore," she said. "Most of Jimmy's old friends aren't as civil as you. I started with a scalpel, but they didn't scare that easily."

I'd been back here before with Jimmy, but the room seemed different now. Like you wouldn't need to take a shower just from standing in it. The overhead light worked, for a change, and without the grime I could tell that the floor was actually white. The cages stacked on the near end of the room looked clean and well-kept, a few dogs and cats here and there napping or scratching or just watching us with wide, curious eyes. A metal operating table sat in the center of the room, an icebox in the corner, and a shelf with medical supplies and jars of anesthetic toward the back, next to a steel door.

"Did you know him, too?" I asked, putting away the wallet and the photo.

"Only by association," she said. "I set up practice three months ago. Too late to get in this year's directory. After the auction, I checked to see why it came so cheap. The paper said they found him six months back in one of the stalls at Kenniwick Downs, just before the fifth. An in-the-money favorite had danced a waltz on his skull with all four hooves. Considering what he was planning to dope her with, I'd call it self-defense."

"I like what you've done with the place," I said. "Not so much of that abattoir feeling."

"Yeah, well, Jimmy's old clients aren't exactly a boon for business." Dr. Kelly set down the shotgun and fished a pack of smokes out of her pocket. She peeled out a stick with unrugged lips and made to light it with a beat-up old Zippo that clearly hadn't been hers to start with. "Want one?" she said around the first few puffs.

I waved her off. "I'm not too keen on smoke in my lungs."

She looked at me for a second, curious, and then shrugged. "Fair enough." Then she snared the cigarette between two fingers and blew a long stream of smoke up toward the ceiling.

“I should probably give it up. For their sake.” She waved toward the animals in the cages.

“For a new practice,” I said, “you don’t seem to be doing too badly.”

She let out a short, weary laugh in Morse dots of smoke. “Most of these are strays from around the neighborhood. Old habit. I’m handing out a lot of cards and hoping for the best.”

I wandered over to one of the cages. A little white pup with a missing ear huddled in the back, nibbling on one of its flanks. “Hey, kiddo,” I said quietly. “Hey.”

The little dog looked up at me.

“Why didn’t you stop?” it said.

I jerked back from the cage like I’d been shocked.

“Whoa, whoa, easy!” I heard Dr. Kelly say. She sounded about a mile off, but getting closer. Then I felt a hand on my arm. She helped me lean against the operating table, and frowned. “You look like yesterday’s newspaper.”

“You didn’t hear that?” I asked, staring at the cage that held the pup. He’d gone back to protracted negotiations with his own haunch.

“I didn’t hear a thing,” she said, and her eyes narrowed. “If that business about the cat was some sort of put-on —”

“Sorry,” I said, waiting for my heart to climb back down out of my throat. “A week ago, maybe less, I was a drunk. Highly accomplished, by all accounts. I met a funny little man with a funny little needle, and woke up this morning cleaned out and wishing I wasn’t.”

“Which explains the choke,” she said, and tapped one finger against the collar. “I thought you had funny taste in jewelry.”

“My client picked it out for me,” I said.

Her hands moved on my neck, quick and sure, probing. She tilted my head back and got a look at my eyes. “You had anything to eat?”

“Two squares so far.”

“Kept it down?”

“Amazingly, yes. No offense, but aren’t I sort of a large breed for your practice?”

“There’s the problem,” she said distractedly, two fingers on my carotid to time out my pulse. “You broke your sense of humor. I did the Florence Nightingale bit for a stretch, back in the war.”

“Stateside or over there?”

Dr. Kelly rapped her cane against the brace on her leg. “Strictly 4-F, soldier.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Pupils are normal, pulse is steady. You had any other incidents like this today?”

“One, a few hours back.”

“What did you see?”

“What made me a world-class drunk. Any reason you don’t have a husband?”

“Same reason you don’t have any manners,” she said. “Just lucky, I guess.”

“So it’s just you and the dogs and cats and horses —”

“No horses,” she said, a little too quickly. “No horses. Parakeets, though. Hamsters. Even livestock, in a pinch.” She straightened out the lapels on my jacket. “Bad news, soldier. You’ll live.”

“I was afraid of that,” I said.

“I’ll tell you one thing for free,” she said, flicking the ash from her dwindling cigarette into the industrial sink. “Word on the street says a necklace like that doesn’t come cheap. Nor does a weekend dry-out. Someone really wants that cat back.”

“Can’t imagine why,” I said. “You heard anything about it? Maybe from one of Jimmy’s friends?”

She shook her head. “If I laid eyes on that thing, I doubt I’d forget it.”

“The client said something about trouble breathing, if that helps.”

She frowned and bit her lip. I could see the wheels turning. “Wait here a sec,” she said, and swung-walked her way to the door in the back of the room. She had an easy way of moving with the brace, in practiced little hops, that made me think it wasn’t anything new. I started to follow her, but she turned halfway through the door to poke me in the chest with the end of her cane. In the room beyond her I saw a little cot huddled among rows of filing cabinets, under a dangling bulb. “You got a habit of wandering into ladies’ boudoirs uninvited?” she asked.

“Not that I remember,” I said. “But I could have picked it up at some point.”

“Put it down again,” she said, and shut the door. I waited, counting the tiles on the floor, hearing file cabinets bang around from the other side of the door. I didn’t look at any of the cages. I just wasn’t that brave.

At last she came out again with a datebook. “They wore better suits than any of Jimmy’s friends. Wanted to see if I could send out some special food or medicine for a cat that was breathing funny. I said I’d need to see it first, and they lost interest in a hurry, but I gave them one of my cards anyway. And I wrote down the address. Figured maybe I could hit them up

for future business. This was a couple of days back.”

2327 Burning Springs Road, Encendio. Whit Whittier’s place. No wonder they’d wanted me gone.

“This helps,” I said. I gave her Whit’s description, best as I remembered, and she shook her head.

“The one that did the talking was a big guy, bald. Made some of the cats hiss just walking in the door.”

“And me without my howitzer,” I sighed. When she looked at me funny, I gave her a lopsided grin. “Never mind. Just chalk it up to side effects.”

“I’ve been doing that since you walked in the door,” she said. A smile almost creased her lips. Almost.

“Could I trouble you for one of those cards of yours?” I said. She jangled her way to a cabinet over the sink and took one out of a box.

“In case you find the cat?” she asked.

“In case I pick up fleas.” I looked the card over. “Dr. Vera Kelly. You ever eat dinner, Dr. Kelly?”

“I’ve been known to,” she said, stubbing out her cigarette on the metal of the sink.

“Any particular reason you’re asking?”

“Professional courtesy,” I said. I tapped the edge of the card on the brim of my hat.

“Thanks, Doc.”

“I’ll send you the bill,” she said to my back. But I liked the way she said it.

Dark had fallen by the time I left the office, the last dregs of day trailing gold and



pink in the west. The cold already rolled in from out of the desert. I started the car and headed back toward the hills.

## Chapter Six

### The Shadow

I sat in the dark with my hands shaking, parked down the hill from Whit Whittier's drive, wishing like hell for a belt of whiskey to smooth me out. I didn't know how many men Whit had in the house, or how many of them would be packing. But I figured none of them would give up the cat without a fight. And I didn't know whether I'd be ready for them.

I took the .38 out of the glove box and tore open the box of bullets. It only took me three tries to load it right.

I didn't have a shoulder holster, but my jacket pocket worked well enough. The gun bounced against my chest as I headed up the hill, over my heart. It got cold fast at night up here; already I could just about see my breath in faint little ghosts. I was breathing hard.

Either Whit Whittier's party hadn't started yet, or it had ended way too early. All lit up, his place looked like one of Joe's flying saucers. But the driveway sat empty. I kept out of the

lights as best I could, cutting through the palm trees and across the dry, whispering lawn. I looked for shadows moving in the windows. None appeared.

A razor edge of yellow light leaked out around the front door as I came up the steps. Someone had left it open. From inside, I could just hear the same few seconds of music over and over, punctuated by the scratch of a skipping needle.

I put a hand to the knob. It wasn't there anymore. The entire lock had melted, dribbled down the front of the door like a Dali painting. I touched the metal; still warm. Someone could have done this with an acetylene torch. But that was a lot of hassle and a lot of time and considerable noise, and it would have brought trouble running on size 14 feet. A simple pick would have been cleaner and quieter. This didn't make any sense.

I wiped the sweat from my palms on the sides of my trousers, took the gun out of my jacket, and pushed the door open.

A pale, drawn face jumped out at me at the opposite end of the front hall as I slid the door open. I pulled the shot in time to save myself seven more years' bad luck. The face was my own, in a round mirror hanging on the opposite wall of the tall, narrow foyer, below a high window staring up at the stars. Coats and hats, men's and women's, hung on hooks along the walls. Even a few purses. I walked in across lush red carpet and eased the door shut behind me.

The stuttering music floated toward me down a long, low, dim hallway to my left. I saw light at the end of it, but I didn't hear the sounds of a party. Just the scratch of the record, again and again, like a beating heart. Small square photographs hung on the walls, framed in black and white. Pretty girls with fixed smiles and distant eyes and just enough fabric in their general vicinity that you could call the whole thing "art," if you were willing to stretch. But at

least they all looked old enough to vote.

A glass wall covered the back of the house. From up here, the city looked like a jeweled spiderweb. The hallway took a few steps down into a sunken den. A fire still crackled in the stove against the left wall, and a hi-fi cabinet lurked against the glass wall. Someone had left a perfectly good highball on it, next to the record player, and for half a second I thought of nothing else.

In the center of the room I saw couches and chairs and a glass table busted into a million snowflake pieces. A blonde in a green dress sprawled in the middle of it, very still, with her neck twisted at an angle all wrong for the rest of her.

I took one step down into the den and froze.

Over the back of the overstuffed easy chair near me, I could see a round pink dome of a head. Baldy. I trained my gun on the back of the chair and opened my mouth to speak. Then I saw his hands. They dangled down over the arms of the chair and didn't move. The carbon stench of burnt meat attacked me.

I moved down the stairs and around to the front of the chair and forgot all about the perfectly good highball. It seemed someone else had my idea about Baldy and the howitzer. Except they'd followed through on it.

His eyes stared straight ahead for a million miles. Over his head, on the wall, I could see a round black mark burnt into the wood paneling. Right about his chest height, if he'd been standing up. In his lap a .45 automatic huddled, useless. A neat circular hole the size of my fist had burned right through his chest, the edges black and cauterized and still wisping smoke. Not a drop of blood.

In the war I'd seen all manner of things done to men, by shells and mortars and bombs that didn't care who they'd hit, or in how many pieces they left them. But I'd never seen this.

The skin on the inside of the blonde's wrist still felt warm. No more than an hour, if I had to guess. She looked like she'd died with a scream stuck in her throat.

The back wall of the den, opposite the glass, had an arched doorway looking into the kitchen. A staircase against the far wall led up to the second level.

I shifted my grip on the gun and moved past the couch and Baldy and the poor dead girl into the kitchen.

The icebox door hung open, an unanswered question, mist rolling slowly out of it as the compressor fought the outside air and lost. All the food had been strewn across the floor. The Filipino lay on his side in the middle of a nest of iceberg lettuce and a shattered bottle of milk. He'd been folded in half — the hard way. The backs of his wingtip shoes touched the base of his skull. I felt the blood drain from my face.

I backed out of the kitchen into the den and wiped my face slowly with a handkerchief from the front pocket of my suit. The record player on the hi-fi kept spinning, and I could feel every scratch in my back teeth. I crossed the room quickly and tore the needle squealing off the record. I let the turntable circle. The highball sat there, sweating, beads of condensation leaving trails down the sides of the glass. I loved and hated it all at once.

Through the wooden beams of the ceiling above me, I heard a soft thump and the crash of glass. I stood there for a moment, waiting for the blood to thaw in my veins. When I could feel it moving again, I swallowed hard and eased toward the stairs.

Round windows set in the wall of the house let in slants of moonlight as I moved from the bright den up into the darkness of the second floor. I reached a landing; ahead of me and along the passageway to my right, past a metal railing, I could make out four doors. I turned my head and saw a light at the end of the passage, at the back of the house. I didn't hear any more noise.

I poked open the first door with the barrel of my gun and flipped the lightswitch. It was the Filipino's room, small and spare and with just one postage stamp of a window up near the ceiling. He'd made his lonely little bed with military precision; a pair of slippers he'd never fill again waited at the foot of it. The sad eyes of Jesus stared back at me from a printed card stuck in the frame of the mirror.

I was about to shut the door when I noticed the nest of blankets tousled in the far corner, littered with thick short white hairs. Even from the doorway, it smelled of cat. Lucky had been here the whole time; maybe he was here when I came by this afternoon. The poor houseboy. I wondered how he'd managed to sleep in the same room with it.

The next room was the john. Nice fixtures. Classy.

After that was a guest room, the bed pushed against a wall of slanting glass that looked out over the side yard and the garden. A man and a woman lay twisted on the bed in a tangled mess of sheets, not wearing much. At least, I guessed they were a man and a woman. Too much of them was missing to tell for sure.

It looked as if someone had taken a pair of scissors and cut a neat diagonal line down across their bodies. The man was one shoulder, one arm, half a torso and both legs in a set of trousers, cauterized. The woman was a pair of hips wrapped in the fringe of a negligee, two legs

that would have been nicer to look at attached to an owner, and the sad little V of a bent elbow, severed at both ends. The rest of them was just skinny, stretched-out shadows singed across the bedsheets and up the headboard.

My stomach turned over, but lunch had moved on a long time ago, and there was nothing left in it. Acid splashed up the back of my throat and I fought it back down and stood there, gasping, my mouth sour and faintly burning.

Same problem as the lock on the front door. You could have done this with an acetylene torch, too. But it would have been slow, and this looked quick. Maybe instantaneous. Five years was a long time to be out of commission, but I couldn't believe science had dreamed up anything like that.

I shut the door, gladly, and felt a quiet relief when I opened the last door and found a master bedroom, empty, the wide cushy bed undisturbed against the same slanting glass wall. That left only the room at the end of the hall.

The back wall had the same view as the den, but higher up. I didn't look at the city, though. I was focused on the empty suit of clothes sprawled across the doorway.

The fabric was gray tweed, the tie black, the shirt white except for a dark yellow stain. A splash started at about head height on the wall to my right and dribbled down, sticky and flecked with small bits of pulp slowly drying. Orange juice.

The arms of the suit draped as if they'd been thrown up to cover the face. They leaked a thick black goo that also oozed out of the cuffs of the trousers and around the collar, and spilled over the sides of the two polished black shoes. Where it reached the carpet it gave off a rank, burnt chemical odor. I didn't touch any of it.

I stared so hard at the empty suit that I didn't see the other man in the room until he let out a low, wet cough. I looked up.

A bar spanned the front wall of the room, the shelves behind it as well-stocked as anything the Hi-Hat had to offer. Or at least they had been; most of the bottles were now jagged nubs of glass. The collar cinched itself a little tighter around my throat.

One barstool lay on its side on the carpet, one stood empty, and the middle one held Whit Whittier, perched very still and very straight. His body faced forward, but his head turned to face me. Maybe it had only been five years, but he'd aged ten. Possibly some of those had passed in the last hour or two. The same brown eyes stared at me from a face marshmallow-puffed with needless pounds.

His forearms rested on the bar, trembling slightly, as if they were keeping him upright. The one pointed toward me held a little snub-nosed pistol in its fist.

"Are you one of them?" he said in a quiet, controlled voice. As if he were afraid that anything too loud would break him to pieces. "Are you a lousy Red?"

"I voted Democratic," I said, slowly raising my hands. I stepped forward carefully, staying clear of the empty suit on the floor. "But that was a while ago."

He narrowed his eyes. "No," he said. "You're no Red. I know you. Where do I know you from?"

"Five years ago," I said. "Your brother went missing. I caught the case."

"Which one are you?" he said. He stopped and thought about it a moment. "Not the Mex. You're Pearl. The one who killed Eli."

He looked bad, and more than a little drunk besides. I glanced at his trigger finger as



often as I thought I could get away with it. If he started to take a shot, I could hit the deck.

Maybe he'd miss. But he didn't have far to aim.

"Eli—" I said, and had to swallow and start again. "Eli killed your brother. Half brother."

"I know." Whit let the gun droop toward the wood of the bar just a little. "I never liked Eli. He was better with the girls. Just another thing he was lying about."

I started to lower my hands slowly. "How about you and I put away our guns and talk like regular people? I have some questions for you. Your sister's looking for her cat."

I'd said the wrong thing. The gun went back up, and the dark eyes narrowed in his puffy, glistening face.

"Maybe I'm wrong," he said. "Maybe you're lying. Maybe you're a Red." He motioned with the gun toward a highball glass with a chipped rim down at my end of the bar, with maybe a mouthful of orange liquid in it. "Drink it."

"No," I said. "Let's just have us a talk."

"Drink it," he said, and wrestled the gun up until it was more or less pointing at my heart. "You put that gun away and you drink it. Then we'll talk."

I could shoot him. I figured I was fast enough. But I needed him to talk. "Is there booze in it?" I asked, moving forward slowly, slipping the pistol in my pocket. "Your sister gave me a little gift."

His eyes focused on the collar, and he sneered a little. "Little Bev. Always thinking it out. No, no booze. Just pure sunshine."

I lifted the glass and sniffed it. Orange juice.

“Here’s to my health.” I drank it down. Just juice. It tasted fresh. I set down the glass and looked Whit in the eye. “Satisfied?”

He set the gun on the bar and his shoulders drooped a half-inch, as if he’d been holding his breath.

“It’s hard to tell,” he said. “But they don’t like the juice.” His eyes flicked over at the empty suit lying in the doorway, then over to the bar. “Fix me a drink.”

“Get it yourself,” I said. “Who did this?”

Another mistake. Up came his pistol again. I was getting tired of this.

“Fix me a drink,” Whit said. “And I’ll tell you what you need to know.”

His gun made it tough to argue. I picked my way behind the bar. Broken glass crunched under my shoes. “What are you having?”

“Whatever you can find,” he said. He sounded sick. Like it took all his energy just to stay vertical.

“So,” I said, digging around under the bar for a clean glass. “You going to tell me who threw this little horrorshow?”

“I told you,” Whit said. “The Reds.”

“Communists?” I said. He just let out a bitter little laugh, so I moved on. “The cat was here, wasn’t it?” At the back of the second shelf down, toward the far corner of the room, I found one whiskey bottle missing only its neck. I let an inch or so of it splash into a glass. My stomach curled with a pang of longing. The collar gave my throat a quick squeeze until I held the glass out and away from me.

“Yeah, we had it,” Whit said. “More.”

I poured another inch in the glass. “How long?”

“Few days,” he said. “Since dear departed dad went up like a Roman candle. Wish Ma — my ma, not the china doll he ditched her for — could’ve seen it.”

I looked at him low and level, holding the glass out, letting the threat that I’d drop it sink in. “Did you see it? Your father’s little accident?”

“More.” He jerked his head a little at the glass. “Saw it, yeah. Didn’t cause it.” He gave a little snort. “I got what I could out of him a long time ago. We were just there for the cat. Scared us half to death when the shed went up. I’ve never seen anything burn like that. The colors. Then we had to leg it through the hedges so little sister wouldn’t see us and tattle.”

I gave him another couple inches of whiskey. The glass was almost full. “Why the cat? Why did you take it? Why did the Reds want it?”

“Give it here,” he said. When I held the glass for a second longer, he finally put down the gun. I set the drink in front of him on the bar, and he just looked at it, tender and surprisingly sad, like he’d been reunited with his missing child. “You got any smokes?”

“Not me,” I said. He rolled his eyes. I was so inconsiderate.

“Gold case at the other end of the bar,” he said. “Help yourself.”

I found a gilt-edged box, opened it up, and brought him back a cigarette. He put it to his lips with a hand that only faintly shook.

“The cat,” I said. So patient. I was a saint. Pick out a cathedral window for me.

“I don’t know why,” he said. He took a matchbook from his pants pocket, thumbed open the cover, and struck a match. “Manny did. The bald one. Whole thing was his idea. He went to lodge with my father. Said he was talking up something big. Some new project. I wasn’t

really listening.” He lit the cigarette and dropped the match hissing onto the wet surface of the bar. “Mainly I did it to get at my sister. She’s nuts about that damn thing.”

He tossed me the matchbook without looking. I caught it by reflex and tucked it in my shirt pocket.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What did the cat have to do with the project?”

“You know that cat will eat anything?” Whit said. “Pinoy said it ate his shoelaces. Maybe his rosary.” He coughed out smoke, and his whole body quivered. “That goddamn cat.”

“Whit, listen to me,” I said. I wanted to grab him, shake him. But his fingertips brushed idly over the butt of the gun. “What does the project have to do with the cat?”

He took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked at it forlornly. “All I need now is a blindfold,” he said, even quieter than before. He picked up the glass and looked at me. “I got another case for you, Detective,” he said. “You find out who did this to me. And if you do get your hands on that cat, promise me. Promise me you’ll wring its goddamn neck.” He took a deep breath and stared into the glass. I saw a thin line of dark red blood dribble from the corner of his mouth.

“What the hell,” he said at last. “Bottoms up.”

“Whit, wait —” I said. Too late. He tossed back the glass, and his body fell with it, off his stool. I lurched forward over the bar and stopped.

The bottom half of Whit Whittier still sat on the barstool, legs slack. The upper half of him, connected by the white bone of the spine and a thin pink ribbon of flesh, dangled backward, his head bent forward on the carpet against his chest, his arms splayed sideways. The glass rolled out of his hand onto the floor. The whole cross-section of the middle of him was

burnt and cauterized, like the others.

I reeled backward, slamming into the shelves, rattling the broken bottles. Glass shards skidded under my feet, and I almost fell. Instead I stumbled sideways, down the length of the bar, past the empty suit, my shoulder smacking the doorjamb as I jerked out the doorway into the hall. Right into the spacemen.

They swarmed up the stairs in silvery suits that covered them head to toe, with black square windows in the front of their heads. The lead one carried some kind of device, a box in one thick gloved hand and a cable running to a wand in the other. It let out an eerie, rapid clicking. I clawed in my pocket for the pistol. I almost had a grip on it when the first one saw me and drew back in shock.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” he said to the ones behind him, muffled under the suit, but in perfect American English. “Radio command. Tell them we’ve got a live one.”

## Chapter Seven

### The Feds

The spacemen grabbed me with mushy gloved hands and hustled me in a crinkling cloud down the stairs. More of them filled the living room, glazing the corpses in the white light of popping flashbulbs, prodding the air with chattering gadgets.

We crowded out the door and around into a drive much less empty than the one I'd walked across going in. A small circus of cars and vans and rolling steel-skinned trailers had appeared. I hadn't heard a sound from inside the house.

The lead spaceman swept the wand in his hand back and forth across my face, checking the readings on the little box. The chattering sound stayed steady. It took me a moment to realize he'd started talking to me.

"I said, you're in the clear, pally."

I blinked and shook my head a little. "What?"

The spaceman reached up and pulled off his hood. Underneath he was just a man, younger than I would have thought, with jug ears and hair like a pushbroom and big square glasses framed in black.

“We were thinking radiation, but no,” he said, and laughed in a nervous, nasal way. “Lucky for you.”

“Sure,” I said through a dry mouth, thinking of Whit Whittier. “Lucky me.”

The air buzzed with the rattle of generators and the overlapping babble of dozens of voices. People moved all around me, some in silver suits, most not. Too many for me to take in.

A sharp whistle split the noise, and almost my eardrums. The spaceman in the glasses looked up and over, and nodded to the others, and we changed course toward a huddle of people gathered by one of the trailers, hunched over a folding table. A halo of klieg lights made shadows of them, narrowing my eyes to slits.

“This is him,” the spaceman with the glasses said to the shadow people. The spacemen let go of my arms. One of the shadows stepped forward. I held up a hand over my eyes and cleared my throat.

“Anyone care to tell me —” I started, and felt air move. A freight truck plowed square into my solar plexus. I doubled over, gagging, orange juice and acid at the back of my throat. My lungs flopped around in my chest, a pair of dying fish.

Another truck swung around and knocked the backs of my knees out from under me. I pitched sideways to the concrete. All I could see was a shadowed forest of legs, and the dangling wooden knob of a Louisville Slugger, chipped and scratched within an inch of its life.

A voice far above me said something. Maybe it was “run the test,” or “rum is best.”

Silver hands reached down and hauled me up again; at least one set of them took the opportunity to rifle my pockets. I felt my wallet and gun slip away.

The man with the glasses and the other spacemen dragged me on dangling legs over to one of the trailers, up the fold-down steps and through the door into an oblong bubble of silver aluminum. In the center of the room sat a sort of dentist's chair fitted with thick, heavy leather straps.

Two of the spacemen dumped me wheezing into the chair and set to tying up the straps around my arms, my legs, my chest. I told my arms to punch their lights out. My arms told me to go to hell.

The man in the glasses peeled off his silver mitts and busied himself at a metal table off to the side. I heard the snap of rubber gloves. "Get his sleeve," I heard him say. One of the spacemen bunched up my jacket and undid the cuff on my shirt to lay bare a stretch of my forearm. The man with the glasses appeared with a needle and an alcohol swab. Not this again.

"Just a quick sting here, pally," he said. A spot on the inside of my arm felt cool for a second, and then a single sharp point stood out burning. After a few seconds passed, I felt a little tug, and the pain began to fade. The man with the glasses slapped a bandage on my elbow and tugged my sleeve back into place. He handed a vial of my blood to one of the spacemen, who took it out through the doorway.

"And one more little thing," the man with the glasses told me. Before I could move, he put a gloved hand around my jaw, the smell of rubber filling my nostrils, and squeezed my mouth open. I tried to talk, but he used the opportunity to run a cotton swab around the insides of my cheeks instead. He let me go at last, popping the swab into a little vial that he sealed with a



rubber stopper.

“That should do it,” he said cheerfully. “You just sit tight, now. They’ll want to talk to you.” The man with the glasses ducked out the door, the other spaceman following. I heard the latch click behind them, and then I was alone.

I could wiggle my toes and fingers now. I felt the rest coming back, but it was taking the scenic route. Clumsily I threw myself against the straps; the straps won. I couldn’t hear anything from outside, but it didn’t feel like the trailer was moving. I wasn’t going anywhere, either.

They had a lot of equipment and a lot of horsepower, both of which meant money. And money meant G-men. I would have said the bureau, but that didn’t fit. The bureau shouted from the mountaintops. These people didn’t even whisper.

I heard voices outside. The door handle turned. As it turned out, I’d gotten the “G” part right.

The blonde floated in first in a camel-colored suit, tucking a thick manila folder under her arm. As she entered the room she tossed her head slightly, gold curls rippling in a tidal motion, and my nose caught a rolling wave of cinnamon and spice. She smelled like a fresh-baked apple pie.

The brunette followed close behind in long, deliberate strides. If the blonde was a bombshell, the brunette was a sniper bullet; just enough to get the job done, devastatingly, and in exactly the right places. She wore gray tweed and sensible shoes, with her hair pinned tight in a bun too old and matronly for the rest of her. She carried the bat whose acquaintance I’d just made in her left hand, her grip sure around the taped and retaped handle.

Apple Pie stood before the chair and gave me a once-over. She had dumb-blond lips and a cute little nose, but her eyes pinned you to the spot sure as any butterfly under glass.

“Joel McCrea,” she said to Baseball. “Don’t you think? Or Joseph Cotten. I always get those two mixed up.”

Baseball squinted at me over the bridge of her glasses. “I don’t see it,” she said, in a voice that suggested a pack and a half a day, give or take.

Apple Pie pointed at the band around my neck. “He’s got one of those.” She said it quietly, like she wanted to spare my feelings.

“Could be a phony,” Baseball said. “Maybe they’re getting better at this.” She held up my wallet and looked inside it impersonally, and frowned to Apple Pie. “The registry’s off.”

“It happens,” Apple Pie shrugged. She furrowed her brow, reading, then looked up at me earnestly. “So! Mr. Pearl.”

“You have me at a disadvantage,” I said, a little surprised to find my lungs working well enough to speak. I waited for her to give me a name. A last name, at least. The G-men I’d known liked to bludgeon you with them.

Baseball had a different tool for that, apparently. She hefted the bat up and let it rest against one padded shoulder of her suit jacket. “Clearly,” she said.

“Don’t suppose you could spare me some breathing room,” I asked, jiggling at the straps that held me to the chair. “Or at least let me know what goes on here.”

Apple Pie shook her head. “We’d be terribly foolish to do that just yet.”

“I know nothing about nothing,” I said. “And the last time I checked, I was only a danger to myself.”

“Someone else told us that once,” Apple Pie said. “We believed him.” Her mouth hardened.

“And?” I asked.

“There used to be three of us,” she said, and looked away.

“What’s your business here, Mr. Pearl?” Baseball asked, still poking through my wallet. With the bat cradled in the crook of her arm, she held one of the bills inside up to the overhead light.

“You’ve seen the buzzer,” I said, “so you know I’m private. I’m here on behalf of a client.”

I watched Apple Pie put on her best look of interest, the one she saved for Sundays and holidays and members of the clergy. “What client would that be?”

“The sister of the dead man who owned that house,” I said. “I’m looking for her cat.”

Baseball looked at me suddenly, snorted, and came dangerously close to a smile.

“Pull the other one,” she said.

“That’s me,” I said. “I like to get tied down and kid with strange women.”

Baseball took a big step toward me. The bat dropped from her shoulder, and without any apparent effort she swung it one-handed into my upper arm. She pulled the swing at the last second, so it didn’t break bone. It just hurt like hell.

“Manners,” she said.

I grimaced, and bit back a few choice words. I could already feel a bruise coming on. “There’s a picture in that wallet you’re manhandling, if you need convincing.”

Baseball found it. I had the satisfaction of watching both her eyebrows jump about a

half-inch up her forehead.

Apple Pie beamed at me. “A lost kitty?” She held out her hands eagerly, and Baseball handed her the wallet. She looked at the snapshot and her face went pale. “Oh,” she said quietly. “My.”

“That’s about the size of it,” I said.

Baseball recovered her composure first. “What happened in that house, Mr. Pearl?”

“I showed up after the party was over. You probably know more about it than I do. Hell, you’ve probably got it all in a series of labeled bags.”

Apple Pie walked over carefully and sat herself on the edge of my lap. I told my lap to behave itself. I wasn’t sure it would listen.

“You must have had such a terrible shock,” she said softly, and patted me reassuringly on the knee. “Do you want to talk about it? That’s what we’re here for.”

It hurt like hell to laugh. I did it anyway. “This is good,” I said, and meant it. “This is very good. I bet this gets the fifth columnists and enemy agents curled up at your feet, lapping milk from a saucer inside of ten minutes.”

Apple Pie looked at me sincerely. I suddenly wanted to buy war bonds. “I believe that deep down,” she said, “everybody’s basically decent.”

A knock sounded through the walls of the trailer. Baseball walked briskly to the door, opened it just enough to take a piece of paper from a waiting hand, and began to read it, tapping the baseball bat thoughtfully against her shoulder.

“You served at Guadalcanal,” she said, without looking at me. “Or someone named Henry Pearl did. Nomination here for a Navy Cross from your C.O.” She handed the paper to

Apple Pie.

“Three men pulled from a burning barracks,” Apple Pie read, and smiled dazzlingly at me. “You were so very brave.” Any minute now she’d pinch my cheek.

“I was stupid,” I said. “They all owed me money.”

“And then you were a policeman,” Apple Pie kept reading, “and you ... oh. Oh dear.” She folded the paper away inside her jacket, and primly smoothed out her skirt. “Well. Let’s not dwell on that.”

“The question, Mr. Pearl,” said Baseball, “is whether you know the score. Or even the game you’re playing.” She looked at me sharply. “Do you know what Howard Whittier was working on before he died?”

“A full glass of whiskey,” I said. “It got the better of him.”

Baseball’s lips tightened, and she lifted the bat off her shoulder, a single ominous inch. “The father, Mr. Pearl,” she said. “Not the son.”

“I didn’t get the specifics,” I said. “I didn’t ask. I don’t care. I told you. I’m here about the cat.”

Apple Pie and Baseball shared a look. I could tell some sort of communication was going on, but I didn’t know the signals.

“You’ve been away, Mr. Pearl,” Apple Pie said. “Not long, but long enough. The world has changed.”

“We have actionable intelligence,” Baseball said, and paused for a moment, requisitioning the right words. “There are Red infiltrators on American soil. A menace to our way of life.”

“And what exactly do these Reds want?” I asked.

“Space, Mr. Pearl,” Baseball said. I watched her grip tighten on the handle of the bat.

“The moon. The stars. We need a way to get there, and we need it before anyone else.”

“Here I thought you had a whole farm league of poached eggheads with painted-over swastikas,” I said.

“They can build the rockets,” Apple Pie said. “But we still need the fuel.”

I started to grasp the outlines. “The kind Howard Whittier knew how to make.”

“Enough to get us out of orbit,” Baseball said. “Or maybe just lob an H-bomb all the way to Red Square.”

“Not that we hope it’d ever come to that,” Apple Pie added. “But you understand.”

“And you think he found it,” I said. “The right mix.”

“We know there was a considerable explosion,” Apple Pie frowned. “Judging from the size of the pieces.”

“Swell,” I said. “Knock yourselves out. It’s still not my concern. I’m just looking for the cat.” I knew there had to be a connection. So did they, probably. But if they knew so much, let them figure it out.

Baseball frowned. Apple Pie sat back a little, looking dismayed. She opened her mouth to say something else when another knock sounded at the door of the trailer.

The man with the glasses was waiting when Baseball opened the door. He saw me and flashed a jaunty grin.

“He checks out,” he said to Baseball. “One hundred percent.”

“I’ll be the judge,” she said. She snatched a paper from his hand and shut the door in

his face. She read this one over, the muscles in her face shifting slightly as she noted whatever it had to say. At last she shook her head. "Cut him loose."

"See?" Apple Pie beamed, undoing the strap around my head. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"I assume you can tell me what that was all about?" I asked.

"Red infiltrators," Apple Pie sighed, freeing my hands. "We had to be sure."

"I didn't know Communism showed up on a blood test," I said. I tore off the strap around my chest and set to work on my ankles.

It took me a few seconds to stand up, my breadbasket aching, my bruised arm sending pain in Morse all the way up to my shoulder. Baseball handed me back my wallet, along with a small white card. It had no name, no agency, just a telephone extension printed in small, serious type.

"If you happen to chase this cat of yours into any other massacres," Baseball said, "I strongly encourage you to let us know."

"Sure," I said, and put the card in my billfold. "I'll send you a picture postcard."

"One more thing, Mr. Pearl?" Apple Pie stretched out a soft, graceful hand and tugged the lapel of my jacket toward her. "If we find out you've been anything less than completely honest with your government, well..."

She came up with my gun in her other hand, and kept it pointed at me for a long moment. Then she let it drop into my inside pocket.

"We will personally collect those solid brass balls of yours," Baseball said.

"They'd make darling paperweights," Apple Pie beamed.

“You say it so sweetly,” I said. “I don’t suppose that card was your home number?”

She patted my chest where she’d replaced the gun. Baseball reached the door in three strides and held it open, waiting.

“This is where you get off, Mr. Pearl,” she said. “Your government thanks you for your cooperation.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m red, white, and blue all over.”

When I came out the drive had emptied, the other cars and all their occupants long gone. No lights shone in any of Whit’s windows. If I went around to the front door, I suspected I’d find it fitted with a shiny new lock. Whatever remained of the people inside probably had an equally shiny new alibi by now. Or just a quiet grave out in the desert.

I caught a glimpse of Baseball just before she shut the door to the trailer, but I couldn’t read her face. As if on cue, the black wagon it was hitched to started its motor. After a few seconds it pulled away from me, circled the rest of the drive, and disappeared into the shadows of the street beyond. A pair of red taillights trailed off into the dark, and then I couldn’t even hear it anymore.

I let out a slow deep breath. I wanted to sit down right there on the concrete of the drive. But I’d had my fill of that address. I walked down the hill to my car and started the motor and let it run for a few seconds. I turned on the radio.

The night had reached that dreamy, abandoned time when the world seems wrapped in velvet. I drove home through a maze of empty streets, eased my wreck into its spot in the car park, and took the stairs back up to my office, fighting the urge to jump at every shadow.

I thought about the Murphy bed, but ended up on the couch. I lay there a long time in



the dark with my gun on my chest, loaded and waiting, listening for the sound of footsteps moving toward me down the hall outside. They didn't come.

As I waited, I took the matchbook Whit Whittier had tossed me out of my shirt pocket, and turned it over and over in the fingers of my free hand. It was a cheap paper job, a few flimsy matches torn out inside. There was no secret code written under the cover, no message that would make sense of anything I'd seen that night.

Just red lettering on the outside of the black cover, in fancy cursive script: THE HOT SPOT.

Eventually, I slept.

## Chapter Eight

### The Squeeze

I woke with a start, and a plan, and the sun in my eyes. Morning again. This would take some getting used to.

I showered and shaved and found a clean dress shirt cowering at the back of my wardrobe, entombed in a laundry bag. It smelled of dust and neglect, but it fit all right. At the coffee shop I ate a big breakfast and two cups of black coffee. The counterman almost looked like he didn't want to spit in my eggs. Two days in a row of walking around on my hind legs must have improved his opinion.

Another dime got me the morning paper. I had a lot of catching up to do. We were at war again, someplace I barely remembered from my days in the service, off at one distant corner of the maps. The President I knew had stuck around, but his days were numbered. The new faces had already started to squeeze him out of the headlines.

I checked all through the society pages for a mention of a club called The Hot Spot. I found none. That told me something. I looked for it in the directory in the telephone booth. It wasn't listed. That told me something else.

After breakfast I drove to the Hall of Records. It hadn't changed a bit. Good old bureaucracy. The lady behind the desk had probably traded fashion tips with Cleopatra. Her hair looked stiff and unnaturally black and not fooling anyone. I had to repeat the name twice, and then write it on a piece of paper, but she finally came through.

I killed an hour reading through permits and deeds and legal documents in a little cubbyhole. That told me everything I hadn't already figured.

I walked out into the sunshine and sat in my car for several long minutes, my hands slick and clammy on the wheel. After last night, I needed to know more about the people who'd stolen Lucky. And maybe about the people who'd killed them to steal him again.

I just wanted another way to do so. Any way but this.

I started the motor.

Willowdale was country-club territory, palm trees lining the streets, the old money snug up in their vast crumbling houses, plugging their fingers in their ears and waiting for the world to stop turning. Not the place you'd expect a hush-hush gambling joint, even one made just for the quality. But I guess that was the entire point.

No sign marked the open wrought-iron gates, but I saw boltholes in one of the stone gateposts where some kind of placard had been removed. I drove up the hill and parked in a wide gravel lot off to one side of a huge gray building that looked like its architect had seen Greece once or twice, in the movies.

From the lot I could see down the hill and over the hedges and the stone wall to the adjacent property: row after row of headstones. Entire well-monied dynasties, slowly rotting into fertilizer. Convenient.

I took the garden path around to the front, past a wide fountain where another little bronze statue of a goat-legged man danced in the spray, slowly corroding to green. No half-dressed women attended this one. Maybe he wasn't as good on the pipes.

On the wide flat base of the triangular facade, just above the four fat stone columns, someone had engraved the solemn letters O.T.O. I put my foot on the first step leading up to the tall bronze doors in the shadow of the columns.

I still had a choice now. I could still turn around.

I thought about wearing the collar the rest of my life. I thought about having to tell Beverly Whittier I'd failed her.

By the time I stopped thinking I had already climbed the stairs and opened the doors.

Inside the air felt cool and still. The heels of my shoes echoed softly on a marble floor. I passed through an anteroom with a coat-check counter and a little podium for the maitre'd. Maybe by night the place jumped. Right now it was a tomb.

The lobby led me into a large open chamber. Overhead a chandelier glimmered from the top of a high dome. The ceiling had been edged in gold and painted by someone not quite well-paid enough to be Michelangelo. A lot of men in robes chasing a lot of women falling out of them, all of whom seemed to be carrying overflowing jugs of wine. I began to sense a theme.

The room opened up in the center, presumably so the dinner crowd could hoof it a little between martinis. Beyond the dance floor, just to the right of a stairwell that disappeared up

into the stone wall, I saw a proscenium backed in lush purple curtains dotted with sequins. Podiums stood waiting on the stage, black and silver, for some phantom band to materialize. I thought of the graveyard next door. To the right of the stage, another set of heavy doors sat closed. Above the stage a round semicircle of windows extended out and slightly over the dance floor. I saw nothing beyond them but more curtains, of the same purple cloth.

To my right, a wooden bar spanned the entire wall, with a broad mirror behind it. To my left, in a series of steps leading up into an alcove, white-draped tables balanced upside-down chairs on their heads.

A stooped man in a black suit moved with an inchworm's patience between the tables, sweeping a broom across the carpet into a long-handled dustpan. At the end of the bar a man with a gray porkpie hat, his broad back to me, paged leisurely through a newspaper. Occasionally he chuckled. Behind the bar I saw a girl in short, slicked-up hair and a man's suit, polishing glasses with a white silk cloth. She saw me and gave a start.

"Scram," she said to me, warm as a tiger shark with a toothache. "I don't know who told you what, and I don't care. We open at nine, invitation only."

"Of course," I said. "On account of you're a private social club." I helped myself to a seat at the bar. The cushioned stool cozied up to me soft as a cloud. A man could sit here and drink for hours.

The stooped man with the broom had paused his rounds; in the mirror I could see him giving me the eye. So was the girl behind the bar. She gave the man with the newspaper a quick glance.

He wet one thumb with his tongue and turned another page. He didn't look at her; he

didn't look at me.

"Trust me," he said. "You want to listen to Izzie here." His voice was a knife blade drawn across a whetstone.

"You're right," I said. "I do. But I'm not here for myself and I'm not here for kicks. I'm here to talk to your boss."

"The boss ain't in," Izzie said, setting down one glass and picking up the next.

"He'll be in for me." I took a deep breath. "Tell him Henry Pearl's here to see him."

Izzie's hand froze on the rim of the glass. The stooped man halted mid-sweep. The man at the other end of the bar held his newspaper very still. After a few seconds he folded it shut, and in half, and in half again. He laid it carefully on the bar.

"I have a bad ear," he said, still looking straight ahead, "on account of someone once shooting a pistol too close for my liking. I don't hear so well on this side." He pointed to the ear closest to me. His head swung around slowly. He had a lean, deeply tanned face, salt and pepper whiskers just showing on his long cheeks, and his eyes had a cool, stony squint to them. "Maybe you want to say that name of yours to me again. But maybe you want to think first about whether I heard it wrong or not."

"Henry Pearl," I said. "Charmed, I'm sure."

The man in the porkpie hat sighed and shook his head a little. "I'm not," he said. He got up, tucked the paper under his arm, and walked in long, casual strides across the floor to the mouth of the stairwell by the stage. I heard his footsteps disappear up the stairs.

I turned and put my elbows at the bar and killed time renewing my acquaintance with the labels of all my old friends up on the shelf. It felt like reading my yearbook. I put one hand

over the other on the bar and squeezed hard, so that no one would see them shake.

Izzie had gone back to polishing glasses. Every so often she'd steal a glance at me and sneer.

"Something funny?" I asked.

"Get a pen," she said. "I got a whole list." She smirked again, and I followed her eyes to the collar around my neck.

I tapped a finger against it. "I'm told it's the very latest." Behind the girl, in the mirror, I could see the stooped man making his way slowly toward me across the tile floor.

"You must be some high-class kind of rummy to swing one of those," she said.

"Just the regular kind. I guess I have expensive friends."

She set down the glass on the bar, tossed the cloth over her shoulder, and picked up a bottle from a lower shelf. Not the good stuff. But in a place like this, that was all relative. I watched her pour it slowly into the glass, then set down the bottle. She picked it up and carried it over to me. Her sneer was slowly hatching into a grin.

"Here you go, pal," she said, setting the glass down in front of me. "On the house."

My mouth went dry. "No thanks," I said, with difficulty. "Not while I'm working."

Izzie folded her arms. "You don't look used to making that excuse," she said. "Go on. Have a tippie." She held it up to me, dipped her fingers in it, and flicked a few drops in my face. I jerked backwards. The band drew in a few centimeters around my windpipe, and didn't relent until I'd gotten out my handkerchief and wiped my face clean. Even then the scent of it broke my heart, just a little.

"I'm on the wagon," I said. "Attached by the neck."

She set the glass down again about a foot away on the bar. “I knew a guy once got fitted with one of those things. Expensive friends, like you said.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “How’d it work out for him?” I heard a slow shuffle as the stooped man approached the bar. She looked over my shoulder.

“Tell the man, Wheezy,” she said. “How’d it work out for you?”

I turned and saw the stooped man just over my shoulder. His face looked blasted out of desert rock, the cheeks and nose painted with long-earned gin blossoms. A band of pink scar tissue shone against the circumference of his throat. Just about the dimensions of my collar.

“Not so good,” he whispered, each word clawing its skinny way up out of him. Then he drove a fist into my stomach.

I started to double over. Something dropped past my face. I felt soft smooth fabric against my neck, and then it pulled back hard. My spine curled until I felt my head rest against the cold marble of the bar. My hat flipped up by the back brim like a trash bin lid. The girl with the short hair loomed upside-down at the top of my vision.

I thought of Whit Whittier with his head against the carpet, and fought down a sudden wave of blind panic. Battery acid raced through my limbs.

I braced myself and tried to kick out. But I couldn’t see Wheezy anymore, and my foot swung wildly, hitting nothing but air.

“Hey, Wheezy,” the girl said. I reached up to scrape my fingers at the silk cloth, but she just pulled it tighter. “The man looks thirsty. How about you buy him a drink?”

Wheezy appeared, a shadow against the light of the chandelier. The glow caught the edges of the glass in his hand and shimmered through the liquid inside.



He poured a few drops on my face. The collar squeezed. I almost got a noise out, but it had to turn back halfway up. I could feel the blood rising in my cheeks and forehead. I clawed and spit. Wheezy poured on a little more.

The collar closed tighter. The world began to slide backward, away down a dark tunnel. I heard the girl laugh.

Gunshots. No. Three quick snaps of somebody's fingers.

"Let him go," a new voice said.

The cloth slackened. I popped forward like a jack-in-the-box, blind except for spots and colors, and smeared the forearm of my suitcoat across my mouth and throat. At last the band let up. I started to drop to my knees. A strong hand grabbed me by the elbow and held me up. When my vision cleared, I saw the man in the porkpie hat. He didn't look at me with pity, or with contempt. He just looked at me.

"Easy," he said. He took his hands away.

"You're both in the hospitality industry," the new voice said, in rounded vowels. "But I'm not seeing very much hospitality. In fact, I'd say I'm seeing the opposite. Inhospitability. You're inhospitable."

The voice belonged to a tall man in a gray suit, with a purple necktie and a matching handkerchief in the pocket. A mane of silver hair slicked back over his high, slightly protruding forehead. His thin eyebrows seemed to disappear into the caverns of his eye sockets. The blue eyes themselves were round and heavy-lidded and seemed to bulge slightly. They looked slightly baffled and amused all at once. He wet his lips.

"This man is our guest," he said. "When he's our guest, we treat him as if he were in

our very own home. Izzie, when a guest is in your home, do you asphyxiate him?” His voice sounded like a busted Dictaphone; it seemed to speed up and slow down at random, the cadences and the pauses falling in odd places.

Izzie stood very still. She looked hurt and confused and just slightly afraid. “No, boss.”

“Wheezy, do you choke your guests?”

Wheezy shook his head, his eyes low. A whipped dog.

“What about you, Slate?” The boss turned to the man in the porkpie hat. “You have a guest over, pour some drinks, maybe set out a bowl of pretzels, and then you strangle him?”

“Only if he asks nice,” Slate said.

“Good,” said the boss. “So we’ve clarified that point of etiquette.” He fixed me with those big, watery eyes. “Henry Pearl, huh?”

“That’s me,” I said, rubbing my throat slowly.

“You’re a brave man, coming here,” he said.

“Just stupid,” I said.

“Fine line,” the boss said. “A very fine line. How about you come up to the office with me, and we’ll have a chat. Maybe a nosh.”

“Just a second,” I said. I balled a fist and turned and smashed it into Wheezy’s nose. Wheezy dropped like a sack of cement. I pivoted on one heel; Izzie stood behind the bar, her hands down at her sides, her eyes clamped shut.

“Open your eyes,” I said, and when she did I threw the rest of the drink in them. She yelped and clawed on the bar for a towel.

“I don’t hit girls,” I told her. “Even when they have it coming.”

The whole time Slate stood next to the boss and watched it all happen. He didn’t move a muscle. He didn’t give a damn.

I took a moment to straighten my tie and adjust my hat. My knuckles throbbed. I felt like a million bucks, minus a few singles. “All right,” I said. “Let’s have that chat.”

Sol Lavender looked at Wheezy on the floor, and Izzie behind the bar, and shrugged at them. “I gotta say,” he told them. “I really think you two deserved that. Follow me, Henry.” He stopped, and ran his tongue over his lips again. “Do you mind terribly if I call you Hank?”

## Chapter Nine

### The Pits

Sol Lavender plucked a wet, glistening olive out of the jar of yellow oil on his desk. He made a quick cut along its equator with a long, curving silver knife. He pressed his lips to the cut, sucked out the stone inside, and with a soft spurt of air spat it across his office into an old copper spittoon. In the silence, it rang like a bell.

“Most people like them pitted,” he said to me, licking the oil catlike from the tips of his thumb and forefinger. “Not me. I like a challenge.” He stared at me under the soft hoods of his eyelids, as if he’d been expecting me, but not until next week. “You still got all your piggies?”

I crossed one leg over the other and set my hat on the uppermost knee. The chair I sat in, opposite the large desk of dark wood, was old cracked leather stained crimson, and a little too comfortable. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your toes,” he said. “All your little piggies. I know you were in the war.”

“All ten of them.”

“My two littlest piggies, they went wee wee wee all the way home.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s not so bad.” Lavender gestured at me idly with the tip of the silver knife. “You can’t see it when I have shoes on. Obviously.”

He’d had the oval-shaped office papered in a deep red floral pattern, one that seemed to subtly move whenever I wasn’t looking straight at it. Two tall bookshelves nestled themselves along one of the curved walls, full of thick old bound volumes. On a little shelf between them, a radio played Latin jazz just loud enough to make out. Behind me, glass stretched from floor to ceiling.

A trio of paintings, or copies at least, hung over Lavender’s desk. Strange fields of frolicking figures, bizarre castles and shapes, grotesque details when you looked close enough. It wasn’t Greek, but it seemed to fit all the same.

Lavender took another olive from the jar, made his surgeon’s cut, and paused, resting the olive on his lower lip thoughtfully.

“I bet you’re wondering if I’m going to kill you,” he said.

My heart beat slow and steady. No liquor ever made me feel so detached. “It crossed my mind.”

“Are you remorseful?” Lavender said, his eyes never leaving me. “You come here to beg my forgiveness?”

I’d come this far. I didn’t hesitate. “No,” I said. “Maybe I’d do it differently now, if I

could. But I can't say it busts me up."

Lavender's face was stone for five endless seconds, watching me as he worked the olive pit loose with his teeth. Then a sly little smile broke across it. "I like a man who knows his mind," he said. "Begging. It's distasteful, don't you think?"

I didn't say anything. He didn't seem to need me to.

"My love for my son was a weakness." Lavender puffed his cheeks and fired off the spittoon. "Terrible thing to say, I know. But when there's a lion in your village, roaming with impunity, seizing children in its jaws and carrying them off in the bush, well, you gotta kill that lion. For the sake of the village." He fingered the edge of the knife thoughtfully, his gaze distant. "But when that lion is your child — when you remember dandling that lion on your knee, and the sound of his laughter ..."

"It complicates things," I said carefully.

He looked up at me again. "But I know what he was, my son. I know what he did. So maybe you almost did me a favor."

He let out a short, cackling laugh, like he was about to slug me in the shoulder and hand me a beer. The grin he wore seemed genuine enough, but the sleepy, steady eyes above it still gave me the willies. I saw too much of his son in him.

"Relax," he said. "I could've made you dead a long time back." He dunked the knife into the jar of olives, tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek, and with only a little trouble speared another one. "When you were blackout drunk on a cheap Murphy bed, say, in the back room of some shabby little office. You get that blotto, you wouldn't hear it if a man came into the room. Sat down next to your bed. For a long time, watching. Even if he showed up every night

for a week, you wouldn't hear it. You'd never know he was there." He leaned forward in his chair. "That's just my imagination working, you understand."

I managed not to shiver. But I had to work at it.

He began to chew the meat off the olive, still impaled on the tip of the knife. "You know, I have an olive tree. Not here. In my back yard. I could go there, cut you off a branch, if you want an actual olive branch." He pushed the jar across the desk toward me. "Or maybe just an olive."

I put up a hand, palm out. "I'd rather just have some answers."

He shrugged, set down the knife, popped another olive in his mouth and leaned back, sucking on it thoughtfully. "I'm in a mood," he said, with his mouth full. "Shoot."

"I'm working for a friend of a friend of yours," I said. "Beverly Whittier."

"Little Beverly," he said, and spat. Another gong. "Skinny kid. She still have glasses? I always figured, as much as that girl read, she'd need glasses."

"This place used to be Howard Whittier's, didn't it?" I said. "Some sort of private lodge. You bought it off him a couple years back, at more than the assessed value. A lot more."

"Hal — that's what I liked to call him, Hal — he hit a little rough patch," Lavender said. "Happens to everyone. I did him a favor. And hey, what can I say? Have you seen the place? I love it. I'm a nut for all the columns."

I believed at least half of that last sentence. "You knew he had a cat, I'm guessing."

"Mean little bastard," Lavender nodded. "Take your hand off soon as look at you. I liked that cat. They're wonderful animals. The tails."

"Beverly Whittier liked him, too," I said. "Enough to go to a lot of trouble to get me

to find him. The cat vanished the night Whittier died. I traced it to Whit Whittier's house and found a big bald battleship who used to work for your son."

"Manny," Lavender said. "Haven't seen him in a while. How is he?"

"Perforated," I said. "Someone burned a hole clean through him, big as a grapefruit."

Lavender sat straighter in his chair. His lips hung slightly open. His tongue ran over them as if it didn't belong to him.

"I wasn't informed of this," he said quietly. Just for that moment he looked old.

"You wouldn't have been," I said. "Not for another few days. Maybe never, as far as the particulars. Some government types showed up not long after I got there. Something told me they weren't about to splash it all over the papers."

"And Whit?" he said.

I shook my head. "He survived. For a little while. Nothing I could do."

Lavender shook his head. The sorrow seemed genuine. "Poor kid."

"He said Whittier had been spreading talk at his lodge about some big new discovery. He mentioned you in particular. I think Manny wanted a piece of whatever Whittier was onto, and used Whit to get it."

"And how does the cat figure?" Lavender asked.

"I don't know," I said. "The cat had been there, but it was long gone. I think whoever killed Manny and Whit and everyone else in that house took it with them. I was hoping you might know why."

Lavender put on his grin again, not quite hiding the work it took, and wagged a finger at me. "You. I like you, Hank. You're persistent. You persevere." He paused, his mouth half-



open, and spoke again. “Does it surprise you that I was in the war? A man like me?”

“Not much surprises me these days,” I said.

“I was 75th Infantry. The Ardennes. Goddamn snow everywhere. That’s how I lost my little piggies, you know — the frostbite. You get any piece of the Ardennes?”

I shook my head. “Pacific.” Wherever this was going, I didn’t have a map to it.

He peeled the meat off another olive with the edge of the silver knife. “One night it’s me and two other guys on sentry duty. We dug ourselves a hole and piled up the snow and waited to pop any jerries that might want to wander by.”

He spat. No sound from the spittoon. “I thought I had that,” he said, furrows creasing his forehead. “Did you see where it went? Did it go on the carpet?” He waved his hand before I could say anything, and shut his eyes briefly, collecting his thoughts.

“The Ardennes,” he said. “I get first watch. An hour passes, two hours. I’m wishing I had a nice cup of hot coffee, maybe a bagel. I hear movement off in the trees.

“The snow’s coming down, because the goddamn snow is always coming down. I can’t see a thing. Can’t feel my fingers on the carbine. Halt! I say. Who goes there? Now, Americans, they’ll say something. Jerries’ll say something too, maybe just so you think they’re American. These guys, they say bupkus.

“I manage to draw the bolt on the carbine, and I take aim at the sound, and I’m just about to pull the trigger when I see the first of them coming through the snow.

“The uniform’s ours, but that doesn’t mean anything, of course. But I look at the guy, and I think, I’ll be damned if that isn’t John Wayne.

“And the group of them keeps coming, and the first guy still looks like John Wayne,

but now I see the second one. And he's John Wayne, too. Different hair, maybe a little younger, but still. Then the next guy, he's also John Wayne. And the next guy. And the next. Five John Waynes done up like dogfaces, taking a stroll through the Ardennes in the middle of the goddamn night.

"And I'm not just saying they looked like him. They had the walk. You know, the way he sort of rolls himself, like he always just got off a horse after too long riding. And then I see the last guy in the group, and who do you think it looks like?"

I hazarded a guess. "John Wayne?"

Lavender gave me another Cheshire grin and shook his head. "Bringing up the rear, in full fatigues, the helmet and everything — I swear this to you on my mother's grave, and she's not even dead yet — is Shirley goddamned Temple. Apple cheeks and perfect little curls and everything. She's got some Flash Gordon gizmo she's carrying around, half as big as her, studying it like it's her studio contract.

"Now, I figure, I shoot John Wayne, I'm only gonna make him mad. Even madder if there are five of him. And you shoot Shirley Temple, well, you might as well get out the flag and have yourself a piss on it. So I do nothing. Just sit there and watch them pass. As they do, the third John Wayne, he looks over me and tips his helmet, like he does in the cowboy pictures, and says, 'Keep your chin up, soldier.' The voice and everything.

"And they disappear on past us into the snow." He looked down to where a drop of oil had fallen on his shirt, and dabbed at it with his handkerchief.

"I don't think I follow," I said carefully.

"A man in my business, he lives and dies by power," Lavender said, pointing at me

with the knife. "I'm not talking about politicians. Politicians are cockroaches. If man died out today, the cockroaches would, too. On account of they need our garbage. To feed off. I read that in *Life* magazine. That's what politicians are to a man in my line of work."

He licked the handkerchief briefly and attacked the stain again.

"I'm talking about real power. Not about being able to hit the other guy harder, if he takes a swing at you. I mean getting to the point where nobody even dares to make a fist. Now, for a long time, I had that. We all had that. I'm not saying me. I'm not saying this country, even. I'm saying human beings. Top of the food chain."

"And now we're not?" I asked.

"I know what I saw in that forest," Lavender said. "And you know what you saw in that house."

I didn't. Wasn't sure I wanted to. But I humored him. "And Whittier said he'd found an answer to that?" I said.

Lavender spread his hands slowly. "Toward the end there, he wasn't doing so hot. I was worried, honestly. He said his boy, the dead one, was telling him something."

"A formula," I said.

Lavender shrugged. "I guess. Now, Hal Whittier and me, we'd had some wild times. We'd done some talking, like you do sometimes, when you get a snootful in you. Long on ambition, short on specifics. But this idea, he said it was a whopper. Said it was dynamite."

"Like whatever put a hole through your boy Manny?" I asked. Lavender chortled at me, like I was some chump fresh to the roulette wheel.

"Think bigger," he said. "Top of the food chain bigger. Once and for all."

“I still don’t see how the cat figures,” I said.

“Maybe there’s nothing to see,” Lavender said. “I’m not really sure.” He set down the knife again and stood up stiffly, putting a hand to his lower back. “I need a new chair,” he said. “This one only looks nice. You been out to the Whittier house since you took this case?”

“For a while,” I said. “I was out of my head for most of it. I had a two-ton escort for the rest.”

Lavender creaked his way around the desk and over behind me to the windows. I got up — the chair didn’t want to let me go — and followed him, hat in hand. Mostly I wanted to keep him where I could see him.

“Hal liked to hide things,” Lavender said. “Sometimes in plain sight.” He frowned at a smudge on the glass and started to polish it off with his handkerchief. “I tell them to clean these things, and always I see spots. I don’t know what I’m paying for. This last big thing of Hal’s, he got pretty bugs about it. Half out of his skin. Maybe you go back and give his place a once-over, you’ll find something he squirreled away.”

I looked down at the empty dance floor. From here, you could see a pattern, red tiles among the gold. A five-pointed star, bounded in a circle.

“You find that cat,” Lavender said quietly, “you let little Beverly know her Uncle Sol would be very interested in seeing that it’s well cared-for. Do that for me, would you?”

“I’ll pass it on,” I said.

The door behind us opened. The man in the porkpie hat stood there. “Mr. Lavender,” he said.

Lavender didn’t look at him. He stuck out a hand to me; after a few seconds, I shook

it. The grip was stronger than I expected, and it lasted a bit too long for comfort.

“You know, I thought you’d be taller,” was all he said.

I followed the two of them down the stairs. They stayed at the bottom; I walked out alone across the tile floor. I felt their eyes on me the whole way.

Izzie worked a mop behind the bar; she didn’t once look up at me. Probably Wheezy was off somewhere holding a napkin full of ice to his nose. I hoped I’d busted it.

I stepped out into sunshine, and air as fresh as it ever gets. The world seemed unreal for a moment. I couldn’t be sure I was alive.

I got into the car and drove down the hill. No black sedans came roaring after me. No one waited in the bushes at the bottom of the drive with a Thompson to make a sieve out of me. It all seemed too easy.

I felt wrung out and famished, and no more enlightened than I had when I woke up this morning. My throat still hurt a little. I took the matchbook for the Hot Spot out of my pocket and tapped it against the steering wheel, and put it back again.

I needed something to eat. Then I needed to wait until dark.

## Chapter Ten

### The Toss

The night had settled in warm and clear, the moon almost full, the stars diamond dust tossed across the jeweler's velvet of the sky. In my headlights, the gates to the Whittier House loomed, sprawling long shadows on the ground beyond. I tried not to think of that half a couple on the bed at Whit's house.

I left the motor running and got out. The guard booth sat empty; by the spiderwebs that glowed cottony in the beam of my pocket flash, it had been that way for some time. The gates gave with a push, and a tired, rusty groan. Not even locked. Crime was just an ugly rumor in Plumeria Heights. It happened to people who didn't matter, far away.

That, or the Whittiers simply had nothing left to steal.

I got back in my car, killed the headlights, and coaxed it lurching up the drive.

I parked around back, near the garage. With the sleeve of my coat I smeared away

dust and peered in the windows with the flash. One car sat up on blocks, another half under a tarp. Neither had been built anytime after the war. Between them, an empty space. I spotted cigarette butts piled discreetly in a potted hydrangea to one side of the garage doors. None of them looked even remotely fresh.

I did a full circuit of the house, hearing the grass swish and rustle around the cuffs of my trousers. Not one light shone anywhere, even in the smaller rooms, the servants' quarters. No radio played. Moonlight edged the overgrown hedges in glints of silver. I stood by the pool and shone my flash over the tarp and watched it bob and ripple on the surface of the water.

I walked to the side lawn, to the blotch of black, dry, dead grass that marked the gravesite of Howard Whittier's workshed. Aside from the fringe of lingering charred wood, only a square concrete foundation remained, scorched and gritty with ash. I played the beam of the flash over the surface of it. Under the soot I thought I could almost make out some sort of geometric pattern painted on the floor, more complex than the one I remembered from my brief glimpse five years before. But maybe I was seeing things again. I walked back toward the house.

Every door I tried was locked; the front, the side leading to the shed, and the kitchen door out back by the garage. But the last one had a mat, and when I looked beneath it, a key gleamed dull and heavy at me.

The kitchen looked clean enough, but I couldn't say I'd want to eat off the floor. In the icebox I found three small apples, the mauled carcass of a roast chicken, two eggs, and a couple bottles of beer. I wondered if the beer was weak enough to fool the collar. My throat still burned. I shut the icebox door and let my eyes readjust to the dark.

Through a heavy swinging door with a little round window in it, I found the dining

room. A white cloth draped over most of the table, peeled back at one very end to leave just enough room for a service for one, in front of the only chair not similarly covered. I imagined Beverly Whittier eating all her lonely meals in here. I wondered if she made the man with the ink eat in the kitchen, just for appearances.

The dining room stepped down to the solarium. The table and chairs at which I'd sat with her the previous morning remained in place. It felt like a week ago, at least.

From the solarium I passed through the parlor, and on into the music room. The lid was up on the piano. I looked at the sheet music. Stravinsky. Heady stuff.

I passed the stairs in the front foyer and headed up. Howard Whittier's room was the first down the hall, on the left. It might as well have been a museum. The covers on the bed still kept their creases. The clothes sat neatly folded in their drawers. Maybe someone had tidied up after he died, but something told me he hadn't slept here in a long time.

Matching nightstands flanked the vast continent of the bed. One stood bare and empty, not a scrap in the drawers. The other had the telephone and the alarm clock and a framed picture of Madeline Whittier. She was smiling, so I only just recognized her.

I looked in the drawer, hoping for a diary or a datebook or something. All I found was a dog-eared old snapshot of a young, vital Howard Whittier in someone's front yard, grinning white teeth at the camera like a picture-show pirate. Next to him stood a woman I didn't recognize, in a dowdy floral dress. She frowned and squinted at the camera, the sun in her eyes. In her arms, a baby boy sat fat and quizzical. Poor Whit. The world took him so far from where he'd started, and all in the wrong direction.

The room across the hall, I recognized. I hesitated for a moment, my hand on the



knob. I was a little afraid. I went in anyway.

I don't know what I was expecting. A time capsule, I guess. Billy Whittier's room dipped in amber, exactly how I remembered it. I found nothing. Not a stick of furniture. I opened the closet; it yawned empty. They'd even torn the paper off the walls.

Down the hall I found Beverly's room. It smelled faintly of perfume, over a layer of old books. She had shelves full of them, and more stacked neatly up against the walls. I picked one up and paged through it in the light of the flash. It was old, the pages yellowed and crumbling, the language unfamiliar. Even the letters looked strange. I put it back in its place.

The bed was a four-poster, the coverlet quilted. I didn't look too long at it. Or at the dresser, where a drawer hung just ajar enough to let the corner of something discreet and lacy drape itself out, like a come-on to a sailor ashore.

On the wall by the door, framed under glass, I found the same scrawled crayon picture I'd seen over Billy Whittier's bed five years before. I didn't need the collar to feel strangled.

I left the room and took the back stairs down.

At the bottom of the stairs I found myself in a low, dark hallway I knew. They'd kept me here while I screamed and thrashed and sweated out the booze. I made for the room I knew, and stopped. On the same side of the hall, two heavy doors stood side by side, a key protruding from a lock in the leftmost one. On the knobs I saw the same symbol embossed that I'd seen in the tiles on the floor of the Hot Spot — an upside-down star contained in a circle. I turned the key, and the knobs, and pushed the doors inward.

You saw chapels in a lot of wealthy homes. Old money liked to mix their piety with

their privacy — and avoid brushing up against the hoi polloi as they passed the collection platter.

New money liked to feel just as good as old money.

This wasn't a chapel.

Short, heavy wooden pews brooded on either side of a narrow aisle, leading up to a raised platform with a broad low altar. But I didn't see a cross. Or a star of David, for that matter.

The walls bore more mosaics, with more satyrs. No chasing or frolicking or pipe-playing for these guys, though. And no robes for the ladies. This crowd was all business. From the looks of it, everyone involved was having the sort of time that nowadays could get you arrested. Maybe it was supposed to be someone's idea of a turn-on. It just made me bored.

Around the edge of the dark mahogany altar someone had carved out dense Greek script I couldn't understand. I could make out the three letters in bronze on the front, though: O.T.O. Whatever these guys did for fun, I bet it beat hell out of the Elks and the Masons put together.

I started to wonder about Howard Whittier sitting in his shed, writing down a formula, listening to his dead son.

I left the doors as I'd found them, closed and locked, and continued down the hall with a case of the willies dancing down my spine.

Someone had changed the sheets and made up the bed they'd put me in. I found no trace of restraints or the IV stand. Not even a towel left in the bathroom. Now that I had my head about me, I could see lighter-colored areas of the stucco on the walls, about the size and the shape of the bookshelves I'd seen up in Beverly Whittier's room. She'd had them moved. I wondered when.

The desk's drawers wouldn't budge, but I found a heavy paper clip way back in a cubby on top and straightened it out. The first lock took me a few minutes of fiddling; after that it got easier.

Mostly I found bills, some of them second and third notices, with their increasingly urgent politeness. Threats were for the lower tax brackets only. With the upper crust, you cajoled. I unearthed a yellow legal pad filled, every page front and back, with dense scribbles that could have been math or code or some ancient language. Maybe I wasn't even looking at them the right way up.

As I worked my way down the drawers, I started to hit paydirt. I smoothed out the thin, crinkling paper of a telegram dated two weeks ago — origin Washington, D.C. — and read it by the light of my flash. WHITTIER STOP VERY INTERESTED IN NEW DISCOVERY STOP PLEASE CONTACT TO ARRANGE DEMONSTRATION STOP.

Below the telegram I found a sheaf of invoices, mostly from picture companies, listing payments for explosives and other special effects. The studios got bigger and more glitzy, and the payment amounts steadily larger — but only if you read them in reverse.

In the very bottom drawer I found a letter dated two years ago, this time from some other government agency whose name I didn't recognize. It respectfully informed Mr. Whittier that his invention was plenty swell, but not practical, and thanked him for his interest. It was clipped to a photostat of a patent application, describing a "device for the internal transport of confidential materials." Internal to what, it didn't specify.

At the back of the drawer I found something that matched the cylindrical diagrams in the photostats, silver and metal and roughly the size of a fat piece of chalk. I held it at both

rounded ends and twisted one and felt it unlock. The sides sprang open and fanned out like a flower around the edge I'd twisted, revealing a scroll of paper wrapped around a central column. I unrolled the paper, and read, in a jaunty, scribbly hand that matched what I'd seen on the legal pads: ALWAYS DRINK YOUR OVALTINE.

I started to let the doodad drop back into the drawer, and had a brainstorm, and just caught it again in midair. I remembered what Whit Whittier had told me just before he died. About the shoelaces, and maybe the rosary.

I opened the top drawer again and tore through the bills until I found a familiar name on one of the letterheads. The same Plumeria Heights vet clinic I'd called the day before, with the slightly shellshocked nurse. I dug in the pile and pulled out all the notices I could find, their dates scattered among the past five years. Some were just for deworming or flea collars or vitamin shots.

But two of them billed for abdominal X-rays. And one mentioned a stomach pump.

I sat down with my back against the edge of the bed. It made a horrible kind of sense. The safest place to hide a secret was somewhere no one would want to look at, let alone touch.

I wondered how the cat had even gotten the cylinder down without choking. Then again, from the sound of it, its whole existence had been one long act of determined spite.

Then I asked myself whether Beverly Whittier knew. And why she hadn't told me, if she did.

Far away, on the other side of the house, something thumped and clattered.

I stuffed the papers back in the desk as best I could, and shut all the drawers again. Standing up, I put a hand in my pocket for my .38. It wasn't there. It was sitting in my glovebox,

where I'd left it this morning before heading into the Hot Spot. Sign me up for the Nobel Prize.

I killed the pocket flash and let my eyes slowly take in the silver light shining through the barred windows. On the balls of my feet, I took slow, measured, minefield steps out into the hallway. Nothing moved in the shadows. Nothing but me. But another thump carried through the walls and the corridors of the house, deafening in the stillness. My ears rang like a Sunday's worth of bells.

I followed the hallway past the chapel that wasn't a chapel, past the back stairs, through the billiards room and into the parlor. The doors to the solarium hung open, and the room seemed dazzlingly pale and empty in the moonlight.

I took the parlor door into the dining room and stopped, flattened against one side of the doorjamb. Through the swinging door at the other end of the room, I heard the icebox open. I saw light appear through the little round window in the door, and a shadow moving in that light. I stuck a hand in the outside pocket of my suitcoat and made a gun of my fingers. I thought about just the index, but it looked more convincing with the index and middle. I only felt halfway like an idiot.

I pushed the swinging door open slowly, with my shoulder, praying somebody kept the hinges oiled. Out the curtained windows over the sink, facing the drive, I could see a sleek silver convertible in the moonlight, parked next to my wreck.

An almost Biblical light poured forth from the open icebox. I could see the back of a man in a hat and a trenchcoat, rummaging through the cabinets. He poked and pawed with no apparent concern, his movements stiff and somehow odd.

I turned on the flash and threw the beam on his head and dragged my best cop voice

out of mothballs. “Hands, pal. Show ‘em slow.”

He turned around without any apparent surprise or concern. When the beam hit his face, he didn’t flinch. Not even a squint.

Me, I almost dropped the flash.

The light showed a long, oval-shaped face with a slender hawkish nose and a wide, heavy-lipped mouth quirked in faint amusement. Under the brim of his hat, his eyes were baggy and basset-hound sleepy, like he’d just gotten up from a ten-year nap. The expression didn’t change, didn’t even seem to register my presence.

I’d seen that face staring back at me dozens of times, projected thirty feet wide on a square screen in a dark room. I’d watched it kiss dames and crack cases, and heads, and wise.

My mouth hung open. I started to say something, to call him by name, when a hand fell on my shoulder and spun me around.

This one had beady eyes and a pug nose and cherubic cheeks and a baby’s fat little chin, all squeezed down to the lower half of his face by a tall forehead and a curly wave of dark golden hair. He had to reach up to get to my shoulder, but the grip put iron to shame. He smiled at me, one eyebrow arching, the opposite side of his little mouth jerking upward on invisible strings. I knew his face from the pictures, too. Well enough to know that smile meant trouble.

He didn’t move. I didn’t move. The whole world moved, falling away beneath my feet, the walls of the house whirling around me like a carnival ride. I felt his hand peel away from my shoulder. I saw the ghostly white chairs of the dining room table hurtling underneath me. The chandelier tickled my back.

Then, for a long time, I didn’t see anything at all.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Law

Through a mile of thick black mud, a bell tolled.

I opened my eyes. Half of me throbbed. I lay on coarse sheets and a pillow that smelled of someone else's hair oil, staring at white paint on a cinderblock wall. Someone with a pencil had written a brief description of a girl named Mildred, noting at least one thing she excelled at. I wondered if she put that on her CV.

The bell still tolled, but it sounded less like a bell. I turned my head, slowly; I felt stiff and bruised, with a sour, stale taste on my tongue. I looked down the length of me, over the hat someone had left on my stomach, and saw iron bars and a concrete wall beyond. The tolling sound came closer, and closer, and then a tall skinny kid with a brown flattop cut and a blue patrolman's uniform appeared in front of the bars, his nightstick up, ready to give them another conk. He saw me and smirked a little.

“Hey, Rip Van Winkle,” he said. “Good morning.”

“Maybe for you,” I said. I shut my eyes. It made my head throb a little less. I heard him give the bars another whack, a good hard one, the sound reverberating painfully in my skull. I opened one eye again and drilled him with it.

“Nix on the shuteye, Rip,” the uniform said. “The lieutenant wants to see you.” He took a half-step down the hall, got a bright idea, and stopped, smirking again. “Don’t you go nowhere.”

“I’ll work on that,” I growled, and sat up slowly, putting my hat back on my head. My right arm and leg ached when I moved them, and again when I probed them with my fingers. I had all kinds of black and blue to look forward to. My watch told me I’d been out for ten hours, give or take.

I checked my pockets, and found nothing but the paper clip I’d used to pick Whittier’s locks. Someone had taken off my shoes and left them by the side of the bunk. I sat there for a moment looking at my stocking feet, wiggling my toes experimentally. All my little piggies seemed intact. At least I had that going for me.

I laced up my shoes and ran a trickle in the doll-sized sink on the other side of the room, and splashed my face with it. It was freezing cold and smelled like old pipes, but it helped clear out the cobwebs. I was straightening my tie when I heard a heavy door open at the end of the hall. Quiet voices echoed off the cinderblocks, one of them the uniform’s, one too low to make out. Then footsteps, and then another man appeared on the other side of the bars, carrying a wooden chair with him. He sat down on it and leaned back and folded his arms, his mouth a thin firm line.



Five years had filled him out some, and weathered him a little around the eyes. He had a better suit and a better tie and a rakish little pencil-thin mustache that made him look like a high-class bandleader.

“You don’t look surprised,” Joe Vasquez said.

“Give me a second,” I said. “I’m moving slow this morning. Someone hit me with a dining room.” I eased myself back down onto the edge of the bunk.

“When the call came in from Plumeria, I figured you for the drunk tank,” he said.

I pulled back the collar of my shirt to show him the band. “Clean and sober,” I said. “Like it or not.”

“I saw that,” Joe said. He leaned forward in the chair, his elbows on his knees, and knotted his fingers. He spoke low. “You remember I came to visit you? About a month after you left the force?” I shook my head. His eyes darkened. “You were lit. Like a stick of dynamite.”

I couldn’t look at him. “I got dried out a few days back,” I said. “Beyond that, the last five years are one long bad night.”

Joe looked down at the concrete floor. “Did you mean to do it?” I didn’t need to ask what he meant. “I know what you said at the hearing. I want you to give it to me straight.”

I honestly hadn’t thought about it until now. “After everything else, it was just one more punch,” I said. “But I guess I didn’t care one way or the other. Not enough.”

“You could have told me.” Joe looked me in the eye this time.

“I know,” I nodded. “That’s why I did it myself.”

Joe chewed on that for a long moment. Then he stood and picked up the chair, and walked away without a word to me. After a few long seconds his footsteps echoed back down the

hallway, accompanied by the jingle of keys.

He opened the cell door and stepped back. "You look like a man in need of coffee."

I stood up, wincing, and put on my hat. "Only as much as oxygen."

We took the elevator up with the uniformed kid. He kept his arms folded behind his back, his feet apart, like they'd taught him at the academy. I could tell he was trying not to stare. At last he spoke to me, quiet, out of the side of his mouth.

"Is it true?" he said. "Are you that Henry Pearl?"

"I used to be."

The kid let out a low whistle. I shot a glance at Joe; he turned his face to the elevator wall so I wouldn't see him stifling a grin.

"Did you really do it like they say?" the kid asked me. "With a book? Guy down in motor pool says it was a dictionary."

"Rules and regs. Guess I didn't read it well enough." Someday he'd tell his grandkids.

We left the kid in the elevator and got off on six, one floor up from my old stomping grounds. This was Robbery Homicide. I noticed a few old familiar faces as Joe threaded me through the bullpen. They looked everywhere I wasn't.

Joe had a closed-in office in the far corner, his name on the frosted glass of the door. He unlocked the door and led me inside, and busied himself with a kettle and an electric hot plate on a little table in the corner.

"You'll take instant and like it," he said, measuring out scoops.

"At this point I'd take mud," I said. I stood, a little awkwardly, not wanting to sit. He

had a good-sized desk with the usual paperwork on it. I thought I caught a glimpse of a comic book peeking out beneath a pile of vehicle mileage reports. One chair sat behind the desk, a slightly shabbier one across the way for visitors. Low shelves bulged with case files and law books. A few framed commendations hung just barely crooked on the walls.

Joe stepped back from the kettle, satisfied, and took a seat. After a second I followed suit. Mine had a busted spring somewhere in it.

“You want to tell me what you were doing in the Whittier house?” he asked, picking up a pen. He peeled a sheaf of papers off the top of his inbox and started to work.

“Depends,” I said. “Did the uniforms find anyone else with me?”

Joe shook his head. “Some insomniac neighbor saw a silver convertible going in the gates in the middle of the night and called it in. The uniforms passed a car by that description headed down the hill when they were coming up, but they couldn’t get the plate, and the neighbor hadn’t phoned one in.”

“And that’s not the neighborhood where you go blithely pulling people over,” I said.

“Not in a prowler car you don’t,” Joe said. “The uniforms found the kitchen door open, signs of a search, and you, in the dining room, out cold and eating plaster.”

“Beverly Whittier has me working a case. Nothing to trouble the cops, at least as it was told to me. I had a feeling I wasn’t getting the whole story, so I paid the house a little midnight visit. I’d been a guest there for a few days during my dry-out. I figured I was within my rights. I guess someone else had the same idea.”

“Your pals in the silver car?” Joe asked.

I held up my hands. “When I figure it out,” I said, “I’ll let you know. Right now, even

I wouldn't believe me."

"If I call Ms. Whittier," Joe said, "she'll back your story?"

"Not for another few days she won't," I said. "Unless the department's willing to spring for a person-to-person all the way out to Nevada."

"As a matter of fact, it is," he said, "and it did. Got the number from her answering service. Ms. Whittier was only too happy to name you as an employee. She sounds all grown up."

"Lot of that going around," I said. "Lieutenant."

Joe shook his head. "Politics. I got the bump to Robbery Homicide to finish up the Whittier case, once they knew they were never going to solve it. I guess they figured if they threw me a bone, it'd keep my mouth too full to say anything. I made a few good cases over the years, busted my hump, kept my head down. Three months back the mayor decides he wants to firm up the Mexican vote in the next election. And here I am."

"Next you'll be chief of police," I said.

Another smile, almost. "You ask my abuela, I'm already commissioner." He hesitated a moment, then picked up a small frame off his desk and handed it to me. The picture showed him in front of a little bungalow, his arm around a beaming dark-haired beauty. He held the hands of a little girl in a frilly Easter dress who stood on his shoes, leaning against his knees. She looked at the camera with bright, curious eyes.

"Look at you." Happiness took an ice pick to my heart. My empty office. My Murphy bed. "Somebody's sinful granddaughter, I presume?"

He pretended to take offense. "I met her at a church picnic."

“The little one’s got her mother’s looks,” I said. “Lucky for her.”

“Don’t I know it,” Joe said. “Sylvia’s going to be three next month. All I hear from her is ‘puppy, puppy, puppy.’ You know how they get that look in their eye...” Then he realized, and fell silent.

“Sure,” I said, just to let him off the hook.

Joe got up and checked the coffee, poured it out into steaming mugs. He put one in my hand, and I breathed in the steam.

“I’m not saying you didn’t have it coming,” Joe said at last. He had his back to me, staring out the windows, taking genteel little sips. “But it stinks all the same.”

“I saw the name on the headstone, and I started digging anyway,” I said. “Don’t get all torn up because you didn’t take the shovel from me. You’d only have gotten dirty. And I’d still be this far down.”

Joe rubbed the heel of his palm against one eye. When he turned to look at me, I could see he’d had a long night. “So what would you say to a hand up? Supposing it were offered.”

“I could still be in that cell, and I’m not,” I said. “That’s plenty.”

Joe sat back down at his desk and opened one of the top drawers. “Tough,” he said. “When they brought you in I went down to records and pulled this.” He tossed a thick manila folder in my lap. The full jacket for the Billy Whittier case. “I figured you’d want to know what you gave it all up for.”

My throat caught, tighter than the collar could ever squeeze. “Thanks, Joe,” I managed to say. I didn’t want to touch it. As if it would burn my fingers.

“Skip it.” He kept his head down, working through requisition forms and witness statements. “Next time you get in over your head, Henry,” he said quietly, “maybe you give me a call. If I’m around.”

I waited to feel like I deserved this. After a while I gave up. “Maybe I do,” I said. I put down the coffee on the arm of the chair, stood up, and tucked the Whittier jacket under my arm. “Your boys happen to tow my car in last night?” I asked.

Joe looked up at me from under one raised brow. “That was yours? The motor pool boys are keeping an eye on it. Something about morbid curiosity.” He reached for the phone.

I left him in mid-conversation and went quietly out through the bullpen. Still nobody looked up. I was the invisible man.

I took the elevator down and signed out my keys and wallet. I drove up the ramp from the motor pool into the sunlight and the traffic. The Whittier jacket sat on the seat beside me like a coiled snake.

#

I did everything I could not to look at it.

I gave the car a fill-up and pretended to listen to the attendant crack wise about it. I stopped at a drugstore for soap and a toothbrush and a razor and a bottle of aspirin. I bought two new shirts from a menswear store on Fuente.

I ate breakfast at a diner down the street from the store. I chewed everything slowly, including a couple of the aspirin. I had a slice of the pie. I found myself asking for another cup of coffee.

When I couldn’t put it off any longer, I drove back to the office. I thought about

leaving the file in the car, for some other day. I stood by the passenger door for a good two minutes, thinking. In the end I took it up with me, along with the gun from the glovebox.

In the office, I tried calisthenics, until my right arm and leg gave me hell. The jacket sat on my desk, waiting.

I had a hot shower and shaved my five o'clock shadow back to eleven a.m. or so. All down my right side, the flesh felt tender, jellyfish blooms of sickly yellow and dark purple emerging under the skin. I took all the pins out of one of my new shirts, and tried it on, and tied the same old necktie on top of it. By now I was certain it had been Howard Whittier's.

I went back to my desk, pushed the jacket aside, and got out the list of veterinarians I'd called the day before. I made the phone company happy, but no one else. No one had brought in a godawful cat-shaped mess. The same nurse I'd talked to from Plumeria Heights confirmed, in a hushed and troubled voice, that our Lucky had a habit of eating all sorts of things you'd think wouldn't fit inside a cat. From the sound of it, I'd put her off her lunch.

I got out the gun, disassembled it, cleaned it out, and put it back together. I tried to have a chat with Miss July from the calendar, but she wasn't feeling talkative. Conversation probably wasn't her forte anyway.

And finally I ran out of excuses.

I did OK at first. The typewritten reports were only words. They couldn't hurt me. I learned a lot.

A real estate development company held the deed to the house in Monteverde. No one bothered to dig farther than that, or if they did, they left it out of the writeup. It didn't matter. I knew who must have owned it.

The evidence boys had collected prints inside the trunk of the car, but never processed them. That could have been pressure from above, or just fruit of the poison tree.

The files listed Eli Lavender as a “person of interest” sought for questioning. Nothing else. The coroner ruled his death blunt force trauma to the base of the skull, resulting in a cerebral hemorrhage. Accidental, the report said, and made it a point to say very little else. Not the first accident in an interview room at Central. Probably not the last.

Jaime Calvera never even made the file.

All this was fine. I was tough. I could handle it. Right up until the photographs.

The first showed Billy in the trunk, curled up just the way I remembered him. No fly on his cheek, though. The photographer would have shooed it. Then the close-ups: The torn hem of his jacket. His small shoes, the laces looped tightly in double knots. His fingernails, ragged and black with dried blood. No rope, no gag. Eli probably made him think it was a game. Or maybe a magic trick.

Cause of death was asphyxiation. Carbon dioxide, not monoxide, although they’d found traces of that in his blood and tissues, too. No ether or chloroform. The drive didn’t kill him; the wait did. He suffocated, hot and thirsty and absolutely alone. If he screamed, if he banged on the lid, there was no one close enough to hear him.

On the slab, he looked like a marble sculpture. You could only just see the top edges of the stitched-up Y-incision.

I lifted my eyes up from the jacket to find the sunlight pinkish and waning. I looked out the window, breathing slowly, feeling gut-punched. Outside the signs were just coming on up and down the block. As I watched, the Hi-Hat’s neon snapped and flickered and started to glow.



It had been hours since breakfast, but I wasn't hungry. Just so very thirsty.

Dr. Vera Kelly answered on the second ring. I heard her shush something yapping before she came on the line.

"It's me," I said. "The world-class drunk." I realized I was holding the phone tight enough to make my knuckles stand up white.

"Jesus," she said. "Listen to you. Who died?"

"No one you know," I said. My tongue sat there useless in my mouth for a second. Finally, I said, "How would you feel about letting a two-bit shamus buy you dinner?" Christ, but I was out of practice at this.

"Depends on the shamus," she said. "You find the cat?"

"No," I said. "Not yet. Just a whole lot of trouble."

"Good," she said. "I could use the cheering up. Can you be here in ...?" I heard her check a watch or a clock. "Forty-five minutes?"

"I can be there in thirty," I said.

"See, you're going about it all wrong," she said. "You're supposed to keep us waiting. Forty-five minutes, shamus." The line clicked off.

I sat there in the gathering dark, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. Then I pushed the jacket into an open drawer in my desk, and shut the drawer tight. I got my hat and my coat, picked up the gun, put it down, and picked it up again. Just in case anyone came at me brandishing a foyer.

I drove slow all the way out to West Windward, but I still got there early. The lights shone in her office when I parked at the gas station. I had my hand on the lever to open the door

when I looked across the street to the alley behind the office.

A silver convertible waited next to her yellow coupe.

The back door of her office banged open. Three figures spilled out into the dark, two upright, carrying a third limp between them. The one being carried had a mop of red hair falling down over her face, and a white coat. My limbs turned to stone.

They loaded her in the back of the silver car and put the white canvas top up. A truck passed, rumbling on toward the desert, and they froze for a moment as its headlights slid across them. They wore the faces I remembered from the Whittier house.

The hangdog one got behind the wheel, the scrappy little one in the passenger's side. I ducked down in the seat of my car as their motor started and their headlights switched on, the beams leaping across the asphalt to die out just a few feet from where I was parked. I put a hand inside my coat to my gun.

Whit Whittier'd had a gun, too.

A good month passed in the next ten seconds. Then the silver sedan pulled out into the street, headed away toward the desert. I counted to fifteen, killed my lights, started the motor, and headed after them.

## Chapter Twelve

### The Reds

I let the silver convertible gain distance on me. The streetlights thinned out and the buildings dwindled, and the wide flat emptiness of the desert unrolled itself before the foothills in the distance. The light of the full moon made the dirt and scrub on either side of the road an ocean of mercury, the telephone wires strands of spider-silk. A pair of red dots stared back at me from far ahead down the road.

Every so often I passed a service station or a scrapyard or some lonely all-night diner for the truckers and the tramps and the bus lines. Sometimes I could see people inside, pouring coffee or mopping counters or reading the paper. I wondered where I was going. And whether I'd be coming back.

After maybe a half-hour of flat straight road, the grade steepened. Bristly, twisted trees and jagged rocks began to gather by the roadside. The convertible headed up into the

foothills, always at a constant speed, always staying perfectly centered in its lane. I followed, running dark, my palms sweating into the steering wheel.

We climbed up the foothills and over the pass and down, down the winding hillsides, cutting back and forth into the valley beyond. I saw little patches of orange light down in its vast bowl, spread out few and far between.

About a mile onward, the silver car took a crisp, sudden turn off the highway, onto a rural road that sloped downhill toward an orange grove maybe a quarter-mile below. I pulled up slowly to the turnoff and waited, watching the red taillights disappear down the dirt road and into the trees, until they became occasional glimmers among the neatly planted rows. Toward the back of the property, I saw the lights of a small building, maybe a farmhouse.

Something looked wrong with the rows of orange trees. A jagged, diagonal scar cut across the tidy lines of the plantings, leaving nothing but bare earth, as if a plane had come in for a crash landing. But I didn't see any trace of wreckage.

I eased my car down the hillside, following the same road the silver sedan had taken. It brought me to an open wooden gate at the edge of the property, bearing the faded remains of a once-cheerful sign: WELLS CORNER GROVES. I did a careful U-turn and parked facing the way I'd come. Just in case I had to leave in a hurry.

I cut the motor and waited in the dark, my eyes on the rearview mirror. After a few minutes I forced myself to open the door and get out. My legs felt like two rubber bands. I fumbled the gun out of my pocket and held it tightly, low against my hip. Then I put one foot in front of the other, through the gate and into the perfumed air of the grove.

The trees sagged with ripe oranges. Some of them had fallen to the ground around the

roots and begun to rot. Someone should have harvested them. No one had bothered.

The night felt cool, diving swiftly toward cold. I cut into the trees, two rows removed from the main drive, and followed the shallow irrigation channel that ran down the center of the gap. The widely planted trees provided less cover than I liked. I had to fight the urge to sprint from one to the next. The night had no sound, no movement but a breeze that ruffled the leaves around me from time to time. Ahead I saw the faint glow of house lights, above me the moon and countless stars.

The trees thinned out and I came to the scar I'd seen carved out of the soil of the grove. The furrow ran about the width of two automobiles, and a good five feet deep, banks of dry, sandy soil plowed up on either side. I picked my way across the furrow, stepping over the twisted, cracked remains of trees plowed into the dirt by whatever had come through here. From the looks of them, the damage had been done a good while back. But no one had removed them. No one had replanted.

Ahead of me, through the trees, a bright blue-white light sprang forth. I hit the dirt, belly-crawling into the shadow of the nearest tree. The scent of orange oil wrapped around me, lurid and unreal. But the inches-long thorns on the branches cut a lot of the romance.

I waited for a sound, for feet coming down the rows. When nothing came, I crawled back out into the row. The light continued to flicker, but it wasn't aimed at me. It had a familiar pulse to it, strangely comforting. Through the trees I glimpsed a house. I moved onward, staying low.

The dirt road ended at a clearing in the groves, in front of a two-story wooden farmhouse. Nothing moved in the shadows of the front porch, but I saw a handful of lights in the

first-floor windows. A shadow passed across one of them and didn't return. The silver convertible sat out front, the top still up. I saw no one inside.

Behind the house, the hulk of a barn loomed in the moonlight, next to a huge silver water tank that must have been used for irrigation. On the broad side wall of the barn, facing the house, the blue-white light flickered. Someone was projecting a movie without the sound. A Cagney picture. He was dressed like some kind of gangster. That narrowed it down.

I stayed in the cover of the orange trees, moving laterally away from the house and toward the barn. As my view shifted, I could see a third building between the farmhouse and the barn, a large shed way toward the back of the clearing, next to a tall, motionless windmill drooping with fatigue. The shed had no windows, but light glimmered around the edges of its door.

Two men sat on overturned rain barrels at the back of the house, watching the picture show on the side of the barn. The projector was set up in a window in the farmhouse, its reels chattering as Cagney traded gunfire with some dirty rat or other. He held the pistol all wrong. He'd never hit anything like that.

They were the same two men I'd seen at the Whittier house, and Dr. Kelly's office. The hangdog one slouched slightly, his face expressionless. The little pug one sat up straight, his eyes wide, his expression rapt. He seemed to drink in every move Cagney made.

The hangdog one turned to the pug and said something I didn't catch, something low and garbled. The pug turned to him quickly. "Say it right," he said, and pointed to the screen. "Like they do." He had the sound of the voice, the inflection, but there was something wrong about it. A flatness to the cadence, as if everything he said were a recording played off some reel-

to-reel in his chest.

The hangdog one sighed. “You watch too much of this,” he said, in a dry, nasal, slightly mushy voice I also recognized. “It distracts you.”

“Nix,” said the pug. He looked delighted with himself to say it, like it was the sort of swear that’d kill a nun. “It’s research. Boris says. Look, here you are.”

On the side of the barn, Cagney had just barged into a swank office that only looked a little bit like a soundstage. From behind a desk, Bogart looked up, feigning surprise. He seemed somehow diminished here, compared to the pictures with his name above the title. Fame had a way of magnifying you.

The hangdog one made a disgusted noise and slid off the rain barrel. He had a stiff, funny way of moving. There was nothing wrong with it. Nothing you could put your finger on.

“I’m going inside,” he said. “I want to hear the radio.”

The little pug sat and watched, long after the hangdog had vanished around the back of the farmhouse. I saw the pug’s lips move when Cagney’s did. When Cagney crossed a room, the pug stood up and squared his shoulders and tried to imitate the walk.

I almost thought it was cute. But the memory of Whit Whittier peeled open at the waistline kept getting in the way.

I followed the trees around the edge of the clearing until I’d put the barn between me and the house. Then there was nothing for it but a few deep breaths and ten seconds’ sprint across open ground. I scrambled up against the side of the barn and flattened myself against the wood, trying to catch my breath as quietly as I could. My heart thumped fit to knock a rib loose.

I saw no light from inside the barn, heard nothing. I put an eye to a slat in the gray,

weathered wooden planks. Backlit by the picture show from the other side, I saw the shape of something huge, irregular. I couldn't place it. A patch of moonlight from a hole in the roof illuminated polished silver metal. Whatever it was, it sure as hell wasn't a cat.

I edged my way to the corner of the barn and peered around the corner. The light still burned in the little shed by the windmill. Someone was in there. Maybe the someone I was looking for.

"Hello," a small, girlish purr of a voice said. I turned.

A tiny round face looked up at me from the dark, half-hidden in a cascade of blonde hair. Her lips were red and full and quirked in a smile, one thin brow arched inquisitively over her visible eye. She wore a shimmery golden gown that belonged in a nightclub, one side of it bunched in her little right fist so the hem wouldn't drag in the dirt. Under the gown her feet were bare and dusty. Maybe that was how she snuck up on me.

"What do they call you?" she asked, with the same odd rhythms as the little pug and the hangdog man. In the gloom, unfamiliar shapes seemed to move beneath the skin of her face. My eyes playing tricks again.

"Henry," I said. My voice was hoarse. It didn't even sound like me.

"Henry," she said back to me, and giggled. "I like that sound."

Then she bounced me off the wall of the barn with a haymaker left. I felt the planks crack and splinter against my arm.

I landed hard, one cheek flat against the dirt, with the tang of blood in the back of my nose and not one scrap of air in my lungs. Everything hurt. The world got faint and hazy. I barely felt the golden-haired girl grab ahold of one ankle and start tugging.



“We should be friends,” I heard her say, so very far away.

Humming a little tune I couldn’t place, she dragged me around the edge of the barn, and back toward the farmhouse.

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The dirt scraped against my back. I saw Cagney’s face distorted on the side of the barn, hunching through a downpour with his hands jammed in his pockets and murder in his eyes. Far away, sliding slowly up the wall of the world, the little shed glowed.

The little blonde took no pains to avoid bumping me up the stairs of the front porch, or across the doorjamb. At least it helped clear out the cobwebs.

After a while I managed to roll myself over onto one elbow, wincing. Making friends with the barn hadn’t done any favors for last night’s bruises. My jaw throbbed; I could feel a good-sized lump forming. Goldilocks was a compact little thing. So was a hand grenade.

I lay on the wood-plank floor of the front room of a rustic little farmhouse. A shabby couch collected dust in the moonlight, next to a rickety little table that held a lace doily, an old mason jar, and in the jar a brittle handful of long-dead flowers. A grandfather clock sat silent against the back wall, the wrong time written on its face, next to an open doorway that led into a lighted kitchen. A man sat at a table in the center of the kitchen, his back to me, a silhouette against the light of a dangling lamp.

A shadow fell over me and I turned to brace for another hit from Goldilocks. Instead she bent down, and her hand slipped deftly into my coat and came out with my gun. In compensation, I got an excellent view of her neckline. It was nice, but I would have preferred the gun.

Without a word to me she padded into the kitchen. I could hear her speaking quietly with the man at the table. I lay there, counting my aches. In the thin light from the front windows, I could see rusty stains leached into the wooden planks. They had the look of blood.

“Thank you, Veronica,” I heard the man in the kitchen say, in pipe-organ tones I would have recognized anywhere. Another refugee from the picture shows. The golden-haired girl moved back to me, the soles of her bare feet whispering against the floor, and with one hand casually dragged me up and onto my feet.

“He wants to talk,” she said. It wasn’t a request. She had the same smile on her face, like it was the only expression she’d learned. Or maybe they’d cut her to look that way, and it stuck.

I took off my hat, thumped the dust off it as best I could, and tried to straighten out the brim where it had gotten crushed by my long drag across the dirt. Then I put it back on and brushed myself off and walked into the kitchen. The girl stayed in the front room, watching me like I were a new pet.

The man at the table didn’t turn around when I crossed into the kitchen. The sink was empty, spotless. The icebox hung open, unplugged, black rotting remnants of food clinging to its shelves. From another room nearby, I heard the rattle of the projector unspooling.

The man at the table gestured with one huge, heavy-knuckled hand to the empty chair across the table from him. “Sit,” he said. I could have clocked him across the back of the head and made a run for it. But the little blonde waited between me and the front door, and something about his stillness suggested he knew every move I made. So I walked around the table and sat.

Even sitting down, I could tell he was tall, his elbows splayed out to the sides. He

wore a dark pinstripe double-breasted suit that hung awkwardly off his scarecrow frame.

He had a rough and slightly misshapen face, hastily assembled and left for a polish job that never came back around. The lower half was practically all chin, thick and solid with a wide, thin mouth. Between a crooked, beaky nose and two thick black eyebrows, a round and piercing set of black eyes coolly appraised me.

He held my gun in front of him on the table, turning it over in the harsh yellow light, probing it with long, graceful fingers. Over his shoulder, I saw a framed photograph hanging crooked on the wall; it showed a sunburnt older man and a plump woman in front of the orange groves.

"I am called Boris," the man across from me said. His voice was soft and deep and lilting, each word laid carefully in its own velvet-lined case.

"Of course you are," I said.

"You have met Veronica," he said, opening the cylinder to remove my gun's bullets one by one. "And I suppose also Humphrey and James."

"Cute," I said. I was so tough. You could almost hear me over the sound of my knees knocking. "Your docs do good work. Think you could fix me up with an Errol Flynn?"

Boris lined the bullets up in a row on the table before him, and snapped the cylinder shut. "Why have you come here?" he asked, softly, mildly. He set the gun down, but his fingers idly strayed across the lines of the metal.

"My car broke down off the highway," I said. "I saw the lights of your little house, and thought I'd ask if I could use your telephone." I rubbed my jaw. "A simple 'no' would have done it."

Boris regarded me from under his heavy brow. He smiled, but only with his mouth. “Your sense of humor,” he said. “I find it wonderful, I must admit.” The smile gave up pretending and vanished. “To a point. Why are you here?”

“I saw your boys making off with a friend of mine,” I said. “It didn’t look like they’d bothered to ask her first.”

“Ah,” Boris said. “Then you are acquainted with the ...” He reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and produced a crumpled business card, which he smoothed out and squinted at. “Vetahrinnareean. The doctor to your animals.” He pronounced the word as if he’d never heard it spoken aloud. He laid the card down on the table. It looked like the one Dr. Kelly had given me two days before.

“I am,” I said. “I don’t know how they do things in your neck of the woods, but around here, we don’t just waltz in and take what we want. Especially when it might have an opinion of its own.”

He gave me a lurid smile, his teeth showing. He might actually have meant it to be friendly. “She is unharmed,” Boris said. “Perhaps she will remain so.”

“Perhaps?” I asked.

He folded one hand over another and leaned forward slightly. “Do you know about the cat?”

“Do you have the cat here?” I asked. “Were you the ones who took it from Whit Whittier’s house?”

“Poor Cary,” Boris said, casting his eyes downward. He flicked over one of my bullets; it rolled back and forth in a lazy semicircle. “He did not return from the house.” I thought

of the empty suit.

“Sure,” I said. “Poor Cary. And poor Whit, and poor Pinoy, and poor Manny, and poor girl in the green dress, and poor whoever-they-were that your lookalike squad decided to burn in half. I expect you’re all broken up over them, too.”

Boris just smiled at me again. “Truly,” he said, “you are amusing.”

There was something funny about his face when he spoke, something I couldn’t quite place, like the hangdog man’s walk. His lips moved, the eyes opened and shut. But the fine muscles under the skin, the little movements of the eyes, were off. Perhaps those surgeons weren’t as good as I thought.

“The cat,” I said again. “Is it here?”

Boris nodded. “The cat is with your friend. In our care. We believe now that the information is inside the cat. But we are uncertain how to retrieve it. I am reluctant to damage the cat. I fear it might compromise the information.”

“Is that why you sent your boys to the Whittier place last night?” I asked. “To try to dig up something more on this information?”

“You are delightfully perceptive,” Boris nodded. “Do you know of this information? Do you know how we may retrieve it from the cat?”

I leaned forward slowly and rested my elbows on the table. “Look. Politics are politics, but we’re all human beings here, right?” Another ghoulish smile from across the table. “You made it here on the sly. You’ve got the best plastic surgery I’ve ever seen, and enough vitamins or hormones or God knows what to turn little Goldilocks out there into a heavyweight contender. And that’s not even counting whatever the hell kind of ray gun you used on Whit

Whittier and his pals. Whatever information you think is in this cat — why do you even need it?”

Boris sat there silently for a few seconds, studying me curiously. “Are you familiar with the geography of this valley?” he asked at last. I shook my head. “Some distance north of here,” he continued, “there is a canal. Forgive me. The word is not that. The word is ‘river.’

“The river made the land around it live and grow. And then you built your city, and you built your farms. And your city and your farms needed water. So you went to this river far to the north, and with your machines and your ingenuity, you stole its water.

“And your city grew, and your farms grew, and they took more and more of the water that had belonged to that river. And now the land around that river withers and dies. One day it will be gone. And your farms will wither and die, and your cities will wither and die. But it does not happen to you now. And so you do not care.”

“So, what,” I asked. “We should have collectivized the water? Let the Central Committee dole it out?”

Boris looked at me oddly, as if one of us didn’t understand. “If we ... waltz in and take what we want,” he said, trying the phrase on for size, “it is not because we are strangers here. It is because we have become more like you. You spread and you devour and you leave nothing in your wake. This is called progress.”

He lifted his head and looked balefully out the kitchen window. Even with the reflected light from the hanging lamp, you could still pick out a handful of brighter stars in the sky outside.

“Soon you will go to the stars.” His voice had an ache that sounded almost like homesickness. “To you, they will be your own. What you find there, you will take. You will not

think. You will not apologize. It is simply your nature.” He looked back at me, and his voice stayed calm and quiet and pleasant. But a darkness burned deep in his eyes. “We cannot allow this. We cannot allow even the possibility. We must know how close you are. We must have the information within the cat.”

“So you can get there first?” I said. “Because you could do it better?”

Boris sighed and picked up my gun, holding the butt with one hand and the barrel with the other. “You have two futures. In the first, you know how to retrieve the information from the cat. You help us. And you and your friend are not harmed.”

“And the second?” I asked.

Boris bent the barrel of my gun at a 90-degree angle from the cylinder. He did it fast and without effort. Not a muscle on his face moved. He dropped the mangled gun to the table; the impact knocked over the remaining bullets, sending two clattering to the floor.

“Veronica likes you,” Boris said. “She liked the others who were here when we arrived. The man and the woman. There, their image — behind me on the wall.” The old farmer. His plump wife. “She liked them very much. She played with her new toys for three days and three nights before she broke them. They made such noises.” He paused and smiled at me, ever so gently. “She was very sad. I do not like to see her sad. Perhaps you will prove sturdier. If not you, perhaps your friend.”

From the other room behind me, I heard the projector sputter and flap and die down. Cagney had run out of frames. He might plug any number of dirty rats, but in the last reel, he always lost.

My mouth went dry. “I know how to retrieve the information,” I said.

Boris stared at me for a long time, saying nothing. I wondered whether Veronica had played with any of the people in Whit Whittier's house.

"Humphrey," Boris said, in a loud voice. Footsteps ambled slowly, and a door behind me opened. The hangdog man appeared, a small paper box in one hand, the lid torn open. He ate a fine powder from it with his hands. The box said RAT POISON. He seemed to like it just fine.

"Humphrey," Boris said, "you will take this man to see the other one. The vetahrinnareean."

Humphrey nodded, and set the box down on the table. He jerked his head, indicating me to follow him. I stood up slowly, hearing the chair scrape against the wooden floor. Boris watched me with those calm, mild eyes.

"Veronica will be disappointed," he said. "Perhaps."

Humphrey tugged at my arm. I followed him through the door, past the open window that held the projector, to a screen door at the back of the house, and out into the night. The one they called James, the little pug, was waiting for us there. He fell into step with us as Humphrey marched me across the dirt toward the shed. I watched Humphrey lick traces of the white powder off his fingertips. I wondered what the hell kind of doctor it took to make that possible.

Halfway across the dirt yard, I heard a sound coming from the shed. Terrible, unnatural, a cry like something crawling out of a crack in the earth. Like a baby tossed in a boat propeller. I stopped in my tracks, but Humphrey yanked my arm onward. He didn't seem to care whether the rest of me followed.

The two of them led me up to the door. Humphrey produced a key and unlocked it. From inside, I heard the ear-scraping, teeth-rattling howl again. Humphrey put a hand on the



knob.

“I’ll need some time alone,” I said. My ears told me I was the worst liar on earth. But maybe they heard different. “A few minutes. To properly prepare the cat.”

Humphrey glanced at James, and then nodded at me. He opened the door, shoved me inside, and locked it behind.

After the soft moonlight of the yard, the yellow glare from the shed’s single hanging bulb made me wince. Once this had been a toolshed, maybe a workshop, from the look of the wooden benches that jutted from the walls about waist height. But the walls were bare. Bits of old junk and broken machinery nestled in the corners.

Dr. Kelly sat in her white coat up on one of the benches to my right, her arms hugged tight around her waist, staring at me as if I’d just stepped off a rocket. I was just about to say something to her when the horrible howl filled the room, rattling off the planks and into my bones.

On the bench opposite me, someone had placed a large wooden crate stuffed with old newspaper. A foothill of tufted white fur lay there, sporting three stubs and a fuzzy wart on one end. The wart turned toward me and became a face, a single yellow eye regarding me disdainfully. A hole opened in the face, above a little pink triangle of a nose, and I saw a flash of sharp needle teeth as the thing hissed at me.

It was, if anything, even uglier than its picture. It may have been the ugliest goddamn thing I’d ever seen.

“You must be Lucky,” I said.

## Chapter Thirteen

### The Lam

In the light from the bare bulb Dr. Kelly's skin shone milk-pale, her freckles standing out like craters on the face of the full moon. I turned from the pile of cat in the crate and reached for her. "Are you all right?"

She jerked backward. "Don't touch me." Hysteria edged into her voice.

"Hey," I said gently. "It's me. The two-bit shamus. I'm your pal."

Her teeth chattered slightly. It looked like shock. "You show up at my office asking about a cat, and a couple days later a pair of faces come and ... and ..."

I held my hands out, palms up. The cat yowled again. He wasn't helping.

"I saw them take you," I said. "I followed them back here. I met the little blonde. She played a fun game involving me and the side of the barn. Then she took me in the house to have a little chat with the resident creature feature. He had one of your cards. I think it was the one

you gave Whit Whittier.”

“The face shouldn’t ...” she said, and hugged herself tighter. “He got angry and there was something — there was something moving under his face —”

I stepped forward and slapped her across the cheek, so hard my palm stung.

In a blink, she came back with a right cross that knocked me to the floor.

“Ow,” I said, blinking away the double vision, rubbing the sandpaper of my jaw. The lump Veronica gave me wouldn’t get lonely. I looked up at Dr. Kelly. Her breathing had slowed. Her eyes looked clearer and calmer. “That’ll teach me.”

She rubbed the knuckles of her right hand. “Reflex,” she said. “I don’t like to get knocked around.” Her voice had dropped to its normal register. “But I figure you meant well.”

“That’s usually the trouble with me,” I said.

“You all right?” she asked.

“I will be if you don’t belt me another one.” I got to my feet. “What about you? Did they hurt you?”

“They got a little rough,” she said, and shuddered again. But she kept her cool. “Nothing lasting. They were hot for some sort of information. The one in charge, Boris, he thinks it’s in the cat, somehow. They wanted me to get it out. But I don’t think ... it’s like they don’t know how cats work. They gave me a butter knife. And when I told them no, they stuck me in here to cool off a bit.” She bit her lower lip. “I’m telling myself not to think about the face.”

“You saw that, too?” I said.

“I don’t know what I saw,” she said quietly. The cat let out another screech. The mound of flesh and fur in the box had shifted into a position that I guessed meant it was lying on

its back, showing me its belly.

“Don’t,” Dr. Kelly said. “It’s a trap.” She held up one hand; fine red claw marks scratched across it.

“How’s the patient?” I asked. The cat’s left eye regarded me, calm and yellow, with the sort of disdain a maitre’d takes a lifetime to master. A pinched-up wrinkle of flesh had long ago replaced its right eye.

“Not good,” she said. “Near as I can tell, he’s dehydrated, probably running a temperature. It feels like there’s an obstruction in the large intestine.”

“That sounds about right,” I said. “Apparently Lucky here had an appetite. And a paranoid owner with some kind of formula a lot of people can’t kill each other fast enough to get, and a crackpot capsule he’d designed to smuggle spy secrets the hard way.”

She shook her head and made a small, disgusted sound in the back of her throat. “How long has it been in there?”

“A week,” I ventured. “Maybe more?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Can’t be,” she said. “He’d be dead. He’d be long dead.”

“Looks like he disagrees,” I said. “Can you get it out?”

“At my clinic? Yeah,” she said. “The sooner, the better. Here? Not without killing the patient.”

She started to shiver again. I heard her teeth chatter a little, shutters on an old house. I took off my jacket and put it over her shoulders; she scowled a little at me, but she hugged it tight. Then I moved to the opposite corner of the shed from her and started picking my way through the junk strewn around the edges of the floor.

“Stay calm, Doc,” I said. “If only for my jaw’s sake. Talk to me. Tell me how you’re so nuts about animals.”

“You’re sweet,” she said, with maybe a kitchen match’s worth of warmth. “Most people go straight for the brace.” She tapped the metal cage around her leg.

“We all have our accessories,” I said, and tugged lightly at the collar around my neck. I realized I hadn’t thought about it for hours. Funny what you could get used to.

“I grew up on a ranch,” Dr. Kelly told me. “Not too far from here, actually. Dad had a couple hundred head, and some mustangs. Lots of dogs and cats.”

Under a hunk of ancient newspaper, two-decade old news preserved in crumbling yellow amber, I found a round wide washer about the size of a silver dollar. I thought of James and his imitation tough-guy walk. I stuck the washer in my shirt pocket. “You always know you wanted to be a vet, then?” I asked.

She let out a bleak little laugh. “Hell, no. I wanted to be a champion trick rider.”

“And?” I asked. Cracked, corroded tractor engine parts. The metal head of a shovel, without the wooden handle. An old post-holer, the head brittle and rusty. I hung on to that one.

“And my palomino wandered up on a rattlesnake one day,” she said, and waited till she could edge sideways around the rest of her story. “He spooked. Went over on his side. Broke his leg. Crushed half the bones in mine. I was eight.” She let out a breath. “So I took second best. What’s your sob story?”

“I was a cop,” I said. “I beat a man to death with a reference book.”

“Jesus,” she said quietly, after a few seconds’ silence. “You don’t kid around.”

“He had it coming,” I said. “And I guess so did I.” I handed her the post-holer. “It’s

not your walking stick, but maybe it'll help."

"Sir Lancelot," she smirked. She eased herself down off the bench and took a few steps, testing it. "All that rummaging around get you anywhere?"

"Not as far as I'd like," I said. "I think I can get us out of here. But I need you to understand — this bunch is dangerous." I felt the acid churn in my stomach, and I could see the cold understanding seep into her face. "If it's you or the cat, I'm picking you, and you can belt me another one for all I care."

She nodded. I saw her swallow through the pale fine skin of her throat. Then she handed me back my jacket. "So what's the plan?"

"Depends on who answers the door. Follow my lead." I shrugged the jacket on again and knocked on the door to the shed. After a few seconds, the lock clicked, and James, the little pug, spread himself out in the open doorframe. He had his right hand low in his jacket pocket, meaningfully. Maybe there was a gun in there. Maybe something like a gun.

When he didn't say anything, I swallowed nothing down a dry and prickly throat. "I think we're ready," I said. "We can get your information."

He swaggered into the room with his cocky little walk. I took a few steps back, toward the puddle of cat in his crate. Dr. Kelly froze, back against the bench, the post-holer clenched tight at her side. Her eyes stayed riveted on the little man's face.

I pulled the strings and stretched the muscles and forced myself to smile. "Hey, you're pretty good at that." The little pug looked at me suspiciously. "The walk and everything," I said. "You look just like him."

He squared his shoulders, and the corner of his mouth quirked into a familiar little

sneer. He puffed out his little chest.

“I don’t want no funny business,” he said proudly, as if he were reciting from a book.

Up close he had the same strange face as Boris, all the little motions absent or wrong.

“You know what you need, though,” I said, and reached into my shirt pocket. His eyes went cold and hard, and his right hand jerked suddenly inside his jacket. My stomach lurched, but I grabbed tight to that smile and kept it firmly stretched across my kisser.

“Easy, easy,” I said. I slowly drew the washer out and showed it to him. “You need a coin. He’s always flipping a coin.” I demonstrated, launching the washer off my thumb and up into the air toward him.

One hand reached up and snatched it out of the air, as if that whole arm had nothing to do with the rest of him. He held it up, turned it over, studied it closely.

“This isn’t your money,” he said in his borrowed voice.

“Of course not,” I said. “But it’s the right size and weight. Might be good for practice.” I moved slowly toward the cat, and sank my fingers in around the edges of the box. The cat squirmed and gave a little hiss. Its stubby limbs flailed, but it wasn’t willing to put in the effort to actually claw me.

The little man gave the washer a toss, hesitant. It wobbled a bit in the air, and he had to reach out to catch it. The second time was better. By the third, he was really getting the hang of it.

I lifted the cat from the box in a cloud of rank white dander, holding it under what I could only suppose were its two front legs. It felt like a sack of potatoes covered in dirty mink. The cat let out another annoyed little hiss, and wriggled. Even a few seconds of lifting the thing

made the muscles in my arms burn.

The little man had the coin-flip down to a science now. Cagney never did it any better. He looked up at me, his eyes glittering, a grin frozen on his mug, just to check that I was suitably impressed. I took one slow step to the right. He tossed the washer in the air.

I threw the cat at his face.

I'm not sure who screeched louder. I was inclined to give it to the cat, but with its fluffy bulk latched over the little man's face, he may have been muffled somewhat. James staggered backward, his left arm batting the light bulb as he flailed. His right hand came out of his pocket empty — the sneaky little punk — and clawed at the cat's stained, matted fur. But the cat clawed right back, and threw in a set of teeth for good measure.

At the yowl, the hangdog man, Humphrey, came charging in through the door. In the shifting light something small and silver glinted in his hand. He pointed it at me.

Dr. Kelly swung the post-holer, scoring a grand slam off the back of Humphrey's skull. The rusted metal cracked, but Humphrey went down, his eyes crossed. Whatever he'd had in his hand tumbled out and skidded into the junk under the workbench.

James tore the cat free. Bits of his face went with it. In the sliding shadows of the bulb, the blood from his wounds looked black as pitch. I ducked. Dr. Kelly came around on the backswing and caught him square in the teeth. He smashed back hard into the doorjamb and slid down.

His hands still gripped the cat. I reached down and tugged it free, the cat letting out another hiss and wriggling in my arms. It made to gnaw at the sleeve of my suitcoat, but I had bigger problems.



James looked up at me, his movements jerky and erratic. Only one of his eyes pointed at me, and his words slurred out through lips half drooped into mush.

“Why, you dirty—” he began. I kicked him in the face. Something crunched under my heel. Maybe his nose. His head sagged.

I wanted to say something tough. Something mean. But instead I found myself watching him, waiting, until I was sure I saw his chest rising and falling. Until I knew I hadn’t done it again.

I got a better grip on the cat, holding it close to my chest in defiance of every survival instinct I had. Dr. Kelly swayed, more on one leg than the other, holding the post-holer up, ready for another swing. I held out one hand to her; the other was full of cat.

“So,” I said. “Dinner?”

Her laugh was short and only a little hysterical. I was feeling that way myself. But she lowered the post-holer until it was a walking stick, and took my hand. Hers was small and cool, the skin rough on the palms and the fingertips.

The cat squirmed and jabbed its hind leg against my stomach. That was it for the mood.

“Which way?” she said. I led her out into the cool air, the world inky after the light of the shed. The whole of the open yard stretched out before us, blue-white under the moon and the stars.

“Around back, into the grove,” I whispered. “We’re no good on open ground.”

We made it into the treeline, the heady scent of the fruit not quite disguising the eye-watering cloud that the cat gave off. We moved as fast as we could, which wasn’t very. Every

hiss and grumble of the cat, every dull thunk of the post-holer against the ground, every creak of the doctor's brace as she hopped-swung along, sounded loud as gunshots to my ears.

We circled toward the house, then around the edge of the clearing parallel to the dirt road. The Reds' car was still parked out front, between us and the house. None of the lights in the windows of the house looked any different from those I'd seen before.

"Do you have a car?" Dr. Kelly whispered, leaning the post-holer against the trunk of one of the trees.

I nodded. "Outside the front gate. About a quarter-mile from here. Do you remember whether they took the keys to theirs?"

She shook her head. I studied the distance from out of the trees, across the dirt to the car. I could make it quickly, if I weren't stuck lugging the cat. But I wasn't sure how fast the doctor could move.

Apparently, she was. "I can start it," she breathed. "Come on." She pulled away from me, loping low across the open ground. I stood there stunned for a moment, and then the cat hissed and struggled. I crouched, took a deep breath, and followed her.

I found her with her back against the metal of the car door, brace stretched straight out along the dust and gravel, slowly prying open the front passenger door.

"Of all the stupid—" I hissed, and choked it back as the hinges of the front door of the house squealed open. Soft bare feet whispered across the creaking planks of the porch. I heard the little blonde humming her odd tuneless tune.

The cat screeched. I almost jumped out of my skin. I clamped a hand over the thing's muzzle; I could feel its jaws moving, trying to pay me back with a big juicy bite of my palm.

The humming stopped. Dead silence rolled across the distance between us and the house. Dr. Kelly's hand found my arm and all but crushed it.

After a few seconds the humming began again. The porch planks groaned. The door squeaked open. Stayed open, as if she were taking one last look back. And slammed shut again.

I let go of the cat's mouth and took off my hat and slowly, slowly, eased my head up to see through the windows of the car. The porch stood dark and vacant. I slid back down to give the doctor a piece of my mind, but she'd already eased the car door open.

"Behind the wheel," she whispered. "I'll hotwire. You drive."

She climbed in after me and reached under the dash. I dropped the cat on the bench seat between us, and slouched down as low as I could in the seat.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" I breathed.

"My old man lost the keys to his truck when I was five," she said, her voice floating up from the vicinity of my shoes. "I grew up knowing this." A brief spark flashed, and she let out a yelp. "The wiring may have changed some."

The lights in the front room of the house snapped on. My stomach clenched.

"Something's up," I whispered to her. "Make it fast."

"Give it some gas on three," she said. "One. Two. Three."

Sparks singed my trousers. The motor turned over. I floored the gas, and the car roared to life. I shifted into gear and nearly lost a wheel fishtailing out and onto the road back to the front gate. In the rearview I just glimpsed the door of the farmhouse flying open, figures dark against the glow.

Dr. Kelly hauled herself up onto the seat, cradled the cat in her lap, and brushed red

tangles from her eyes. She beamed at me, her eyes wide, delighted with herself.

“Well,” she said, and never finished the sentence.

The flash had no sound. White light filled the cabin of the car, and then cool air blasted in behind us, tinged with the sizzle of burnt metal. Our seats tilted back; a jolt went up through us, followed by a terrible grinding screech.

I lost the wheel. The car veered sideways into the grove, clipped a couple of trees, and plowed into a third, leaving us sprawled breathless and bruised against the dash.

I coughed and groaned. “You all right?”

“Jesus,” Dr. Kelly gasped. The cat mewled dazed in her arms. “What was that?”

I craned an aching neck. The whole back half of the car had vanished, simply gone, cut away in a clean line still glowing yellow-white around the edges of the steel frame.

The flash came again, and I screwed my eyes shut. When I opened them, the tops of the trees a few hundred yards back had become nothing more than faint tongues of flame. I thought of Manny in the armchair. The couple on the bed. I thought of Whit.

“That was a warning shot,” I said.

I kicked my door open, an orange crushing to wet pulp beneath my shoes, and hauled her and the cat out. Behind us, through the grove, I heard branches rustling and snapping. I took the cat from her. She grabbed my arm and yanked. We ran.

Her brace clattered loud as an express train. At this point it didn’t matter. The cat felt like a cement block. My arm ached. My lungs started to burn.

Every few seconds the world turned stark white and bright as day, the trees standing out flashbulb-sharp, casting knife-edged shadows on the dirt. Ahead of us a tree fell in half,

burning. The air congealed with the cloying stink of carbonized sugar and orange rinds. Behind us, the rustling grew louder. I could hear the little blonde tittering in delight, as if at the prettiest new dolly.

We started zigzagging, cutting back and forth through the trees. The cat began to ooze out of my grip, and I had to hunch it back up into place with a boost from the top of my leg. It had stopped squirming, but now it wheezed like a leaky gasket. Every so often a flash would erupt behind us, audible only in the new crackle of burning orangewood.

I heard the doctor's brace catch in an irrigation ditch, felt her weight shift. Her hip slammed against mine, and we went down into the dirt. I rolled, curled up to protect the cat. It landed cannonball-heavy against my ribs.

I struggled out from under the animal's weight and looked up. Just a few hundred yards ahead, I could make out the fenceline at the edge of the property. I reached back for Dr. Kelly.

A hand closed on the collar of my coat and swung me up into the air. I felt the cat tumble liquid from my arms. Dr. Kelly cried out. My momentum changed. I hit the ground flat, the shock jolting all through my body. Above me, at the end of a long, skinny arm, Boris's eyes drilled through me.

"I have never understood the pleasure Veronica takes," he said, as if he were reading me the night's drink specials. He turned his head only slightly as Dr. Kelly pulled herself to her feet on the branches of an orange tree. The backhand he cracked across her mouth had a casualness, an ease, that her fast ugly spin back into the dirt did not. He looked at me again, and his bushy brow lowered.

“Perhaps now,” he said, “I will understand. Thank you.”

He clamped both hands around my head and began to squeeze.

The pain radiated inward, growing. I was half blind. I could barely see his face swimming in front of me. Through the haze his features seemed to ripple and distort. I swear I could feel the bones of my skull start to flex.

I dug and yanked at his hands, his forearms. They were cast iron, for all the good it did. My sight went in a cascade of bright red blotches against a black sea. I splayed an arm out into the dirt. Something tender and round and pebbly met my fingertips. A fallen orange. I smashed it against one of the hands that were cracking me like an eggshell.

I heard a sizzle. I smelled burning — not meat, but something strange and chemical. Boris shrieked, the voice too high, the sound too prolonged. Even the cat didn’t make a noise like that. The hands let go of my head.

“They don’t like the juice,” Whit Whittier said at the bar, already dead.

I didn’t wait for the spots to flee my eyes. I flailed out, found another orange, overripe and ready to burst. With my other hand I got a fistful of Boris’s coat. I aimed for the screaming.

I felt the rind split and crumble as I ground the pulp into his face, his eyes. Juice dribbled between my fingers. I smelled sunshine. Boris shrieked again.

My vision cleared. Boris staggered away, his body bent in ways bodies weren’t supposed to, in some savage fight with itself. The burnt chemical reek made me gag. He slapped pitifully at his face with the dead, dangling hand I’d hit with the first orange. The skin on it seemed to be sloughing off.

His screaming didn't stop. It got louder and louder, higher and higher. Until it stopped sounding human altogether.

I didn't wait. I fished the cat up from the dirt, draping it in the crook of one arm. I swung Dr. Kelly halfway onto my shoulders, as she smeared dirt and blood from the corner of her mouth. We staggered toward the fence, my head still throbbing with each beat of my heart. Behind us, Boris shrieked.

I heard a heavy metallic clack in front of us, and then light blasted through the fenceline, enveloping us. I waited to feel myself dissolve.

I didn't. Shadows moved at us through the light, knocking down the fence with fire axes, surging through the gap. They wore silver spaceman suits; the ones who moved past us, back toward Boris's keening, had large tanks on their back and spray hoses in their hands. Two of the spacemen took us by the arms and helped us through the gap in the fence. In the open dirt around the lane, surrounding my car, I saw more of the same wagons and sedans I'd found parked outside Whit Whittier's house two nights before. Still not a marking on any of them. The spacemen dropped us in front of a searing spotlight, opposite a pair of shapely silhouettes. I smelled cinnamon and spice.

"Well, well," said Baseball, the bat dangling by her side, tapping softly against the outside of her thigh. "Look what dragged in the cat."

"We were worried about you," said Apple Pie. She whittled the end off a cigar with a penknife. "You didn't call."

"You know how it is," I said, grimacing through the fading pain in my skull. "There's never a phone." The spacemen hovered behind us, too close for my comfort.

“Friends of yours?” Dr. Kelly asked me.

“We like to think we’re everyone’s friends,” Apple Pie said, and patted the doctor benevolently on the shoulder. For a moment, my mind went to a place usually only found in magazines with “Spicy” in the title. Just for a moment.

Behind us in the grove, another high screech leapt up toward the stars, then died away to nothingness. Apple Pie struck a match and lit her cigar and took a few satisfied puffs. “Well,” she said, shaking out the flame. “Most everyone.”

“You’ve been following me,” I said. “All that time we killed having our little powwow. You were putting something on my car, some kind of tracer.”

“Really, Mr. Pearl,” Baseball said. She didn’t smile, not even a little. “Your paranoid fantasies. Is this the cat?” She eyed Lucky warily. It eyed her right back, and wheezed a little more. “It looks like a menace to public health.”

“You should take a nice deep breath of it,” I said. “Now, if you’ll excuse us—”

The bat came up and poked at my rib cage. “We need to debrief both of you,” she said.

“It’d be so helpful,” Apple Pie said, around her stogie.

I held up the cat. It drooped against my arm, and I could feel its little lungs panting and fighting inside it. “This thing’s in even worse shape than it looks. My friend the veterinarian here needs to fix it up. My client specified ‘alive’ on the invoice. I’d like to get paid for my trouble at some point.”

Apple Pie stepped forward and blew a cloud of thick, sweet-sour smoke in my face. She almost made it feel like a kiss. “That’s all well and good, Mr. Pearl,” she said, “but there’s



still that little matter we discussed before. The formula. If you knew where it was, well, we'd be just tickled pink."

It would have been easier to lie to a priest. I swallowed hard.

"Wish I could help," I said at last. "All I've got is a defective cat." I held it up so Apple Pie could get a good long look. It hissed at her. Either it had been neutered, or it just had no taste.

Apple Pie took a quick step back and plucked the cigar from her mouth. She gave a little smirk to Baseball, who looked like she might consider returning the expression after she'd filed all the proper forms for it.

"You've got quite a pair, Mr. Pearl," Baseball said.

"They'll look swell on my desk," Apple Pie nodded.

Baseball gestured to the spacemen behind us with the tip of the bat. Before I could move they'd grabbed me and the doctor. The fingers clamped around my arms just above the elbows, in excellent, healthy G-men grips.

"Put them in holding," Baseball told the spacemen. "Until we can all have a nice, long —"

The light flashed again behind us, and this time, the screams were all too human. Fire exploded in the orange grove. I heard the little blonde's musical voice grown to a roar, strange syllables I didn't recognize hurling and looping up into the night like campfire sparks.

More spacesuits streamed toward the gap in the fence. Baseball and Apple Pie pushed past us, toward the screaming. The grip around my elbow slackened.

"No offense to Uncle Sam," I said, and wrenched an arm free, and drove it into a

silver spaceman solar plexus.

I heard him grunt from behind the visor, and then the other one yelped as Dr. Kelly drove her heel down his instep. She hit hers in the throat, and shook herself loose, and I dragged her and the cat toward my car. Behind us I heard Baseball barking urgent orders.

We weaved through a milling crowd of shining foil suits, past a familiar man with glasses and jug ears, headed away from my car in the opposite direction. He turned as we passed, surprise on his face, a little black box trailing wires in one of his hands. I wondered which one of the G-women would chew him out for taking back their tracker too soon, and for how long, and how nice they'd be about it.

I opened the driver's door, pushed Dr. Kelly and the cat inside, and slid in after. Behind us I heard another high, impossible scream from the orange grove. I guess that finished the little blonde.

"This is your car?" Dr. Kelly said. She sounded a little dazed. "This is a car?"

I started the motor and floored it up the hillside. "I take you somewhere nice, I introduce you to my friends, and you complain." The lights of the Fed circus shrank away in the rear view. I reached the highway and turned back toward the city.

Sometime in the next few hours, when I had a free moment, I'd find a nice quiet place to scream myself hoarse. For now, I had the shock and the adrenalin to swaddle me. I felt smooth as glass.

"You're not asking me about Betty and Veronica back there," I said, after a long silence from the passenger seat. I looked over. Kelly was probing the belly of the cat with her fingers. It splayed in her lap, like it was already just a pelt.

“I’m not,” she said quietly. “How fast can this thing go?”

“How fast do you need it to?” I asked. She looked up at me, from somewhere beyond fear and fatigue, someplace cool and clinical and exact.

“I can’t tell whether he’s breathing anymore,” she said.

I made the gas pedal kiss the floorboard.

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Cat

I couldn't tell you how fast we made it back to her office. I wasn't looking at the clock, or the speedometer — just trying to keep all four wheels on the road. Dr. Kelly counted off the cat's pulse in one-minute intervals. The number kept dropping. The cat made strangled little noises now and then; sometimes its limbs would flail in a wild burst of motion. Mostly it just lay still, wheezing louder than the growl of the motor.

I skidded to a halt in the alley beside the doctor's little yellow coupe. She was out of the car and limping before I killed the motor, struggling with the cat in one hand and fumbling for her keys in the other. I took the cat from her while she unlocked the heavy steel alley door. The cat sagged against me, panting. I could feel the heat of it even through my coat.

"Through here," Dr. Kelly said, over the chiming of her brace. I followed her into the back room I'd only glimpsed on my last visit. We passed a cot strewn with an old woolen

blanket, and the filing cabinets I'd seen. Metal shelves held boxes of supplies, and a radio, and a few books. A brassiere dangled over the corner of a folding wooden screen in one corner. I didn't have time to take an interest.

The strays in the cages set up a racket the moment we came in, the noise clawing and scratching and rebounding off the pale white walls. The shotgun lay twisted on the tile floor like a dead snake. It had a crimp a few inches down on the barrel. The indentations looked like fingermarks.

"Set him down on the table," Dr. Kelly said. "Belly up." She went to the shelf of supplies and tore through it, looking for something she didn't find. Then she let out a few words she must have picked up on the farm. Probably on the soles of her boots. "Goddamn suppliers still won't send me the new anaesthetic." "Your money's not good?" I asked, laying the cat down on the cold steel. It looked up at me with its one dismissive eye, as if to suggest that any human being worth a damn would have fixed its problem by now, and maybe gotten it a sardine.

"They keep thinking I'm the previous tenant," she said, biting off the words with her back teeth. "Most of his dope didn't end up in the animals. Hell. We'll have to use ether."

She washed her hands in the sink, found rubber gloves and pulled them on, and opened a drawer next to the sink to reveal a neat row of scalpels and forceps on a bed of cotton gauze. I took a step back toward the door.

"I guess this is where I take a powder," I said. In response another pair of gloves fluttered across the room and slapped me square in the chest.

"The hell you do," Dr. Kelly said. "I've got to do this fast and dirty, and I can't do it alone." She must have seen the blood drain from my face. "I'll do all the cutting." She took a jar

of ether down off the shelf, and a clean rag from another drawer by the sink. “You just keep Lucky under.” I stretched the gloves over my hands and fingers. They pinched.

I’d done some first aid in the war. But that was a long time ago, and an ocean away. And do what I might, none of my patients tended to live.

The sickly-sweet stench of the ether filled my nostrils, even at arm’s length. I held the rag over the cat’s face until it stopped squirming. I felt it go limp.

“Keep an eye on that rag,” Dr. Kelly said. “You have to reapply it every few minutes, or he’ll wake up. None of us wants that.”

In a few quick strokes of a straight razor, she’d shaved the cat’s belly nude and pink. She upended a bottle of alcohol onto another rag and gave the bare patch a quick swab. Under the overhead lamp, the skin glistened, and I felt the collar clench briefly at my throat in the faint wash of fumes.

On one end of the operating table, Dr. Kelly set out a little metal tray with a scalpel, two sets of forceps — one holding a little round sponge — three lengths of suture attached to gleaming needles, and several neatly folded little cloths. On the opposite end, she set a small steel dish.

From across the table, she grabbed my right hand and moved the fingers down to the crevice between the cat’s sole hind leg and its abdomen. I could feel a faint throb through the fur. “That’s the pulse,” she said. “I need to know if it slows down or gets weak.”

Dr. Kelly picked up a scalpel. I could see it tremble in her hands as she moved it toward the cat’s stomach. Even the animals finally went quiet.

“You’ve done this before, right?” I asked.

“On cats, yes,” she said. “Plenty. None of them living. Give him more ether.”

I did. She took a deep breath and shut her eyes. Her hand steadied. The steel blade winked a reflection at me from the lamp above. She cut into the skin.

She drew a line with the scalpel, a distance slightly less than the length of her index finger. A rivulet of dark crimson blood trickled out. She grabbed the forceps with the sponge and blotted it as she went. She spread open the cut she’d made with her gloved fingers, and cut again, down into the yellowish fat, and then another deeper cut, spreading that one wider as well. Getting through the fat took a while.

I hit the cat’s muzzle with another shot of ether. Its artery pulsed under my fingers, slow but steady. Unconscious and silent and not trying to bite anything, the cat didn’t look so bad. I felt a little sorry for it. Like you do for magazine photographs of dead lions, or sharks hanging from hooks.

Eventually I saw a band of blue-white tissue through the skin and fat, inside the incision the doctor had made. She took a deep breath and handed me the forceps with the sponge.

“Keep blotting,” she said. “I need my other hand.” She winced and shifted her weight off her bum leg.

“Do you need your cane?” I asked.

She glared at me. “Don’t be nice. I’m still deciding whether I hate you.”

“Most people figure it out pretty directly.”

“Shut up and blot.” She reached into the incision with the other set of forceps. In the cat’s belly, a white line ran down the middle of the glossy, faintly blue tissue, like the spine of a fish. She lifted this up with her forceps, flipped the scalpel so the blade faced up, and gingerly

began to cut through the tissue.

“And,” she said, measuring each syllable out in spoonfuls, “now ... we’re ... into ... the ... abdomen.” The last word deflated in relief.

She set down the forceps and gently, carefully, started to dip her hand into the small red crevice of the cat’s belly.

“Can you feel it?” I asked. The cat’s leg twitched, and so did she.

“Ether, ether, dammit!” she snapped. I took my hand off its pulse, resoaked the rag, and dropped it over the cat’s muzzle again. The tension in both of them, doctor and patient, uncoiled. She bunched her fingers and slipped her fingers once again through the wound in the cat’s skin.

“That’s the small intestine,” she said to herself, distant, dreamy, her eyes unfocused. Seeing with her fingers. “And there’s the large. And — jackpot.”

She took a deep breath and began to slowly wriggle her hand free from the cat. A length of pinkish intestine came with it, her hand slicked in crimson above the blue of the rubber glove. A notable bulge about three inches long, swollen and bluish, rested between her thumb and forefingers. It had the color of a dead child’s lips. For the first time my stomach rolled tidally. I turned my face away and fought it down.

“Don’t tell me you’re going weak sister,” Dr. Kelly said, making a square higher up on the cat’s belly with the clean cloths from the surgical tray. She laid the intestine gingerly on them.

I shook my head. “I’ll live.” Nausea prickled hot and thick at the back of my neck, but I wouldn’t give it the pleasure.



The doctor held her scalpel over the blue bulge. “Tough little guy. I thought for sure I’d have to resection.” She made a slit with the scalpel; a gap yawned in the wet blue surface of the tube. “I can see it. I need another set of forceps. Second drawer down, by the sink. While you’re there, I’ll need some saline, too. Third shelf down from the top, left side.” She might as well have been ordering breakfast.

I found both, and set them down by her.

“Good. Now check the pulse.”

I put my fingers to the inside of the cat’s leg. “Slow. Fainter than before.” I watched the cat’s little ribcage rise and fall in small, jerky motions. She picked up the forceps and carefully reached into the intestine.

“Almost,” she said. “Almost. Come on, you bastard.”

With a wet little trickle of sound, it came free: A silvery metal capsule like the one I’d seen in Howard Whittier’s desk. Dr. Kelly let it rattle into the empty metal tray up near the cat’s head.

She paused, and let out a long breath, and tried to blow a dangling curl of red hair out of her eyes. Tiny beads of sweat shone on her forehead.

“Now for the fun part,” she said. She set down the scalpel and reached for the needle and thread.

She made tight little stitches along the gap in the cat’s intestine, first in one lower layer, then closing the other one on top of it. Her hands moved quick and deft and did not shake. I wouldn’t have been able to say the same. I watched the blue of the intestinal wall slowly fade back toward pink.

Carefully, she stuffed the intestine back inside the abdomen. Any other time, I would have liked the way she pressed her tongue to the inside of her cheek, concentrating. Right now I was busy ruining any thoughts of Thanksgiving dinner for a solid year. Possibly longer.

“I need a hand,” she said. “Take the saline and flush out the abdomen.” I upended the bottle; clear fluid splashed down through a tube in the spout. It reminded me a little too much of a bartender pouring gin.

She used one kind of stitch to close the blue-white membrane over the abdomen; another to knit up the layer of fat above that; and a third, with a different sort of thread, to bind up the cat’s skin. She took her time. It felt like hours. But I had to dose the cat just twice more; it could only have been a few minutes.

Then it was over. She painted the wound with a swab of iodine. I felt ready to sleep for a month, and all I’d done was hold the rag.

“Hang on,” she said. “I want to tighten that last suture.” She took both ends of the thread in her fingers, looped them around, and made a double knot. If I hadn’t been looking at it, I wouldn’t have even noticed.

But I did.

I took a few steps back. It was that or lose my balance entirely. The world dangled loose around me, a picture hung off-center.

“Christ, you’re white as a sheet,” Dr. Kelly said, snapping off one glove. “You were doing so well.”

“I was,” I heard myself say, the floor slowly rising back up under my feet. “I am. I need to sit down.”

I knew it all. I saw the whole picture in my head. But I couldn't pry it up my throat, past my teeth and tongue, and out into the air. I could hardly even think it. It was too big and too wrong and it made too much sense.

I leaned against a shelf and breathed deeply. I needed something else to think about. "How's the patient?" I said.

"Which one?" Dr. Kelly asked, eyeing me with something dangerously close to sympathy.

"I'm all right. The cat?"

"Living up to his name." She took a syringe from a drawer and filled it with fluid from a jar. "I can give him this now to keep him out. Would've dropped his blood pressure too low for surgery. After that, I'll dose him with penicillin and hope for the best." She injected the cat; it stirred briefly, then went limp again. She lifted it gingerly, grunting slightly as it sprawled gracelessly across her arms, and barely managed to stuff the cat into one of the cages along the walls. Above it, an orange tabby with patches of missing fur opened one eye curiously, and then twitched its way back into sleep.

"And you?" the doctor asked, removing her other glove.

"Forget it," I said. If I kept lying to myself that everything would be fine, I could just about stand up. "Let's have a look at that obstruction."

I washed the silver capsule in the sink, then peeled off my gloves and took the thing in both hands. Dr. Kelly came up beside me, leaning heavily on the counter. Her arms trembled slightly; fine red veins bloomed in the whites of her eyes. She drew a cigarette from her pocket, hung it dangling from her lips, and lit the end until it glowed. A jet of smoke wisped from

between her pursed lips.

“This was their information?” she asked.

I nodded, and twisted one end of the capsule. The sides unfurled. A tight white scroll of paper dangled around the central rod. I peeled it off gingerly and stretched it out. I could recognize Whittier’s handwriting. The rest was a lot of Greek letters, numbers, and equations, plus a few diagrams that didn’t look like any math I ever knew.

I held it up so she could see. “Can you make anything of it?”

She shook her head, making the knot of hair behind it dance like a paintbrush.

“Above my pay grade. Maybe your leggy friends in the fancy suits would know.”

I put the scroll in my pocket. “They’re not my friends. And this doesn’t belong to them. Not yet it doesn’t.”

“So,” she said, and took the cigarette out of her mouth long enough to stifle a yawn.

“I seem to recall that a very long time ago, you said something about buying a girl dinner. I’ll settle for a cup of coffee.”

I wanted to. I wanted that so much. But something else had me by the neck, and for once it wasn’t the booze, and it wasn’t the collar.

I took out my wallet and handed her a sheaf of bills. “Buy it yourself,” I said. “And a hotel for the night.”

Her eyes hardened, and her mouth became a tight line around the cigarette. “Look, shamus, if you think I’m that sort of girl —”

“The hotel’s for you,” I said. “Just you and our friend Lucky there. If that wax-museum bunch from the orange grove could find you here, so could someone else. And I’ve put

you in enough trouble.”

I held the money out to her. She just stood there, arms folded across her chest. “If you think I’m walking out on a 12-month lease on this dump, you’ve got another think coming.”

“Come back in the morning,” I said. “One way or another, this should all be over by then.” I found a notepad and a pencil and started to write down my office phone number. Then I realized I didn’t remember it. I wrote my address instead, and left the money beside it. “You still feel like breaking bread in the morning, come and find me. Bring the cat. I won’t take it personal if you don’t show. I may not be there myself.”

“Just like that?” she asked. She didn’t move to pick up the pad I’d written on. She didn’t even look at it.

I took off my hat and wiped away the cooling sweat just under my hairline with the back of my sleeve. The fabric still smelled faintly of whiskey and orange juice. “Just like that. I’m sorry, Doc. There’s someplace I need to be. Someplace I’ve needed to be for a long time.”

She checked her watch. “Better hurry.” The words dripped poison. “It’s almost last call.”

“I guess you’ve made up your mind about whether to hate me,” I said. “My compliments on the decision.”

She didn’t say anything; just opened her mouth and let a contemptuous tendril of smoke curl out, punctuated midway through with a quick exhalation.

I showed myself the door to the waiting room. Halfway through, I turned.

“Just so we’re clear,” I said, “I don’t think you’re any sort of girl. Just some kind of a woman.”

She had the cigarette halfway out of her mouth and stopped when she heard it. She looked like she wanted to say something. Maybe something kind, even. I didn't give her the chance.

I walked out through the waiting room, empty and sterile and the lonely kind of small-hours bright, and out into the cool night.

I drove my car back toward the city, not sure where I was going. A couple of times I turned toward Plumeria Heights, then back around again. I couldn't even bring myself to say the words out loud. I wasn't sure how I would say them to Beverly Whittier. I told myself she wasn't back from her trip. That bought me a few more hours of cowardice. Then I'd have to find some other excuse.

The car seemed to know the way back toward my office. I just sat behind the wheel and gave it an excuse. My watch read eleven as I pulled into the garage under my building. I felt like I hadn't slept in a year and a half. I didn't notice the man waiting until after I'd shut the car door behind me.

"Evening, Mr. Pearl." The voice echoed off the concrete. It was low and dry and I recognized it from Lavender's place. The man with the porkpie hat stepped out from behind a column. "You do keep a man waiting."

"Slate, right?" I asked. "I didn't figure this for your kind of scene." He held a pistol in one hand, small enough not to look ridiculous, big enough to do real damage. He kept it low and casual by his waist, but he kept it on me, and he didn't so much as let it sway.

"It's not," he said. "But I'm on the job. Let's see those hands, nice and friendly."

I lifted them up slowly. He walked across the grimy cement floor and did a quick

patdown up one side of me and down the other. He paused to test the tone of one arm, and frowned a little. “Man like you ought to take care of himself.”

“I’ve been busy,” I said. He stuck a hand into my pockets, and I started to twist away — but only until he casually bumped the muzzle of the gun against my stomach. He came out with the paper scroll in his hand, unfurled it a little, and gave a low whistle.

“You’re just full of surprises. The boss only wanted a talk.”

“And now?” I said. He shook his head, with about as much pity as you’d spare for a dead dog on the roadside.

“Now you’re the guest of honor,” he said. “Lucky you.”

## Chapter Fifteen

### The Heat

I drove my wreck up to Willowdale with Slate's gun against my ribs.

Along Santa Vista Boulevard, he made me pull into a service station with a phone booth out beside the pumps. He kept the barrel of the gun against the glass wall of the booth, and on me, while he made a call from inside. I couldn't hear what he said into the receiver. His expression didn't change. I wasn't sure it ever did. After less than a minute on the line, he hung up. We got back in the car without a word.

About two blocks from the entrance to the club, I found my car in the company of a much better class of automobile. We joined a parade of long, sleek sedans, black and silver and gold, oozing snailishly onto the main thoroughfare from the hilly side streets and cul-de-sacs. Ahead, I could just see the caravan turning one by one into the gates of the Hot Spot.

"You taking me to a party?" I asked.



“Looks that way,” he said, with no apparent interest.

We crept with the train of cars up the long hilly drive, around into the gravel lot, nearly full by now. In my passing headlights, I saw the cars disgorging whole flocks of pale, slender people in immaculate evening dress; you could practically hear the coins jingle with each step they made. But I noticed a certain blariness about most of them. The women’s makeup looked hastily applied, the men’s hair only so far combed. Like they’d been summoned here from a sound sleep in feather beds the size of Rhode Island.

“Not here,” Slate said quietly, as I nudged the car in the general direction of a place to park. “Keep going. Around the back.”

“Afraid I’ll scare off the quality?”

“Fancy car like you’ve got, I don’t know,” he drawled. “Might make them jealous.”

The gravel trail continued around to the back. A bump of the muzzle of Slate’s gun told me where to stop. I cut the engine and we got out of the car. Slate banged twice on a heavy steel door set into the stone wall of the lodge. When it groaned open, my old pal Wheezy sneered at me from behind a white square of bandage stuck over his nose. It covered up his face some, which I could only consider an improvement. Wheezy stepped back, and Slate prodded the base of my spine lazily with the pistol. I walked inside.

The kitchen was spare and industrial, full of steel tables and squat ranges gray-brown with the scars of cooked-in fat. I smelled disinfectant and chemicals and something more, sweet and crude and high-octane. A small man stood with his back to me against the far wall, at a long steel work table, fiddling with a mass of fluid-filled bottles and tubing that looked like a distillery.

Sol Lavender, in a glossy suit of deep imperial purple, bent over a prep table in the center of the room, chewing on the eraser end of a pencil. He stared down at a newspaper folded in fourths. To one side of it sat a long hunk of fatty cured sausage. On the other, a long wide chef's knife, sharp and gleaming.

He looked up at me with those sleepy, dangerous eyes. "Good," he said, as if I'd just been in the other room. "I got something important to ask you." He looked down at the newspaper again. "21 across, four letters. 'Swamp of the wrathful, from Dante.'"

It took me a moment. "Styx," I said. "With a y and an x." Of all the things to remember.

His eyebrows lifted, and he smiled a little, and wrote it down. "That fits," he said. "Although now I think I got 18 down wrong. I knew you were a good man to have around."

"If that's all you wanted, you could've just called."

Slate moved around me and handed Lavender the little scroll of paper. I glanced back over my shoulder. Wheezy stood by the door, picking his nails with a switchblade knife. He looked up at me lazily, with a stare that would've translated in any language.

Lavender let out a wolf whistle, unrolling the scroll an inch at a time. "What did I say, Slate?" He looked past the scroll to me. "I wanted a progress report. A friendly conversation. You bring me progress. How's the cat?"

"Alive," I said. "It had a rough couple of days. I can sympathize."

"Doctor," Lavender said, turning over his shoulder. He held up the formula. In that moment I already knew who was working the junior scientist's laboratory on the back wall. When the little man at the chemistry set turned around, I saw the same round face and bristly

whiskers I remembered from the Whittier house.

“You do get around, Doc,” I said.

“I go where I am wanted,” Dr. Tochs shrugged. “I am wanted many places.”

“How many of them extradite?”

The doctor ignored me. He took the scroll gingerly from Lavender’s hand and stared at it, his lips moving soundlessly within their moat of beard. “Yes,” he nodded at last. “We have the requisite supplies. It is ... genius in its simplicity. Ten minutes at the very most. I am quite in awe, yes.”

“Good, good,” Lavender said. He lifted the knife and peeled a disc of meat off the end of the sausage. His teeth caught it off the edge of the blade, and he pulled it into his mouth until it was gone. “I get hungry before I have to give a speech,” he said to me. “It’s kind of a big night for us. Thanks to you.”

I glanced over at the formula, half-curved on Tochs’s work table. “I think Beverly Whittier would want a say in how her father’s property gets used.”

“Hal was her father, sure,” Lavender said. “But he was my lodge brother. We went bowling together. Tuesdays, mostly. That’s a very primal bond. And this — “ he waved at the laboratory, where Tochs hummed some vaguely martial tune as he worked — “is most definitely lodge business.”

He turned to Tochs. “I’m gonna go get dressed. You give it to Slate when it’s ready.” Lavender set the knife down on the table and beckoned to me. “Come on. You’ll get a kick out of this.”

“I’d rather just go home,” I said. “With the formula, whenever you’re done with it.”

Lavender's gaze sank into me like a concrete block in a riverbed. "I'm showing you hospitality, Hank. You don't want me to be hospitable?" Behind me, Wheezy took one slow step away from the door, in my direction. Then Lavender's eyes brightened, and he clapped his hands together briskly, as if the whole thing had been settled. "You're gonna love this. Best floor show in town."

I looked at Slate. He raised one eyebrow a fraction of an inch. I obliged.

Lavender led me through a swinging door at the back of the room into a narrow hallway. The walls bore more murals of the goat-man and buxom-lady variety. By now they just bored me. The Greeks at least had imagination. Whoever painted these just had a one-track mind.

The hallway ended in another door, which swung into a room with a high vaulted ceiling and pale peach-colored light from sconces along the walls. No clocks, no windows, just a smaller stage with a piano on one corner of it at the far end. Roulette wheels and craps tables and green felt stations for blackjack and poker sat empty and purposeless. At the near end I saw the double doors I'd seen from the other side, in the main hall. Beyond them, I could just make out a buzz of mingled conversation.

"You're a lousy kind of capitalist," I said. "I figured you'd have that tony crowd from outside courting Lady Luck by now."

"I can make money any night of the week," Lavender scoffed, patting the green velvet of a blackjack table fondly. He picked up a heap of soft black fabric someone had left there, and shook it out into some kind of a robe. "Tonight, well, gambling would just be cheap."

"You know that story you told me?" I asked. "About the John Waynes and the Shirley Temple?" He nodded. "I may have seen some of my own tonight."

“More John Waynes?” he asked, his eyes shining with curiosity. He slipped both arms into the robe, and began to button it down the front.

I shook my head. “No Shirley Temples, either. There was a girl, but the only thing cute about her was her looks.”

“Probably for the best,” Lavender shrugged, pursing his lips matter-of-factly.

“Anything more than one John Wayne feels like tempting fate. So what did you make of them?”

“I made them for Commies, cut up to match yesteryear’s press clippings. But I’ve been wrong about a lot of things. Maybe I’m wrong about them being Reds. Maybe I’m wrong about them even being human.”

Lavender grinned, a touch of the wolf in the teeth he flashed me. “You’re starting to sound like the funnybooks.”

“Pal of mine would laugh himself silly at that,” I said. “So what makes tonight special?”

Lavender walked over, the robe billowing around him, and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Hal Whittier didn’t just build this lodge. Or this little society we’ve got going. He was a great man, Hal. He had a plan. We had a plan. We’d talk it out over cigars and brandy. Maybe sometimes a little reefer. Don’t tell my mother.” He laid a finger to his lips and winked mischievously. “Now at last, I can see it through. I can’t tell you what that means to me, Hank.”

I walked slowly to the double doors and pushed them open a crack. I saw a thin slice of a crowd mingling, some with drinks in their hands, all in the same black robes. I felt underdressed.

“And how exactly do I figure?” I asked.

“Simple,” I heard Lavender say softly behind me. “You’re the cover charge.” I heard fabric glide on fabric.

If I’d been running on anything but fumes and desperation, I might have turned around fast enough. I didn’t. I saw the sap just for a second in Lavender’s hand. Then a black circle of pain exploded in my temple, and yawned wide as a whirlpool, and swallowed me whole.

#

I floated.

The ocean murmured steadily in my ear, the sound rising and falling. A dull ache lapped in gentle waves across the surface of my skull, from a point just above my right eye. I felt something wet and sticky against the skin there.

I saw my own legs. A single spot on the top of my right leg stained the trousers darker than black. This poor suit. The dry cleaner would probably take it into protective custody.

My aching chin rested against my chest. My head throbbed. I’d taken enough lumps for any three prizefighters. I couldn’t feel my hat. I tried to move my arms. I couldn’t.

My hands were bound behind me, the back of a sturdy wooden chair biting into my upper arms and elbows. I could just barely feel the steel handcuffs clamped tight around both my wrists. A snowfall of pins and needles danced across my fingers.

Beyond my legs I saw my shoes, scuffed and creased and dusty, and beyond them, worn wooden planks. One of them was missing a nail. The large, heavy feet of my chair were carved into claws. I tried to rock. Not the slightest bit of give. They must have nailed it down.

I heard the floorboards creak, and the soft murmur of someone reciting words to

himself, rote and mechanical. I lifted my head, slowly. The whole weight of the world lifted with it.

I saw the back of Sol Lavender's silver hair. He stood a few feet away in the black robe, hunched over slightly, murmuring. In front of him, thick crimson cloth draped a long wide table. This had to be the stage I'd seen on my first visit to the Hot Spot. The purple curtains draped closed over the front of the proscenium. Beyond them, through the velvet, I could hear faint jazz music, and the murmur of a large crowd against the hall's high ceiling.

"... I'd rather be in the driver's seat," Lavender finished quietly, and turned toward me. He wore small round spectacles down on the bridge of his nose, and held a series of small white cards in his long slender fingers. Now that he'd moved, I saw the table held a molded chalice that looked like gold, and the scroll of paper bearing Whittier's formula.

And that long, curving silver knife.

"Public speaking," he said, as if he already knew I'd be awake. "I never was any good with it. Time was I did all my talking with lead, but you know how it is. You get enough money, you start coming across all respectable, and then it's the Shriners, and the Rotary Club, and the Knights of Columbus. Bane of my goddamn existence."

"My heart breaks," I said, trying to blink away the dried blood crusted on my eyelashes. "What's this all about?"

"I find that surprise is a very important part of enjoying life," Lavender said. "You're going to want to get as much enjoyment as you can out of the next few minutes."

"I thought you had no hard feelings," I said. "About your boy."

"I don't," he said. He looked genuinely hurt that I'd even broached the question. "I'm

not a vindictive man, Hank.” He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips, and his eyes went somewhere distant. “But you killed my boy. My little boy, my little Elijah. You kill a man’s son, you have to answer to that. Or else he’s not a man at all.”

I couldn’t say anything to that. It made too much sense. We fell quiet for a moment before I spoke. “What do you get out of all this? You planning to sell Whittier’s formula to the highest bidder?”

He laughed. “You got an imagination on you, Hank. What exactly do you think this is?” He held up the little scroll of paper and waved it at me.

“Rocket fuel,” I said. “Or so the Feds seem to think.”

Lavender laughed again, even louder this time, so high it dissolved into wheezing. He had to put one hand on the table to steady himself. He took the glasses off his nose and wiped a tear from his eyes, and took a few deep breaths to calm down.

“That’s good,” he said. “I feel so much less nervous now. It’s very cleansing. I ought to do that every time, before I speak. Rocket fuel.” He started to chuckle again, and checked himself, clearing his throat. “The goddamn government. Everything’s science. They suck out all the magic.”

“So it’s not rocket fuel,” I said. “What, then?”

Lavender’s eyes shone. “It’s a key, Hank,” he said, with the kind of zeal reserved for revivalists and door-to-door salesmen. “The biggest damn key you ever saw in your life, to a great big golden door. And just you guess what’s on the other side.”

“Power?” I asked.

He touched his finger to his nose and grinned fondly at me. “To turn the world



upside-down and give it a good hard shake. Like a snowglobe. What's on the other side of that door, it's the kind of power nobody can touch, nobody can top. The trump card in every arms race." He looked down at his feet. "And I think I'm gonna ask for my little piggies back, too. I miss those guys."

Working missing persons, you practically collected cults. Eventually they all blurred together. People have a lot of ways to react when life kicks them in the teeth. Mine came in a bottle. Sol Lavender seemed to have looked elsewhere.

He picked up the knife, holding it with the flat of the blade across the palm of one hand, staring at his reflection in it. "You get to make it happen," he said. "Don't worry. It's very sharp. I still know how to make it happen quick. Like riding a bicycle." He paused, frowning to himself. "Although, you know, I never actually learned how to ride a bicycle."

The laugh welled up in me. I couldn't stop it. Every laugh made my head hurt. I was long, long past caring.

I was still laughing when a narrow door opened in the wings. Slate emerged in slow and careful steps. He held a glass beaker, full of a viscous golden liquid. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look concerned about anything.

"Keep it down, laughing boy," he said, without looking at me. "Delicate cargo."

Tochs appeared at his heels, in a black robe like Lavender's, fidgeting with terrier-like enthusiasm. Either it was time for his medicine, or he'd just dosed.

"This is it?" Sol asked, holding up the chalice. Slate nodded, and poured the liquid in slowly, slowly, watching every drop. When the beaker was empty at last, his shoulders sagged. He looked like he might at least be considering mopping his brow.

“I have followed the instructions to their every particular,” Tochs volunteered. He pushed his spectacles back up his nose from where they’ve slipped, and then clasped his hairy little hands together. He saw me, and his whole face lit up. “Wonderful, yes! Mr. Pearl!” He leaned toward me, his oddly sweet and fruity breath blanketing my face. “I have been curious about the ... aftereffects of your treatment. A shame, a shame, there is not time, or I would get my notebook.”

“I saw a talking dog and a dead little boy,” I said. “And maybe somebody’s face wriggling around like it wasn’t supposed to.”

“Fascinating!” he beamed. His fingers fidgeted, aching for a pen. “All together, or were these separate? In what order?”

Lavender cleared his throat, and the little man straightened up as if he’d been hit with a live wire.

“Dr. Tochs, if you’d like to mingle with the other Fraters,” Lavender said, “I told Izzie to set you up with an open tab. We got in that thing you like from South America, the one with the name, where you have to be wearing gloves — I don’t know, whatever you call it.”

The doctor’s lower lip twitched, and his mouth curled into a smile. His eyes shone faintly. “Yes,” he said. “Quite lovely, yes.” He left through the door in the wings in a patter of quick, weaving little steps, just on the slow side of running.

Lavender put a hand on Slate’s shoulder, and whispered, semiconfidentially. “Keep an eye on him, would you? That business last time with Mrs. Vandervoort and the cigar...”

Slate nodded. He looked at me with an expression I couldn’t read, and shook his head slowly, and left the stage. It was just me and Lavender again. He wiped his palms on the sides of

his robe.

“So!” he all but barked, a sly grin on his face. “You and me. You ready to do this?”

He walked over and punched me on the shoulder fondly. Then he pulled a long silk cloth from a pocket in his robe, knotted it in the center, and gagged me with it. He patted me on the cheek.

“Just remember, yours ain’t a speaking part.”

I leaned my bare head back against the chair, feeling the collar pinch slightly against the skin of my neck. I shut my eyes.

I guess I’d always known it. I was a dead man from the moment I’d walked back into the interview room with that book in my hands. I spent the last five years in one long dress rehearsal for it. It seemed only right to embrace it now.

This was the system I believed in: You do wrong. You’re punished. The system worked.

*And*, a little voice said deep within me.

It was the same voice that told me how much I’d love one last glass of whiskey, just one, and then I could stop. Maybe just two. Definitely two. But that’d be all I’d need. Unless I needed three.

*And*, said the little voice, *you’ll never have to tell her. You’ll never have to say the words. So much easier this way.*

Behind the chair I curled my half-numb fingers around the cuffs.

*And*, said the little voice, and in my head I turned toward it with clenched fists. I beat and kicked and trampled it. I drove it whimpering back into the dark.

To hell with all of that. I knew who I was. I knew everything I’d given up, and why,

and for whom. I knew what I had coming to me. And what I had to do.

Sol Lavender took his place behind the table, with his back to me and his face toward the front of the stage. The curtain opened.

#

If I read the society pages, or gave a damn about who got seen with whom at Lady So-And-So's Midsummer Froofraw, I might have recognized some of the faces. Mostly they just all looked rich, and frightened, and like they had a stick lodged someplace uncomfortable. Or perhaps it was a silver spoon.

They all wore black robes. Some of them held drinks. By candlelight, their faces looked distorted, unreal. Every one of them had their eyes on the stage. On Sol Lavender. He cleared his throat.

"Hi," he said. "Everybody got refreshments? Can you all see the stage? Not you?" He snapped his fingers and pointed. "Someone get her a chair." Gentle laughter rippled over the heads of the crowd.

I didn't have a gun. Didn't have a knife. I could feel my wallet pressed against one hip, my keys biting into the other, next to the small flat square of the matchbook I'd gotten off Whit.

And, so small I could barely feel its shape against my hip, the paperclip I'd used to pick the lock on Whittier's desk.

Lavender cleared his throat. The crowd quieted. "Frater 121, known in the outer as

Howard Colquin Whittier,” he said, “is no more. From fire he made himself. To fire he has returned. In death as in life, he burned so brightly, he left nothing of himself behind. Well, almost nothing.”

Lavender waited a moment, and gestured back at me. “No, not him,” he said. More laughter from the crowd. “I’m getting to him. No, Howard left us an infinitely precious gift. He gave us the completion of his last great working. He gave us the Threshold.”

You could have heard a pin drop. Then a throaty cry of joy rose from one corner of the audience, and another, and another, shooting up like fireworks, until the whole crowd was in a tumult.

I didn’t join in. I was busy trying not to dislocate my shoulder.

I bit down against the knot between my jaws and stretched my numbed fingers around my back, toward my right pocket. I saw the tip of my finger almost brush the seam at the edge of the pocket.

Lavender held up his hands, and the crowd quieted.

“What began with Balieal, the Harbinger,” he said, “came to terrible calamity in Wilim the Summoner. We all remember Howard’s suffering; his pain was our own. But I’m here to tell you tonight that Howard persevered. From the Land of the Unreturned, the Summoner would not be silenced! He reached across the gulf of stars and gave to Howard the key to Threshold!”

Another cheer. It surprised me. Some of this crowd looked feeble enough to snap in half from a good hard sneeze.

“I don’t know if —” Lavender began, and then stopped. “Dammit, wrong card.” The

crowd chuckled appreciatively, and waited as he shuffled them until he found the right one.

“There we go. I should’ve had them numbered.” He waited again for the laughter to die down.

“Many are the powers arrayed against us now, ready to kill, ready to die, to stop us. The prison state, where the tyranny of the many usurps the will of the individual. The terrible war-angels with their flaming swords and their false faces, prizing the heavens for their own.” I heard the small wet sound of his tongue against his dry lips.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “They can’t stop us.”

The crowd resumed its roaring. I tried again. The cuffs bit and chafed at my wrist, but I managed to rotate the right hand until the palm faced up. I squeezed my arms over to the right side of the chair. It hurt like hell, but it worked. My open palm cupped waiting, just behind my pocket.

“The papers and the magazines and the television sets,” Lavender told the crowd, “they stuff our heads with lies. We’re gonna vacation on the moon. Our cars will drive themselves over the Grand Canyon and under the sea. Whole meals in a pill that expands in your stomach. Me, I don’t see that future. Do you?”

The crowd stood slightly lower than the stage. Lavender’s table reached a little more than waist high, and all the eyes were on him. I took a risk. I lifted my right leg slightly, and jiggled it. I felt the paperclip slip. Another shake. The corner of it poked out of the pocket, faintly gleaming. Another shake. It fell loose.

I just caught it between the tips of two outstretched fingers. Just.

“My future, I see right next door,” Lavender said. “A pile of bones. All of us buried under somebody else. Howard Whittier saw this, too. And Hal wasn’t just a man of vision. He

was a man of will. Hal saw that future and he said no. So do I.”

I tucked the paperclip into my half-numbed fist like a secret. Nothing, not a woman’s hand, not a gun, not a cool sweating glass, ever felt so good to me. I’d spent enough time around handcuffs to know how to crack them. You moved the lever arm inside the lock down against the ridges that held the cuff in place. Push those ridges down far enough, and the cuff swung free. I’d done it plenty of times. But never with hands I could barely feel. And never when my life depended on it.

“We are beset by dangers,” Lavender said. “Pinned down and tied and tortured by the masses who say ‘can not’ and ‘must not’ and ‘should not.’ But we have a right to live, each of us, according to our own will. After tonight we can pursue that will without limits. Tonight we become the masters.”

Slowly, with sweat-slicked fingers, I moved the unbent end of the clip toward the cuffs. My wrists ached, the metal squeezing against the bones. The end of the clip scraped against the metal for several agonizing seconds, then finally slipped into the lock.

“Howard once told me,” Lavender was saying to the crowd, “that he harnessed chaos. Took the power of destruction and turned it, with his mind and his will, to great achievement. Tonight we follow in his legacy. Destroy to rebuild. Tonight we stand at the Threshold, and pay its price in blood.”

He turned back to me again and winked. Clearly this was my big moment. I waited for someone in the crowd to ask who I was. How I got there. I scanned the faces in the crowd. They stared back at me, blank and impassive. They looked right through people every day. I was no different than the gardener or the maid. Except this time, instead of cleaning up the mess, I’d

be making it.

Behind my back I bent the clip against the inside of the lock, crimping it at an angle, and pulled it free. I exhaled slowly into the stale cloth of the gag. Now came the tricky part.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Lavender said. “The world is going to hell in a handbasket. You know it. I know it. And if we have to take that trip ...” He paused, building up to his big finish. “I’d rather be in the driver’s seat.”

More lusty cheers. He turned back and beamed at me, lifting his eyebrows. This was my cue to be impressed.

My fingers slipped. The clip slid between them. I made a desperate grab.

Lavender lifted the chalice and held it high to the crowd.

For a few endless seconds I thought it was gone. Then the unbent end of the clip jabbed me in the tip of my finger, puncturing the haze of deadened nerves. I eased the bent tip back into the lock, got the best grip I could, and tried to move it.

Lavender turned toward me. He held the chalice in one hand, and peered intently through his reading glasses at Whittier’s scroll in the other. He began to pour a thin line of the golden liquid out of the chalice and onto the wood-planked floor. It ran straight and level and did not splash, pooling as smoothly as honey. But the smell came at me hard and burnt and hydrocarbon. As he worked, the line became a shape.

Even the pins and needles were lifting away from my hands now. I could feel everything south of my wrists start to evaporate, fading to strange, empty meat.

Lavender finished the design. A triangle, bounded by a circle. The top point of the triangle aimed straight at me. That didn’t help me relax any.



Lavender held up the scroll, pivoted to the audience, and began to read. The syllables didn't make any sense to me. Sometimes they sounded a little like the Greek I'd heard on leave in the service, after the war. Sometimes I heard a snatch of something like Latin. Mostly they sounded like a phonograph played backward, at the wrong speed.

I turned the clip in the lock. It didn't budge.

Sol Lavender finished his recitation. I saw him set the scroll down on the table. Then he picked up the knife. When he faced me he looked calm, impassive. I wondered how many other men had seen him in this moment. How many had the time I had to wonder about it, to really take it in. How many others just caught a glimpse before it was too late.

Sweat rolled down the back of my neck, under the band of the collar. I tried to turn the clip again. Maybe I'd weakened the metal on the locks of Whittier's desk. Maybe it just wasn't strong enough.

Lavender held the knife loose and easy, like you would a tennis racquet. He stepped carefully into the triangle he'd drawn with Whittier's formula.

I braced my shoulders and tried to keep my face still and calm. Between my nearly gone fingers, I pinched the clip with everything I had. Lavender raised the knife high. It gleamed gold at me in the reflected candlelight. He looked at me and made a face, as if to say, hey, what can you do?

I turned the clip in the lock.

His hand fell, and the knife with it.

I came up out of the chair fist first, a metal bracelet on my left wrist trailing its empty twin. The punch caught him across the jaw and snapped his whole head to the side. He stumbled

backward out of the circle.

The crowd gasped. Far in the back, someone who'd probably tormented a singing instructor or five let out an operatic scream. Even for this crowd, it was a bit much.

My right wrist hurt like anything, but it didn't feel broken. I could work the fingers, make a fist. I tore the gag out of my mouth and threw it at Lavender. As he got to his feet, his eyes looked strangely insulted.

"Thanks for the invite," I said. "But this isn't my crowd."

He came at me with the knife, low and quick. He'd cultivated the manners and worn the suits and made the friends, but under it all he was gutter to the core. He got a slash across the front of my shirt, but nothing deeper. I clamped one hand on the wrist that held the knife and drove my other fist into the side of his neck. He wrenched the knife away from me and caught me with an elbow to the face.

I reeled, spitting blood. My vision cleared just in time for him to hit me in the guts. I folded around his fist, the breath rushing out of me in one surge. He kicked one knee out from under me and I dropped to the stage, one hand hugging my breadbasket, the other keeping me from falling right on my face. I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe. I felt his fingers clench my hair. He pulled my neck up and back.

"I told you." I felt his breath hot on my ear, punctuated with tiny flecks of spit. I saw the glistening golden fluid in lines on the floor. "I could have made it quick." From the corner of my eye I saw him bring the knife down.

I lifted my head half an inch. The blade slid across my throat.

Sparks flew. Metal screeched. The knife struck the metal clasp of the collar. I felt the

thing tighten up, as if it knew something was attacking it, and a thin stinging line as the blade glanced my neck on its way out. But that was all.

I drove an elbow blindly behind me into Lavender, heard him grunt. I plunged a hand into my pocket, came out with Whit's matchbook, and rolled onto my back. Lavender had stumbled backward, inside the pattern of golden fluid he'd poured on the stage, the knife still high, unbending himself from where I'd hit him, a gag shuddering its way up through his body.

I tore out a match, struck it, lit the book ablaze.

Lavender's eyes opened, found me. His weight shifted forward.

I snapped my wrist and let the burning matchbook fly. The yellow flame made butterfly wings as it tumbled through the air. It hit the golden liquid.

White flames burst from the floor of the stage. I lay there on my back, propped up on one elbow. Lavender half-hunched in his black robe, the knife hanging like a toy in one limp arm, the flames dancing in his eyes.

"Well, damn," he said.

The fire seemed to sway outward from the center of the design, and then inward, all the lapping, dazzling fingers pointing toward Sol. Then it exploded.

I felt the heat singe the skin of my face. When I could see again, my eyes dry and stinging, the fire had reached the curtains at the back of the stage, and spread in sheets along the proscenium above me. Lavender tore off his robe as flames sprang up at the hem of it. I heard glasses shattering. Cacophony filled the hall.

A solid wall of fire, a strange crimson flecked with flares of white, already covered the door I'd seen in the wings. Even as I watched, the fire spread from the proscenium up in

tendrils across the paint of the ceiling. Satyrs and maidens warped and bubbled and blackened. The flames moved like nothing I'd ever seen.

I lunged forward to the table, fire chewing its way up the soft velvet cloth. I got my fist around Whittier's formula and stuffed it deep in my pocket.

On the floor of the hall, a sea of old money in black robes fought and lurched and ate itself alive. I dove in. A wrinkled old thing with pearls at her throat tried to claw my eyes out, screaming something I couldn't hear. I stiff-armed her without a second thought.

Behind me the screams grew louder, more dire. I turned my head and saw, above jostling waves of black hoods, the fire spreading into the crowd, feeding on the robes. I looked at the stage. I couldn't see Lavender.

Already the air was oven-hot and thick in my mouth. I fought my way through the chaos toward the bar. From there maybe I could edge around toward the front doors. I stumbled free of the crowd and into a barstool. Someone had left a single glass of scotch there alone on the rail. Seemed a terrible waste.

A fist found my kidneys. Electric pain shot up and down one side of me. I spun and caught another to my cheekbone. Behind his bandage, Wheezy grinned at me. His switchblade knife sprung open in his hand, the blade glimmering in the firelight.

I reached back and found the drink and threw it in his face. He gave a strangled cry and recoiled, hands clutching for a collar that wasn't there anymore, waiting for the band to crush his throat. That took him a second. Long enough for me to bust his nose again. He swayed backward and the crowd swallowed him. I saw his switchblade flash in an upstretched hand. Then I didn't see any more of him.

The fire reached the bar shelves. The bottles boiled, exploded, firecracker flares of bright pink and purple and blue cascading down.

The whole ceiling blazed. The fire pounced from one black shape in the crowd to the next. I heard a woman's high scream and saw Izzie trying to tear off her robe. But the suit underneath had caught fire, too, and the oil in her hair. The flames made a crown.

I hauled myself up on the bar, above the crowd, and ran down the length of it toward the door. Ahead of me I saw black robes racing for the exit. One by one the fire seemed to pull them down. I reached the end of the bar. I leapt. Beneath me a burning hand stretched up, pleading perhaps, or just trying to take me with it. Too far gone for anyone to help.

I hit the stone floor hard and rolled, and scrambled to my feet and into the front alcove. Behind me all was white flame. The heat pressed on me like the palm of some massive, unseen hand. I threw my shoulder into the doors. They opened just a crack, cool air sucking in past me in a sudden wind, pushing them shut again. I heaved. The wind pushed back.

"I gotta say, Hank," a voice came from behind me, along with a high sour stink of burning hair. The fringes of Lavender's silver mane wisped smoke, reddish-black and brittle. So did his suit, charred at the arms and the elbows. Red blisters formed across his face, as if he'd spent all afternoon in the sun. In his shaking hand, a tiny pistol hissed softly against the skin of his palm. He didn't seem to notice.

"I gotta say," he repeated, and ran his tongue across a cracked and scarlet mouth. "This is not how I pictured the evening turning out." He raised the gun.

I don't know how else to describe it: Five fingers of fire wrapped around Sol Lavender, surging over the back of him. The flames pulled him back, his eyes wide and

bloodshot and terribly disappointed. He didn't make a sound.

I flung myself one more time at the doors and they gave, spitting me head over heels out into the sweet cool air of the night. I crawled down the steps, gasping, coughing my lungs out, and spit up a gob of something black. A cigarette butt flicked into the dirt next to me and sizzled. I lay there watching it, my chest heaving. The fibers of it glowed and curled and diminished, lazy and slow.

"It figures," Slate said. He stood with Dr. Tochs on the gravel walk out in front of the temple, lighting a new cigarette. "You step out for a smoke, you miss all the interesting parts."

Tochs drank something from a small silver flask. His eyes seemed distant and glossy, his head cocked slightly, as if picking up a frequency no one else could intercept.

I got to my feet, wheezing through aching lungs. The empty cuff jangled from my wrist. My whole damn body hurt.

"You and me," I said to Slate. "Are we going to have trouble?"

He took off his hat and fanned himself with it lightly, each sweep making the embers at the tip of his cigarette glow.

"Did we ever?" he asked

"I guess not." I stumbled past him, toward the fountain with the satyr, and the gravel lot beyond.

Tochs swayed into my path. On his breath, above the fruitiness, I smelled something new, strange and chemical. When he spoke the words drifted out in hazy clouds.

"If we might perhaps make an appointment," he said, "It would be to the considerable advancement of science if you could describe for me further the —"

I balled a fist and knocked him on his ass. He blinked, dazed, rolling in the dirt like an upturned turtle. He touched a thumb to the bleeding corner of his mouth, and dabbed the blood gingerly with the tip of his tongue.

“Hmm,” he croaked. “Perhaps another time, yes.”

I heard Slate make a short, low sound. Maybe it was an actual laugh. Maybe he was just clearing his throat. I kept walking, one foot in front of the other, taking a census of my aches.

Weary-looking men in chauffeur’s uniforms milled around the side parking lot, swapping stories and cigarettes, taking swigs from flasks of coffee, or something stronger. They stared at me as I approached. I must have been quite a sight.

“Any of those buggies have a radiophone?” I asked. One or two of them nodded. “Raise the fire station. Tell them it’s a five-alarm.”

I walked the million miles around the back of the building. With no windows, the lodge looked peaceful, normal. But I could feel the heat coming off the stone, steady as a stove.

I collapsed into the front seat of my car and dug for my keys. I felt Howard Whittier’s formula crumple and crinkle in my pocket. I coughed again. I wanted to go to sleep right then and there. But I had somewhere to be.

I started the car and turned it, the gravel crackling under the wheels. I drove out past the lot, the chauffeurs not yet realizing they’d joined the unemployment line. I went down the hill and out the gate, and got just three blocks out before I heard the first sirens. A sleek red dragon of an engine hurtled past me, wailing. They paid their taxes in Willowdale, and they didn’t let you forget it.

I found an all-night drugstore at Pine and Mercer and hauled myself up to the

counter, smelling like a bonfire, my handcuffed wrist shoved deep in my pants pocket. A pipsqueak clerk in a paper hat looked up from his comic book, and down again, and up again, as if he weren't sure which one was more real. I paid for a bobby pin and an ice-cold bottle of cola. I drained the bottle dry right there at the counter, and set the bottle down, and asked for my deposit. And whether the place had a lavatory.

In the john I used the pin to pick the lock on the last cuff. Then I scrubbed the ash off my face and combed my hair and wished I still had a hat to hide it. I didn't quite look human — just close enough to pass, in the right light. My jaw was purpling and tender on both sides, my eyes bloodshot and hung with dark circles underneath. The skin of my face stood out bright red, still radiating heat from the fire. A thin slash vented the front of my dress shirt, showing the cotton undershirt beneath.

I looked at the collar in the mirror. Not a scratch on it. The damn thing looked better than I did.

I put both hands on the sink and breathed, letting the last of the smoke leave my lungs. I heard a knock on the door. The clerk, asking was I okay, mister. Probably he was thinking of calling the cops. I decided to save him the trouble. I came out and gave him a dollar, and asked him to make change for the phone booth in the corner.

I knew the number for Central, but I checked the directory anyway to make sure it hadn't changed. When the dispatcher answered I asked for Lieutenant Vasquez. I waited a minute in silence, the line buzzing and clicking faintly, and then Joe came on.

"Hi, Joe," I said, between coughs.

"You don't sound good."



“I sound better than I look. The Billy Whittier jacket said you pulled prints from the inside of the trunk. You still got them in Evidence?”

“We might.” Joe drew out the words, chewing on them thoughtfully.

“Run those prints. Please. Run ‘em against all the prints you took from that case.”

A long silence filled the other end of the line before he answered. “There someplace I can reach you if we get a hit?”

“If you find what I think you’ll find, you’ll know where to meet me. I’ll see you there.” I coughed again. “Thanks, Joe.”

“Be safe,” he said. I set the receiver back on the hook.

I walked out of the drugstore in slow, heavy steps, and got back into my car, and gave myself one last chance to change my mind. I didn’t.

I started the car and drove toward Plumeria Heights.

## Chapter Sixteen

### The Drink

The sky glowed pink. Pink as the guts of a cat. Dawn had begun to sweep away the stardust. I drove in the gates of the Whittier mansion and coaxed the car to a halt in front of the garage.

I got out of the car and cupped my hands around my face to peer in through the garage window. The long black beast lurked in its center spot. Miss Whittier was home from her trip.

I dragged my feet to the front of the house and leaned against the doorbell, ready to drop. My lungs still burned from the smoke, my throat dry and raspy. The muscles of my stomach pulsed with slow, steady pain from where Sol Lavender had hit me. It made a matching set with the throbs of my kidneys and both sides of my jaw. Only duty kept me on my feet.

I pressed the doorbell twice more before the lock clicked and the door opened.

Beverly Whittier must have been traveling all night. She didn't look it. She saw the state of me and her red lips unhinged in a sudden gasp, even as a slim white hand fluttered up to cover them.

"You've lost your hat." Her hand reached out tentatively, hovered a moment, and then made a quick, gentle adjustment to my necktie.

"Found your cat," I coughed. "May I come in?"

She led me into the music room, pulled a sheet off an overstuffed chair in a cloud of dust, and helped me sit. The cushions enfolded me. My eyelids wanted to droop. But I couldn't get comfortable. Not yet.

"I just got in not an hour ago," she said, sitting on the piano bench and facing me. "The night train." She wore a white blouse with long sleeves and a high collar, a black skirt that she smoothed down to the tops of her knees, and black stockings that made silhouettes of her legs. I watched her toes flex through the nylon, working against the carpeting.

"Where's Frankenstein?" I asked.

She laughed a little, and her eyes strayed to the ceiling, but only for a moment. "In town, I suppose. He was kind enough to go with me while I got Father's estate sorted out, and he must be very tired of me. I gave him the rest of the day off. I really just want to sleep."

"I know the feeling." I muffled a cough with the crook of my elbow, and thought about the car parked in the garage.

"I suspect my cat didn't do that." She pointed to the slash across the front of my dress shirt.

"Your next-door neighbor. They'll be putting his property up for sale soon, I think." I watched her face closely. "Your older brother's dead, too, Miss Whittier. I'm sorry. I hope I'm

not the first one to tell you.”

She shook her head. Her lips pursed, her eyes focusing on some memory. “No. They sent a telegram to the hotel. The police found his car down in one of the canyons. They said it was a terrible wreck.”

I let that go. “There’s also the matter of your dining room. I can explain that, but it’ll take some time. This wasn’t just about a cat, Miss Whittier.” I waited. “I suspect you knew that going in.”

She bent forward, her elbows on her knees, hands clasped, blue eyes large and concerned. “How is he? Is he —”

“Lucky’s alive and well. Far as I know. I found him ... never mind where I found him. He was sick. He’d swallowed something and it jammed up his insides. But I got him to a vet. Assuming he’s too mean to die — and I’d take that bet — he’ll be right as rain. He’s still at the clinic. I can give you the address.”

“Thank you, Mr. Pearl.” She put a hand on my knee, and after a second took it away again. “I knew you were the man for the job.” I just sat there and said nothing, and waited for her to ask.

“What was it he swallowed?” she said at last. I gave her credit for not trying to act casual.

I reached into my pocket and found the crumpled-up scroll, and handed it to her. “Your father took precautions. I’m not sure how much Lucky enjoyed them. But I guess it all worked out okay.”

She didn’t even smooth out the scroll. She kept the paper tight in one fist, and ran a

hand through her hair with the other. “What is it?”

I laughed a little, until it hurt too much. “Don’t. Don’t insult me. We both know you’re too smart for that. I expect the Feds have already been in touch with you. They certainly found me.” I looked around. “If I had to hazard a guess, Miss Whittier, I’d say any cash flow problems of yours will dry up and blow away soon enough.”

She looked down at the scroll, and her mouth quirked in a shy little smile. Her blue eyes found me again. “I can’t thank you enough. I figured if you knew, you might say no. And if you didn’t know, you’d want to find out. And that would keep you going.”

I shook my head. “I wanted to bring you back what you’d lost. Just once. Just to see what it was like.”

Even in the dim light from the windows, I could see the blush rise in her ivory cheeks. She turned away. “Thank you,” she said in a small voice.

I pulled down the collar of my shirt. “You want to thank me, get me out of this thing.”

“Yes, of course,” she said. She sniffed a bit, and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with the heel of one hand. Then she stood up, slipping the formula in a pocket neatly concealed on the side of her skirt. “I’ll just be a moment. Excuse me.”

She moved into the other room in a quick swirl of fabric, walking on the balls of her stocking feet. I sat like a stone in the chair and listened. I listened to her in the next room over, to cabinets opening and shutting. And I listened to all the rest of the house, to the floorboards and the echoes off the hallways. Silence.

Beverly came back into the room with a silver tray. It held a little glass vial full of

clear liquid, an eyedropper, a glass tumbler, and the crystal whiskey decanter. She set it all down on top of the piano.

“Dr. Tochs assures me,” she said, unscrewing the top of the vial, “that this will work just fine.” I tried not to make a face at that. I’m not sure I succeeded. She drew the contents of the vial into the eyedropper, and crossed the room, and bent over until she was eye to eye with me.

“Hold still,” she said. Gentle as a breeze, she put one soft hand to my sandpaper cheek, and lifted my jaw. She’d dabbed perfume on her wrist. Something light and sweet and floral.

I felt a trickle down over my adam’s apple. It stung ever so slightly, then cooled, then dissipated.

For a long few seconds nothing happened. Then I felt the clasp on the collar begin to tick and rattle. The band drew tight for a split-second — but before I could gasp, the clasp sprung open, and cool air kissed the skin of my neck. The collar fell to my shoulders. I snatched it up like a snake and hurled it across the carpet.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a good while now,” I said. Her face remained so very close to mine.

“I understand.” She left her hand on my cheek for a second longer, and then drew it away, and went back to the piano again. I rubbed the slightly raw, prickly skin of my neck. I felt strangely naked, my head too light, my breathing too easy.

“I’m going to fix myself a drink.” She looked at me from behind a tangle of gold that had fallen across her face. “Just a little one. Would you like one?” I felt my mouth open slightly.

I licked my dry lips. I couldn't answer.

She decided for me. I heard the stopper pop, saw her pour two glasses, a delicate mouthful for her, a great big belt for me. She handed the glass to me, and just for a moment her fingers brushed mine. I stared at the glass in my hand, waiting for my throat to constrict. It didn't.

I brought the glass up to my nose, gave it a quick sniff with my eyes shut. Sharp and oaky. I felt quick pangs in the back corners of my mouth as my salivary glands fired. It smelled so damn good.

"To your health." She raised her glass and watched me over the rim as she drained it dry. Waiting.

My hand trembled. I took a deep breath and let the glass drift back to my lap. That was all I could bring myself to do. My fingers wouldn't let it go.

"In a minute." I swallowed. "I have something to ask you first."

"Mm?" She looked at me, head slightly tilted, eyebrows up.

"I want to know why you killed your little brother."

A camera couldn't have caught it. No shutter on earth was that fast. But for just a split-second her face went hard and blank. Then she smiled, sadly.

"Mr. Pearl." She was so very sorry for me. "I know this has been difficult. Very confusing. But you know that Eli Lavender killed my brother. You must. This must be the treatment. Dr. Tochs said there could be side effects."

"There were," I nodded, "but this isn't one of them. This is about shoelaces."

She sat down. Her face stayed patient, understanding. But her hands stacked one on

the other atop one crossed knee, and all the knuckles shone dead white beneath the skin.

“Here’s the way I always thought it happened,” I said. “Eli got a key. Maybe off Whit, maybe he palmed it off a gardener. Him and his magic tricks. He’d built up enough of a trust with the boy to spirit him away to the trunk of the car he was using. And he was smart enough to plant the pajamas in the incinerator, to throw us at one of the domestics instead. But he didn’t have time to stick around. He needed to establish an alibi — for his father, if not for the police. So he had one of his industrial-sized pals pick him up from the little house in Monteverde, and he left your brother in the trunk, since it left the least chance he’d escape while Eli was gone. We both know how that worked out.”

“We do.” The pain in Beverly’s eyes just about broke my heart. Her lower lip had begun to tremble. “Mr. Pearl, I hope you know you’re upsetting me.”

I wanted to stop. I didn’t. “After I found your brother, I wasn’t in much of a spot to poke too hard at that version of events. And my partner was strongly encouraged to pretend it never happened. So there it opened, and there it shut, and Eli Lavender got stuck in the trap. It couldn’t have worked out better for you.”

“Don’t you dare.” Her voice quavered low and indignant, and tears jeweled the fringes of her eyes. “Five years, every waking minute, I’ve spent missing my brother. Every time I pass his room. Every time I listen for him and he’s not there. Don’t you dare try to tell me I’d ever hurt him. Don’t you sit there in my house, with my money in your pocket, and even think such things.”

“That’s the funny thing,” I said. “I think you really do miss him. I think you really did love him. Enough to help him get dressed that morning. Enough to tie his shoes for him, one



last time. But you didn't love him enough not to hand him over to Eli Lavender, ready and waiting. All the magic tricks in the world couldn't have gotten him out of that house, out of his bed, into his clothes all nice and neat for some adventure he didn't know he'd never have. No. It'd take someone he trusted. Someone he loved more than anyone else in the world."

She rose and crossed the space between us in one fluid step and cracked me across the face with her open palm. I took the hit once, and a second time; after all the punishment I'd soaked up, it might as well have been a kiss. On the third swing I caught her slim white wrist in my free hand and held it there, struggling, and only let it go when I'd proved my point. She stood there, trembling, her shoulders squared, tears carving paths down both her cheeks.

"It was the double knots," I said. "I saw the photos from the crime scene. His shoelaces were tied in perfect double knots. Just like the ones I saw on your shoes, the morning after he was taken. And you said it yourself. He wouldn't let anyone else do it for him."

She shook her head. "You're crazy." She was willing herself to believe it. "You can't make a case on shoelaces. Nobody could."

"You're right," I said. "About the case, anyway. Maybe about my state of mind. I can't make a case on shoelaces. But I can make a case on fingerprints. On the inside of the trunk where I found Billy. The evidence men found prints but never ran them. No need. They had their man, the boy was dead, and the department was pushing for an end to it. But I'll bet if they run them now, they'll find Eli Lavender's prints. And Billy's. And a few that match the ones they took from you the morning he went missing."

She picked up the decanter and poured herself another drink. A big one. She took a swig that wasn't very ladylike at all, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

I looked down briefly at the full glass still in my right hand. It might as well have belonged to someone else, on the other side of the room.

“What do you want?” The whiskey made her voice prickly around the edges. “What is this about? Money? Father’s accounts are drained. The government might—”

I held up a hand and stopped her there. “I don’t want money. I want to know why.”

She looked away from me, and the gold curtain of her hair quivered with each word she spoke. “I wasn’t a child. Not to my father. I was a means to an end. Daddy’s little harbinger. My whole life, right from conception, it was part of a plan. And me, as a person, what I thought, what I felt — that was all incidental. Once he thought I’d served my purpose, once Billy came along, I might as well not have existed. I think they only kept me alive for the sake of appearances.”

“I heard some of the hoodoo your father believed,” I said. “Sane people don’t think like that. You need to understand that. Your life didn’t stop just because your father was done with it.”

Her mouth tightened and she shook her head. “I know that. I’ve always known it. I was made for greatness. But I couldn’t do that with Billy here. The destiny had passed to him. I would always be nothing but a shadow. And he would be the summoner.”

Her voice broke. She pressed the palm of one hand to her lips, her face crushed and contorted in grief. If it was an act, Hollywood needed to know.

“It wasn’t his fault. He was just like me, I guess. He didn’t know what I knew. He wasn’t old enough yet.”

“He trusted you,” I said. “He trusted you and you handed him to an animal like Eli

Lavender. When you knew, even then, what Eli was. What he would do.”

“I thought I was so smart, you see.” She blinked away tears. “Eli was simple. One big want on two legs. And he didn’t just like little boys.” I could see it on her face; a door swung open in her mind, and she shut it quickly and turned the key again. “Oh, I thought I was so smart. I used what I had. What I had was Eli.”

“And for what? For all this?” I gestured to the empty house, the ghosts of draped furniture.

She steeled herself, firmed up her face. Her hands knotted together as if in prayer, and her eyes went distant, remembering. “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law,” she recited. Trying to convince herself, not for the first time. “I have a right, a natural right, to carry out my will. To fulfill my potential. And I have a natural right to remove anything or anyone that would prevent me.” Her head nodded mechanically as she said it.

“Well, congratulations,” I said. “You’re the only one left. You and that cat. Enjoy your great destiny.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the formula. “I will. It’s right here. With me. And now no one else can have it.”

She stuffed the paper whole into her mouth. I didn’t try to stop her. I just watched as she chewed and chewed, the paper wet and crackling from inside her cheeks. At last she swallowed, with effort, and smiled at me triumphantly. The whole time her eyes never left me.

“Now I am the harbinger,” she said, her voice ragged from choking down the paper. “And I am the summoner. And I am that which was summoned. I am the perfect completion. Everything Father ever wanted.”

“You’re a murderess,” I said calmly. “And whether they put you in the giggle house or declare you fit for trial, your destiny is a long time alone in a very small room with a very strong door. And maybe, someday, a date with the gas. I’m sorry about that. I really am.”

“Not yet.” She sat down on the piano bench across from me and folded her legs and smoothed her skirt and composed herself. When she spoke again her voice was a frozen lake, smooth and quiet and deadly just under the surface. “But you will be. I’m the daughter of a great man, a respected man of science. You’re a drunk and a murderer. I pulled you up out of the gutter, Mr. Pearl. If you’re very lucky, I might stop at putting you back there. If I don’t leave you somewhere deeper.” She tilted her head slightly, and applied a smile to her lips again. “Or you can forget about all of this nonsense you’re talking. You can relax and have that drink. And if you want another, you can have another. You can have all the drinks you’ll ever need.”

I looked at the glass in my hand. “You’ll see to that, won’t you? You’ll keep right on paying my way, like you did for the last five years. You’ll spoil me and pamper me and walk me around on my leash. And you honestly think I’ll love you for it.” I shook my head. “Slapping a collar on something doesn’t make it your pet. An animal follows its nature. And mine says I don’t stop until there’s an answer for your brother broiling alone in the dark.”

“I see,” she said. She looked up and over my right shoulder.

I put a hand on the armrest of the chair and tried to rise. The chair was deep and soft, and I was tired and too slow. A huge hand closed around the back of my neck and squeezed, just enough to send pains shooting down my spine. I got the sense he could have closed his fist and popped me like a balloon.

“Hello, Frankenstein,” I managed to gasp out. “You walk quieter than I thought.”

“I got a lot of talents,” the man with the ink said.

#

Beverly stood up and sniffed away the last of her tears, and with the side of her hand brushed hair away from her face. Her blue eyes gleamed clear and calm and quietly mad. “I think Mr. Pearl needs some air, Kuru. I think you should take him for a walk in the garden. Out back, to the shed.”

“Yes, miss.” The big man moved his hand up and the rest of me went with it, my shoulders tight, the pain running all down me. I managed to turn my head enough to see his face, stony and impassive in the half-light. Something shone way back in the depths of his eyes. He still had the monkey suit on, neatly pressed. I wondered whether he sent it out or did the ironing himself. His huge paw made a toy of the small black gun in it.

People who don’t know any better will laugh at those little .22s. They haven’t heard about the bullets. How they have enough force to get into you, but not enough force to get out. How they fragment once they’re in you. How they ricochet.

“And afterward, Kuru,” Beverly said, and rested her fingers ever so briefly on the pale hollow of her throat, “afterward please come and see me.” The red of her lips parted, just slightly.

Kuru nodded curtly. I couldn’t really blame him.

“As long,” I choked, and chafed my neck against the big man’s fingers until I could rasp out the words. “As long as I’m a condemned man, you mind if I finish my drink?”

“Finish it walking,” the man with the ink said, and started to march me out of the room.

Beverly Whittier folded her hands in front of her and smiled politely, as if we'd just concluded some social call. "Thank you for finding my cat, Mr. Pearl. It was lovely to see you again. One last time."

My heels slid on the carpet, and I lurched out of the room neck first.

After a few tries I got my feet under me and walked. The big man filled the world behind me, gravitational; I felt like I might fall in toward him at any moment. The whiskey sloshed in the glass in my hand.

Kuru steered me down the hallway and through the kitchen and out the back door into the garden. The sky had become a pale blue now, streaked with gold, the air still cool, the grass shining with dew. The heat of the day wouldn't arrive for an hour or so, but you could feel it coming. The turf wet my shoes and the edge of my socks.

"She loved her little brother more than anything," I said, around the big man's grip. "And she fed him to a degenerate. You really think you'll be any different?"

He stopped there, in the grass among the statues by the covered pool, and tightened his grip. The force of his arm drove me down to one knee, nerves screaming in red-hot spikes all down my back.

After a century or so of that, he let up and opened his hand. I knelt there, gasping. Some of the whiskey had splashed over the rim and onto my fingers; I watched it drip into the grass.

I saw his neat polished shoes and creased black trouser legs circle around in front of me, and then his catcher's mitt of a fist closed around my shirtfront and lifted me up. The strange black shapes made a mask of his face.

“You try walking around with a mug like mine,” he said softly. “Try it for a week. Try it for a day. See how crazy you get for someone to look at you, just look at you, instead of staring. For someone to touch you and not yank back like they been burned. Like you got something catching. You just see how bad you start to want it.” He let me go with a contemptuous little shove, and leveled the gun at my belly. “Finish your drink, rummy.”

I lifted the glass and looked at it for a long time. Every inch of me wanted it. I could have sucked the stray drops off the skin between my thumb and forefingers. I took that and balled it up in me. I used it.

“You should have left me a drunk,” I said.

The big man snorted. The ink on his face wriggled in amusement. “Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Sober,” I said, “I’m a mean son of a bitch.”

I smashed the glass against his cheekbone.

It exploded in my hand. It cut my palm, my fingers, the alcohol burning in the new wounds. But it cut him worse.

I turned my body away from the gun as he screamed. The pistol snapped. A burning line punched me across the ribs. I heard something in my chest crack like a dry pretzel, and suddenly it ached to breathe. I didn’t care.

I put my left hand on the wrist of the big man’s gun hand and twisted. My bleeding right hand found his pinky finger and curled it away from the butt of the pistol, farther back than it was ever meant to go. The joint popped in my grasp. The big man dropped the gun into the grass. I kicked and it hit my toe and scattered away.

His arm swung. I flung up my own across my face. The world rung me like a bell, and when it stopped gonging I lay flat on my back on the concrete by the pool a good five feet away, blood coppering my mouth. I spat it out and put an elbow under me.

Kuru, his eyes clamped shut, picked a splinter of glass the size of my thumb out of his cheek, and tossed it aside. More pieces shone and glittered on the skin of his face. With a sleeve he dabbed the whiskey out of his eyes and opened them, bloodshot and raw, and saw me. He came at me in a run.

I drove a foot into his kneecap and felt it give. I rolled out of the way. He bellowed again going down, and I swear I felt the earth shake when he hit the concrete. I scrambled to my feet, my ears ringing, my chest stabbing at me with every breath. He got up slowly, panting like an injured horse. He limped on the knee I'd hit him in, but he moved fast enough.

One big step closed the distance between us, and his fist drove the wind out of me. There wasn't much left in my stomach, but it all came up in that second, the acid sour and burning in my mouth and throat. He looked down at his shoes.

"You're always doing that," he said, around teeth clenched in pain. He sounded annoyed. Behind him, the tarp over the pool bobbed gently, soothingly. "I don't think you know how much these shoes cost."

"Send me a bill," I gasped, and drove a fist into his kidney. He staggered a little, and I reared up and almost broke my cut-up hand against the granite of his jaw. He reeled, but didn't go down. I drew back my throbbing fist for one more shot.

His left popped out at me and caught me on the chin, hard enough to lift me off my feet. The grass leapt up and thudded against my back. I lay there gasping and waited for my eyes



to refocus. When they did, I saw him standing over me at the edge of the pool, leaning on the leg I hadn't busted. He had one huge hand rubbing his side where I'd hit him.

"The problem with you," he said, slow and weighty as a glacier carving out a mountain range, "is you don't know when you're dead. Wise up. Let's do this dignified. Like gentlemen."

Somehow, I got to my feet. The odds I'd stay on them shifted from moment to moment. I couldn't even remember a time before pain.

"After you," I said, and charged at him.

My shoulder hit a brick wall. The shock seared my rib cage. White lights flared behind my eyes. But I dug in and pushed. Favoring one leg left him off-balance, too much to steady himself. We toppled back. The tarp loomed. Then the water crashed into silence around me.

Through the murk I could see the blurry shape of him struggling. I grabbed the tarp as we sank, fighting the dull, flabby pressure of the water, and hauled it tight around his face and neck. He drove cannonball fists into my guts, again and again. I screamed out a torrent of bubbles. But I hung on.

His blows got weaker, and weaker, and then they stopped. He went limp. So did I, down there in the cool water, my lungs somewhere far beyond empty. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to let him drift down to the bottom and lie with the muck.

And there in the dark and the silence, as little spiders wove black silk over the edges of the world, I heard Eli Lavender's skull crack.

My hand found the big man's shirt collar. I kicked, hauling him up toward the

shimmering wall of the surface.

We broke the water and I gasped a big glorious lungful of air. I got his head up and paddled toward the side and managed to drape one of his arms over a metal ladder, so he wouldn't sink again. His head lolled. He coughed out water, and stayed put.

I slapped clammy hands onto the concrete and hauled. My ribs scraped the edge of the pool, and for a second I almost blacked out and slid back in. But I hung on and heaved again. I flopped like a fish on the cool ground and rolled onto my back and lay there, looking up at the sky. The water dripped and trickled off of me and chattered against the concrete.

I heard a pistol cock.

I lifted my head and saw Beverly Whittier there, holding Kuru's little gun in both her hands. It seemed much better sized for her. I heard car engines somewhere not far off, and growing louder.

"I name myself Balieal, the Harbinger." Her voice shook in time with her hands. "I name myself the destroyer, the up-ender, the breaker of the old world and the builder of the new. And mine is the law of the beast, and his will is my will, and my will shall be done unto the end of all things."

I coughed and spit up a little water, black with mingled soot. "Henry Pearl," I said. "Nice to meet you."

Sirens broke the dawn, loud and close. She turned her head in a cascade of gold, toward the garage and the drive at the side of the house.

Brakes screeched; distant doors opened; leather soles slapped across concrete and onto grass. A couple of plainclothes men came tearing around the side of the house, guns in hand.

They stopped and planted their feet and took aim at the girl.

“Police!” they said. “Hands! Show those hands!”

Her fingers unfurled, and the gun tumbled from them to the grass. She lifted her arms and spread them wide. The first light of the sun hit her. Her white skin shone, her hair gleaming.

“I name myself Balieal, the Harbinger,” she said, and started that whole bit again. I’d heard it before. Now seemed as good a time as any to pass out.

So I did.

#

Someone slapped my cheek, gently. I stirred. My ribs hurt like hell. I heard my name.

“Ow,” I said.

I opened my eyes and saw a white bandage wrapped around my chest, my shirt and jacket long gone. I felt rough sheets under me, and a steady hum, and heard the rumble of a motor. The room bounced and shifted gently. I tried to sit up.

“Easy,” said Joe Vasquez. “Easy.” He put a hand on my shoulder.

“We’re in an ambulance,” I said, and tried to shake the cobwebs out of my head. Out the back windows I saw streets unspooling away behind us in the pale light of morning.

“Nothing gets past you,” Joe laughed. “Ace detective.”

“Ease up. I had a really fun night.”

“For you, that’s saying something.”

I lay back. “You still keen on those flying saucers?”

“Now and then, yeah. The wife thinks they’re the bunk.”

“I’ve got a story to tell you sometime. Remind me.” I brought my right hand up to my chest. It stung, disinfectant under the gauze that made a mummy of it. “You ran the prints.”

“Eli’s,” he nodded, “And a lot of the little boy’s. And one thumbprint that matched her card, when we finally dug it out.”

“The chauffeur?” I asked. “With the freakshow face?”

“He’ll live. Hasn’t even asked for a lawyer. He’s not saying anything.”

“He won’t. Poor bastard. He thinks he’s in love. Maybe he is. What about the girl?”

Joe took his hat off, and shook his head slowly, and let out a long, low whistle. “You need a better class of client, amigo.”

“She looked all right.” I tried to laugh. It hurt too much.

Joe put a hand on my arm. “Look at you. Cracked the case at last.”

“And my noggin.”

“Your head’s plenty hard.” Joe fell silent for a while. I didn’t have to ask what he was thinking. I guess I still knew him that well.

“You’d have played it smarter,” I said. “With Eli, I mean. Better. Cleaner.” My hand found the crook of his elbow and squeezed. “That’s why you’re the one who still has the badge.”

I let him go and lay back again and closed my eyes.

“Take it easy,” I heard Joe say softly. “We’re almost to the hospital.”

“Wake me if the nurses are worth looking at,” I murmured.

I fell. Sleep caught me.

## Chapter Seventeen

### The Rest

I stood at the window and stared out and down across the street at the door of the Hi-Hat. Under my shirt and a layer of fresh bandages, my cracked rib still burned.

Stillness filled my office, lounging in the chairs, kicking its feet against the undersides of the desks. The phone sat, refusing to ring.

I'd gotten up and showered and shaved and changed the dressings like they showed me at the hospital. I'd unwrapped my suit from the parcel the cleaners had sent it back in. They'd worked miracles on the stains, but it still had a whiff of campfire to it. I'd polished my shoes with an old handkerchief and put them on and tied them, and retied them when the first attempt looked sloppy. Single knots only. I'd taken my new hat out of the box and tried it on and looked at myself in the mirror.

It was ten in the morning. I had a whole long day ahead, full of nothing and no one.

And after that, another night.

I turned away from the window and walked out of the office, through the vestibule and past the ghost of Mildred Harrison of the Pinnacle Secretarial Academy, into the hallway. I locked the door behind me. My footsteps echoed in the corridor, and all the way down the stairwell.

I pushed open the lobby door and stepped into the light. The sun beat down hot, cut only by a breeze coming in from the ocean. I hadn't eaten anything today. I wasn't hungry. Just thirsty.

Across the street, the Hi-Hat waited.

I stepped out onto the asphalt.

The car stopped an inch from my knee, close enough to feel its hot breath through the chrome front grill. I sprang back and turned, pain lancing from the busted rib, one hand becoming a fist.

Behind the wheel of the yellow coupe, a wild sprawl of curling red hair framed a pale, freckle-dotted face and a pair of sunglasses.

"About damn time," Vera Kelly said. She reached across for the passenger door. "Get in."

I looked at the door of the Hi-Hat, blacked-out and empty. I saw myself reflected in it, warped like a funhouse mirror. It wasn't going anywhere. It never would.

Dr. Kelly gave the horn a nudge. "Hey, shamus. Make up your mind."

I walked around the front of the coupe and slipped into the passenger's seat.

"Where to?" I asked. Her yellow dress looked new, the skirt running all the way

down her legs, hiding the brace. Freckles meandered down the pale skin of her shoulders. She smiled and lit a cigarette with her busted lighter.

“I think it’s high time you bought a lady a meal.” She hit the gas and we shot forward. After a few seconds, most of my insides managed to catch up.

“You drive like this back on the ranch?” I shouted over the wind.

“Faster,” she said. “No damn pedestrians.”

A strangled, soul-rending noise scratched its way up out of hell and into the back of the car. I looked over my shoulder. A white mass of fur sprawled on the leather bench seat, shedding with impunity. Its yellow eye looked back at me. I got the feeling that I was in its seat. That anyone, anywhere in the car, was in its seat.

“I brought you a friend,” Dr. Kelly said.

“Oh no. No, no, no. I’m allergic.”

“To cats?” She smiled sideways at me.

“Who the hell said it was a cat?” I saw it open its little maw and flash me a tooth. Showing me who was boss.

“The owner never picked it up,” Dr. Kelly said. “And neither did you. And I’m sure as hell not keeping it. It beats up the other cats. And most of the dogs. The rest are too scared to come near it. And dear God in heaven, the way it eats. So it’s officially your problem now. Congratulations.”

The cat let out a horrible, wheezing breath, and yawned, and started to lick itself pornographically. I looked away, but not nearly fast enough.

“I did stop by, you know,” she said. “More than once. Even called you, after I found

your number in the book. You never picked up.”

“I’ve been busy. A lot of different men with stethoscopes spent a couple of weeks reading me the riot act. Something about taking better care of myself.”

“I could have saved them the trouble.” She laughed a little. “And here I thought you might be cozied up in some love nest with your friends from the government.”

“They dropped by while I was laid up. I passed them off to a new playmate.”

“Anyone I know?” She brushed a windblown curl of red out of her eyes.

“A funny little gent with a faceful of whiskers and a needle full of God knows what,” I said. “I thought he might know something they’re all hot and bothered about. Far as I’m concerned, he can have them.”

“Generous of you,” Dr. Kelly nodded. “So I wanted to tell you. I had a customer. A few of them.”

“Swell. I’ll throw you a party.”

“Just buy me breakfast. First was a couple with a little girl. Nice people. Something about a birthday present. I sent them home with the white pup with the missing ear. Your old friend.” She paused a moment. “He had a look about him, the husband. Clean, well-dressed for a budget, a lot of starch. Kind of a cop look. I said he seemed a little bit far out of his way, coming to my place. He said something about word of mouth. Said he’d tell the other guys at work, too. Some of them have kids.”

I didn’t smile. I looked out the window. “Funny about that. And the other one?”

“Half a mink farm over her shoulders. Kept a hand on her jewels like she thought I’d grab for them. She was making the rounds of the clinics, saw my new ad in the paper. Her little



precious up and went missing. Mystical Champion's Old Elysium, she said. Purebred poodle. Ellie for short."

I turned back to her. "You didn't."

She grinned. "I told her I knew a guy. That I'd run it by him."

"I'm done. No more animals. Our friend in the back seat almost did me in."

"They can't all be missing diamonds." She patted me on the cheek. "Besides, old Miss Moneybags might have friends."

"Nix. Nothing doing."

"Oh, come on." She looked at me balefully. "You need something to keep you busy."

"I've got him." I jerked a thumb back at the cat. It hissed in acknowledgement, and went back to lapping at itself with wet, vile noises.

"And now you need an excuse to get away from him," she laughed. Check and mate.

We drove for a while saying nothing, the wind buffeting the windows. She tore through three yellow lights and burned a half-inch of rubber stopping in time for a red.

"Why me?" I said, peeling my fingers off the door latch. "I gave you a hell of a time. Still haven't paid you for fixing up our friend back there. I'm a wreck and you know it."

She looked at me then as if she'd just finally made up her mind about something. Then she took the cigarette from her mouth and stubbed it in the fold-out ashtray and leaned across the seat.

"Old habits," she said. "I'm always picking up strays."

Then she kissed me, extremely well, and for what felt like a very long time. Behind us, horns started to blare. The cat yowled.

It was an orchestra, for all I cared.