

One

Slate returns from the kitchen with a glass in each hand to find the man in the sailor suit curled on the floor, bleeding into his rug. A silver-haired man with a pencil mustache and a three-piece suit reclines on Slate's long, low sofa, picking idly at the red upholstery with manicured nails. His black fedora bobbles on one crossed knee. Behind him two slabs of muscle and bad intentions loom like Easter Island statues. Slate recognizes all three of the men, and his fists tighten around the cocktail glasses.

"Mr. Santelli," he says, his voice gray and flat and even. "It's been a while." His door yawns open, warm jasmine-scented night air rolling in. Stupid. Slate should have locked it, should have made sure the front gate shut, on the way in. He'd been too busy thinking about the man in the sailor suit. About what would happen after they got inside.

"Three years," the silver-haired man says. "That's partly why I come." On the rug the man in the sailor suit whimpers softly and stirs. Santelli nudges him with the tip of one polished loafer, as if he were some intriguing bit of garbage on the sidewalk. Then the silver-haired man

nods toward the glasses in Slate's hand. "You fix me a drink, eh? Very hospitable."

Slate takes a slow sip from one glass, and then from the other, and keeps his eyes on Santelli the whole time.

Santelli's laugh has the ease of a man who can afford a little insult. "You owe me, Slate. Fifty thousand for that bank job you botched."

"One," Slate says. "The job wasn't right because your man hadn't planned it right. If a job's wrong, I walk. I told you that up front. Your man went ahead with it anyway. That's his problem. *Was* his problem."

"And now," Santelli says, low and even, "it's yours."

"Two," Slate continues. "Sol Lavender paid you your fifty thousand when he purchased my services. Closed book. Clean slate." The pun only occurs to him a second after he says it.

"A very thoughtful gift, and much appreciated," Santelli says. "But now Sol Lavender is dead. That big fire, right? Such a shame. Bad way to go." He clucks his tongue a little. "Too bad for Sol. And too bad for you. Because now I reopen that book."

"I don't have fifty thousand," Slate says. "Not even close." He squares his shoulders and spreads his arms. "Tell your boys to aim right. They miss the vitals, I might take it personal."

Santelli chuckles again. "You're smart, Slate. You'll figure something out. And my boys, they not gonna kill you. Wouldn't dream of it. I tell them to think of something better. I give them a week to think about it. Now you got a week to think about it, too. And maybe think about how you gonna get me my money."

Santelli stands up, dons his hat with a little flourish, dusts off his hands, and walks to the door. His two tagalongs tag along. "I see you next Friday night," Santelli says, and drifts out into

the dark. Slate follows to the threshold, and waits until they're down the walk and out the gate before he shuts the door again with his knuckles. Then he sits down in the easy chair opposite the sofa, still holding the two glasses. He watches as the man in the sailor suit gets his breath back, wiping the corner of his mouth as if he can push the blood back in.

"I'm thinking you never were a Navy man," Slate says.

"I keep the suit under my bed," the man replies. Shame coats and thickens each syllable.

"So — so Mother won't find it."

"Wear it somewhere else," Slade says.

The man in the sailor suit pushes himself up to standing, one hand hugging his guts. He takes a long thirsty look at the glass in Slate's left hand. "I don't suppose..."

Slate downs the whole of the glass, and then the other, and sits there with his throat burning and the buzz creeping up his spine and fogging around the edges of his skull. The man in the sailor suit gets the hint. He limps to the door, sags a little against the frame as he fumbles it open. And then he's gone.

Slate rises and locks the door behind him. He walks back to the kitchen and puts the glasses in the sink. He wants to throw them, smash them against the wall. But glasses cost. Instead he gets club soda from the cabinet, and a handkerchief from the hamper he's left out for the maid, and goes back to the carpet in the living room. The blood isn't so bad. It could be worse. Slate peels out of his coat. He gets down on his hands and knees and pours and scrubs, pours and scrubs. He likes this rug.

When it's done he's sweating. He turns off the lights and sits in the dark and smokes, one after another, until he's halfway through the packet. Wishing the ringing in his bad ear could

drown out that little voice in his head.

You should run, it says. Nothing keeping you here. Run away, change your name, start again. They're going to do something worse than killing. You should run.

Slate doesn't listen. Instead he reaches over, picks up the phone, and gives the operator a number.

Later, he'll remember this moment. He'll remember how he could have avoided it all.

After a few rings, the other end of the line picks up. The voice is thick, cheery, a little lubricated. "Who goes?" it asks.

"Georgie boy," Slate says, and the other man recognizes his voice instantly.

"Gunny!" Normally this kind of whoop would set Slate's teeth on edge. Not with old George it doesn't. "I'd ask the how the hell you've been, but..."

"I've been," Slate says.

"See, this is how I know you didn't call to make conversation," George laughs.

"Little bird told me you were back in town," Slate says. "Maybe looking for help."

"Funny you should mention," George says. "I was just thinking of you. Got a line on something interesting. Maybe a little rough, but the payoff's looking sweet."

"I'm listening," Slate says.

"I was just heading out," George says. "Meet me. You can listen then." He gives Slate the name of a bar, one Slate knows only by reputation. Not usually his type of place. They trade pleasantries, or as close as Slate can get to them, before he hangs up.

Desperate men get stupid, the little voice says. Run.

Instead Slate gets up, shrugs into his coat, collects his hat from the stand by the door, and

walks out into the humid dark.

Two

The bar is dark and smoky and that's all it has going for it. At a glance Slate can tell the drinks are watered-down piss, and that velour-soft music oozing from the jukebox makes him glad he's half-deaf. Somehow the place is packed anyway, sad shabby rummies making roundabout conversation with each other or the bottom of their glasses. The lopsidedness of the noise makes Slate feel like his bad ear's been packed in cotton.

Not too late, the little voice says, but then he sees George in a puddle of light in the back booth, waving him over. That long face a little fleshier, the curly black hair a little thinner, but then it's been what, three years this time since they saw each other face to face? George keeps on the move.

Slate slides into the opposite end of the booth, and there's old George again, grinning like no time has passed. He's dressed like a truck driver: brown leather jacket that's seen better days, sweat-stained shirt undone at the collar, no tie. He has a woman leaning on his shoulder, her hands clasped, green dress to match her eyes, and hair dyed a cheap red, the brown roots

showing. Slate sees the ring on her finger, and on George's.

"You been busy, Georgie boy," Slate says. George lets out that guffaw of his, the one that fools everyone into thinking he's stupid.

"Slate, meet the missus. Verna, this is the fella I told you about, from back in the war."

"Charmed," her mouth says, but her eyes are giving Slate a long hard look, and the rest of her face might as well be stone. In spite of himself, Slate's starting to like her.

"Likewise," Slate nods.

"George says you saved his life back at Anzio," Verna half-asks, around the cigarette she's lighting between her pursed red lips.

Slate shrugs. "There was a lot of that going around."

"Hey, shove over, willya." The kid might be old enough to drive. He's barely old enough to shave. Cheap suit hanging just a little too big for him, two glasses of pisswater beer clanking awkwardly in each fist. Slate turns slowly, sizes him up. Sees some of Verna in his face.

"Kid brother?" he asks, keeping his eyes on the boy.

"Yeah," the kid starts to yap, "so why—"

"I was talking to George." Slate doesn't budge, just sits there staring at the kid.

"Yeah, he's mine," Verna says, before George can. "Charlie, hurry up and learn some manners."

"He's all right, Slate," George adds. "Let the kid sit down." Slate sees him give Verna an *I could have handled that* look. She just works on her cigarette.

Slate waits another long second, then scoots across the smooth-worn wood of the seat. Charlie sits down and scowls, passing out the round.

“You ever even shot a gun, kid?” Slate asks.

“I have, too,” Charlie snaps back, drawing himself up in his seat, as if that’s supposed to be impressive. “Buncha times. I can knock every can off the fence.”

“The fence,” Slate says. “Well.”

“Ease up on the kid,” George cuts in. “Don’t go breaking his balls.”

“What, they’ve dropped already?” Slate enjoys seeing Charlie’s shoulders stiffen out of the corner of his eye. He enjoys seeing Verna quash the kid with a glance even more. And George’s face, seeing Verna send that message, the little twist of irritation at the corner of his mouth? Now, that’s downright intriguing.

“Tell him the score, George,” Verna murmurs, ashing the cigarette in a little tin tray on her side of the table.

“I was getting to it,” George says, his smile fraying around the edges for a second. “Give the man a second to catch up with an old pal, huh?”

“Tell me the score, George,” Slate says. “Plenty of time to catch up after.”

George grins, more genuine this time, and shakes his head. “All business with you, huh, Gunny. All right.” His voice gets low and conspiratory, and he bends forward as if it’ll keep his words from rising too far past the surface of the table. “I still got some buddies in the service. You know that Army post out at Point Alva, just southeast of the Valley? I got a pal there in the motor pool. Says the place has been buzzing with G-men for a couple of weeks now, hauling in stuff in trucks, guarding it like it’s Fort Knox. Something about an orange grove out in the Valley, an aircraft crash, nobody knows for certain. It’s all beyond hush-hush.”

“So far I’m not hearing a payday,” Slate says. He makes the mistake of trying the beer. It

only confirms his suspicions.

“I know some folks,” George continues. “Interested parties, I guess you could say. They’re curious about what the G-men have. Three hundred Gs worth of curious.”

“That much curiosity,” Slate says, “could kill a lot of cats. And us. Unless Uncle Sam’s not too picky about who he lets on and off his army posts these days.”

“That’s the beauty,” George says, grinning even wider now. “They’re moving the stuff tomorrow night. Convoy across the desert, down Route 314, to the depot at Desdichado. My buddy slipped me details. They’re running a decoy down the coastal highway, packing on the guards to make it look convincing. Skeleton crew for the real deal, so it can get there fast.”

“So we ambush.”

“Just like those trucks on the Via Pontina. Charlie’s our wheels and our spotter. You and me provide the persuasion. Verna can drive the truck.”

“Little thing like you and a big old machine like that?” Slate isn’t scoffing. He’s curious. She glares at him from under a well-tended set of eyelashes. “I drove bigger during the war.”

Slate shrugs. “Okay. This friend of yours, George — you trust him?”

“Let’s just say I’m the only thing keeping him in some very bad people’s good graces,” George nods. “So, yeah, he’s motivated.”

“And your interested parties?”

“I’ve worked with them some before,” George says. “Their money spends.” Slate wonders where it comes from, exactly. Which country. Not that it matters.

Slate leans back in his seat. The old wood creaks against his spine. “What’s my cut?”

Verna opens her mouth, but before she can speak, George says, “Seventy-five for you.” The look Verna gives him could draw blood. “Seventy-five each for me and Verna. Fifty for Charlie. Twenty-five for my pal on the base.”

Seventy-five is insane for a job this risky. Slate doesn’t like the kid, doesn’t like the setup, doesn’t like going up against soldiers. His whole body’s itching to get up and walk. But he’s thinking about Santelli, and Santelli’s goons, and about what they might be thinking. About how getting dead on this job might be preferable to staying alive for them. He saw things, working for Santelli. Too much.

“I can do seventy-five,” Slate says. “Provided you tell me what you’re gonna do when this all goes to hell.”

And George does.

After that — all the business done — Slate thinks about going home. But his apartment is dark, the air damp and close, and on the rugs his feet don’t make a sound, as if he’s not even there. Usually he likes that. Not tonight.

So when George tells him to stay and catch up, Slate doesn’t brush him off. Charlie wants to stay with them, but Verna all but pinches his ear. She’s been stifling yawns for a half-hour now, and Slate can tell from the stiff angle of her body since he sat down that this isn’t her kind of establishment, either. She tries to get George to leave, too, but the command sort of slides over and off him and gets lost in the noise of the bar. Slate almost smiles. George had that way in the army, too.

Verna looks back through the door one more time as she’s taking Charlie out, and her mouth is a hard pinched line, like someone drawing a strike through a name on a sheet of paper.

Slate can't quite tell whether she's looking at him, or at George.

And then it's just him and George in the booth, nodding at the barman for additional rounds. They make a little small talk, pushing this bit or that of the time since they last met up across the table at each other, as if they're haggling over a tip.

Slate tells him a little about working for Sol Lavender; George cracks up at a few stories that Slate didn't intend to be funny, but then, Slate never does. George tells him about meeting Verna fresh off a stretch out at Bellhollow; about the time two summers ago when he successfully knocked over a service station with nothing but a banana in his pocket.

Eventually they fall into an easy kind of silence. This, Slate remembers, was why he liked George back in the war. He didn't gab about girls or guns or God. He didn't paw at Slate with innuendo the way that one joe — Slate can't remember his name anymore, just the way he looked after that mortar hit him — did whenever they were alone. When he and George were on sentry duty, they talked when they felt like talking, stayed silent when they didn't. It was one of the few times and places when the war edged close to feeling all right.

"So why are you doing this?" George asks out of the blue. He wads up the cocktail napkin on which he's been scratching some abstract doodle with the kind of stubby betting pencil they give out at the track. "You don't do favors."

"This isn't a favor," Slate says, and takes another sip of the pisswater beer.

"The hell it isn't," George replies. "We both know this job is screwy. Hell, I didn't expect you to stay on the line when I mentioned it." He shakes a cigarette out of a packet and offers it to Slate. Not Slate's brand, but he takes it anyway, lighting a match from one of the books the bar leaves on the table, firing up George's cigarette and then his own.

"Funny thing about our line of work," Slate says around puffs. It's lighter and sweeter than what he smokes — not his kind of thing. But he'll try anything once. "Sometimes saying no doesn't cost you a dime. Other times, it's just about the priciest thing on the menu. And right now I don't have the scratch for it."

George laughs, but there's a knife-edge to it, as if the laugh hurts him as much as it tickles him. At the end the laugh turns into a little smoker's cough.

Slate blows smoke out through his nose. "What about you?" he asks. "I know you've taken some screwy jobs. But always with reason."

"I got people now," George says. "First time since the war. Responsibilities."

"I'm still trying to see you with that dame," Slate says, meaning Verna. "Half the time she looks at you like poison."

George grins, holds up his beer glass. "Sometimes, brother, a little poison's good for what ails you." He finishes the glass, sets it down, and swaps back in his cigarette. "She's all right. So's the kid. I saw you giving him the hairy eyeball."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Slate says, but he's almost smiling.

The mirth trickles out of George's face. In that moment, Slate can't tell whether he looks proud or terrified or maybe both. "I gotta do this, pal. No choice about it. Wouldn't want the choice if I had it. Once in my life I'd like to do the right thing. Maybe just to see what it's like."

Desperate men are bad for business, the little voice tells Slate. *Not too late to give him the brush..*

"Well," Slate says, and signals the sleepy-looking bartender for one last round, "when you find out, I wanna hear all about it." And they both laugh the way they used to during the war. The

half-real, half-hollow laughter of the already dead.

Three

Slate lies on a large flat rock, still warm from the just-departed sun, and pretends to sleep. The air smells of a coming storm, and there's an edge, an energy to the wind as it rushes over him and tugs at his suit jacket. Let it come. They can use the cover.

He doesn't like to make conversation before a job, doesn't like to do anything that might fray his focus or drain his energy.

He has the back of his head against the rock and the brim of his hat tipped down over his eyes, but from beneath it he can still see Verna standing in the dying light, smoking, flicking the butt down to grind under her heel, and lighting another. Worry in her eyes deep enough to drown in.

George stands by the edge of the bluff with binoculars, scanning the road below in the fading light. Over behind a clutch of scrub and cactus, Slate can hear the kid, Charlie, being sick. Surprise, surprise.

George turns, still peeping through the binoculars, and Slate sees him turn them on Verna.

He lowers them then, the joke he was about to make dying on his lips, and crosses the dry dusty ground to her. She turns her shoulders into him, fits into his arms like a bird in the crook of a tree branch.

“Hey,” Slate hears him say softly. “Hey, baby. It’s gonna be fine. We’ll do this.”

“We have to,” she says, as if she’s reading her own obituary aloud. The wind whips, catches at the scarf around her neck, makes it tussle briefly with the line of her cheek and the tip of George’s chin.

“I know.” His voice sounds quiet and hollow, and he kisses the top of her head, where the roots are showing. “So we will. Simple as that. You solid on the plan?”

She nods. But her eyes don’t look solid. “Someone should get Charlie.”

Slate sits up. “I’ll do it.”

There’s no trust in her gaze, but Slate doesn’t care. This is delicate work, and Slate wants to make sure it’s done right. If the kid is weak, the whole plan is weak, and Slate cannot afford that.

He finds the kid on his knees next to a saguaro, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief. Charlie stares daggers at his approach, the boy’s face a mask of shame. “What, you gonna laugh at me again, old man?”

Slate crouches down and rests his wrists on his knees. “I’m not so old,” he says. “And I used to do that, too. Before every battle.”

“How come you ain’t doing it now, then?” Slate can hear the kid’s mistrust, the expectation of a slap behind the soft words. Someone spent a whole lot of years beating fear into this kid.

“I put it all behind a door,” Slate says, “and I shut that door and I locked it and I threw away the key.” *And it cost*, the little voice says, from behind that very door. *Didn’t it just?* Slate ignores it. “You’re scared that something will go wrong. That everything will go wrong. That’s all right. Because it will go wrong, absolutely. Every time. Might as well be afraid of the sun coming up.”

The kid’s face twists, his lips pushing out slightly, brow furrowing over slightly unfocused eyes. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“It’s not supposed to make you feel anything,” Slate says. He brushes some dirt off his shoes and stands up, working out a crick in his back.

From the edge of the cliff, George calls: “I see ‘em.” George has the binoculars, but when Slate turns in the direction of his voice, he, too, can see distant dots of light coming over a rise down below. The wind quiets for a second, then comes back hard, bringing stinging grit with it.

“No time like the present,” Slate says, and moves toward the bait car, where Verna has the guns spread out on the leather back seat like a picnic.

The convoy’s small, just three green trucks with canvas backs — not even a white star painted on the doors. Uncle Sam, traveling quiet.

The lead truck turns the corner of a bluff and finds a car stalled in the middle of the road, cattycornered across the crumbling yellow line, the hood up and a redhead leaning against it, waving for help, barely visible between the dark and the dust-filled wind. What little light remains is deep gray, threaded with crimson to the west. Verna stands in the pale-milk pool of the lead truck’s headlamps, sunglasses on to keep the grit from her eyes, scarf tied under her chin to protect her hair.

The driver of the lead truck seems pretty damn stupid, because he hesitates all of one second before he's opening the door to go and check out this hapless stranded damsel in the middle of his top-secret convoy route. Maybe he doesn't go to the pictures often. Maybe he just doesn't know what he's carrying.

By the time Slate reaches the lead driver, leaning over the engine as Verna butters him with thanks, he's the last man conscious in the whole convoy. He turns just in time to catch the butt of Slate's shotgun across the face and stumble, clutching his bleeding nose, against the grille of the car.

Slate jams the barrel of the shotgun into the driver's breadbasket and bends down to strip him of the sidearm at his belt, which Slate promptly tosses away into the shadows at the roadside. If he has even the slightest choice in the matter, he never trusts a gun he hasn't cleaned himself.

He looks down at the soldier for a moment. Barely in his 20s, if that. Handsome. Too bad Slate doesn't like them dumb.

"You'll live," Slate says, and gives the driver's head a kick.

As he and George had moved up the line, back to front, they'd checked for extra men hiding in the backs of the trucks. Just crates. Now Slate kills the first truck's headlights. The second and third trucks had kept their headlamps off, following the taillights of the first. Stupid, again, but it makes Slate's job easier. Which he hates. Comfort is a bad sign. Something nags at the back of his mind, some itch he hasn't yet scratched, but he can't place it.

Slate binds and gags the drivers while George and Verna check the cargo. Charlie climbs out of the bait car's back seat, shuts the hood, and gets behind the wheel. Slate lugs the men,

some faintly groaning from deep down in the black well of stupor, all in line for demotion and serious KP duty, to the ditch at the roadside.

“Decoys!” shouts Verna from the back of the lead truck. Slate can barely hear her over the wind and the stinging sand.

“Pay dirt!” George whoops. He’s been rummaging around in the back of the middle truck. Slate hears wooden crates creak and crack.

In the near-dark Slate, the shotgun crooked in one elbow, steps on one of the sidearms he’d tossed away. He stoops to pick it up and hurl it farther into the desert, in case any of the drivers come to and get ideas. He’s got it back behind his head, ready to toss, when he stops. Something’s not right.

“Verna, get me some light!” Slate hears George shout. The shadow figure of Verna dashes around the second truck and into the cab of the third. A few seconds later, its headlights bloom, washing over the second truck’s cargo cab.

In the light Slate double-checks that the sidearm’s safety is on. He releases the magazine from the grip and checks it. Full rounds. He holds the clip in his hand, tests it. Frowns. A piece of sand gets in his eye, and he grimaces and turns his back to the wind to smear it out.

In the truck he can hear George laughing like it’s Christmas morning: “Get in here! You gotta see this!”

Slate gets his vision clear, eye watering. He thumbs a round from the top of the clip into his palm. He drops the clip, and the pistol, and with a pocketknife cuts off the back of the bullet.

It has no powder.

I told you so, the little voice sings.

George appears from the canvas back of the second truck, a ringmaster in a circus spotlight. There's something bright in his upraised hand, dazzling silver in the headlamps.

"Slate!" he shouts. "You're never going to believe—"

George's whole body stops, shudders, as if an invisible fist punched him in the gut. A small red hole in his shirtfront has begun to blossom, spreading wider. And a split-second later, faintly in the howling wind, Slate hears the rifle crack catch up with the bullet.

Slate doesn't waste time talking. He drops the shotgun. It's no damn use now. Verna's screaming, running toward George as he falls backward into the second truck. Slate throws himself into the open cab of the third truck, hugging the canvas seats, and reaches over to kill the lights. A half-second later the glass splinters, and a rifle round whizzes over his head into the dark. Clever little sniper, Slate thinks, but I've danced to this tune before.

In the dark now, through the blowing sand, Slate can see double dots of headlights closing in from the east across the desert, moving fast. Jeeps, not trucks.

Verna's sobbing, clutching at George. Slate pushes her aside and checks his pulse. Faint, but he's hanging in there. Gut wounds never kill you quick. Slate turns and grabs each of her blood-slick wrists hard, hard enough to hurt. He doesn't have time to wait for her to stop thrashing. "It's a setup," he shouts over the wind. "Get to the damn car."

"The truck, I can get the truck moving," she says, her eyes wide and darting in every direction.

"It's too big and too damn slow and it's wedged between these two others for a reason," Slate says. He all but throws her toward the front of the convoy. "I've got George. Move."

Slate doesn't wait to see whether she runs, or how fast, and doesn't particularly care. He

hauls George out of the back of the truck, the wounded man groaning softly, and throws him over his shoulders. For half a second Slate sees the inside of the truck — strange, ragged shapes sprouting from open crates, things glinting and gleaming and seeming to glow even in the dark. It doesn't interest him.

Goddamn, he's gotten old, or George has gotten heavy, or both. George's blood is wetting his shoulders and soaking down the back of his suit jacket. That's OK. Slate never wears his good suits on a job. There's always a chance of blood.

If you cared about George, says the little voice as Slate grunts and staggers with him toward the car, you wouldn't move him like this. Surest way to kill him. You'd leave him for the Army or the G-men or whoever's out there. Bet you they've got a hospital, nice and clean, with actual doctors. What have you got?

Slate smashes out the taillights of the getaway car with the heel of his shoe. Verna's waiting in the backseat, the door open. Slate dumps George inside, slams the door, and throws himself into the front passenger seat next to Charlie. The kid is shaking, wide-eyed.

"Drive," Slate says. He always asks nice the first time. Charlie just stares at him.

Slate cracks him hard across the face with an open palm. Charlie's eyes focus. They're filled with hate. Slate can work with that.

"Drive," Slate says again, his palm raised and waiting.

Charlie turns the key, shifts into gear. They roar off into the night, driving almost blind without headlights, sand hissing and spattering against the windshield.

Slate looks into the back seat. Verna's got her scarf pressed to George's gut. He's lying so still, so pale, sweat beading on his forehead. Still clutching that little metal box in his hand.

Four

They lose the Army, finally, somewhere around three in the morning, bouncing along dirt roads in the dark. The dust storm lasts another hour after that, and then they drive in the dark for an hour more, in all but silence. The only sounds come from dying things: George in the back seat, unconscious, breathing in rasps, and the car's engine, sand-choked, struggling.

Finally Charlie turns uphill, a sudden left into a gap in what seemed like a solid cliff face. For a moment Slate is startled at the feel of smooth paved road under the car again. This must be the getaway spot they'd told him about back at the bar. He grants the kid a crumb of respect for even being able to find it in all that blind driving.

A wall bricked in big sandstone slabs surrounds the property, high as two men and prickling with wrought-iron barbs. Charlie gets out to fumble a padlock off the gate, and they proceed up the drive. The house is horseshoe-shaped, nearly encircling a round drive at its heart, with a dead dry fountain in the center.

"It's perfect," George had said at the bar. "Winter getaway for some oilman who likes it

out in the middle of nowhere. But he's only there three months a year — too hot the rest of the time. Verna made friends with the caretaker."

"We were right old pals," Verna said, her eyes even flatter than her voice.

"Is he going to be a problem?" Slate asked. "The caretaker?"

"Naw," George grinned. "Not unless he can dig himself outta six feet of sand. And we didn't leave him in much of a digging mood." He guffawed and slapped the table. Funny old George. Slate watched Charlie turn away, stare into his beer. He watched Verna twist her napkin, knuckles white, tearing it into one little piece after another.

When Slate gets out of the car his jacket sticks, peels off the seat, from the dried blood down the back of it. He opens the back and finds George still breathing, Verna looking half-dead herself. Brown blood soaked into the upholstery, never coming out.

"Hang on, I got the key," Charlie says, and rabbit-runs to unlock the front door. Slate and Verna carry George inside as Charlie coaxes the car into a garage at one end of the horseshoe.

Slate gives the oilman points for taste. None of that phony Old World crap that people clutter around them when they think they have something to prove. The furniture's clean, modern, the living room sunken and carpeted, the back wall all glass admitting morning light over a stone-and-cactus desert garden, and the outer stone wall beyond.

"This way," Verna pants, struggling with George's feet, maneuvering him to the right, around the bowl of the living room to a big glass dining table next to an open kitchen. They lay George on the table, his chest still rising and falling faintly. "Get his shirt off," Verna says, and goes away down a hall to rummage in closets.

"You some kind of sawbones?" Slate calls. Blood makes the shirt stick to the wound.

Slate tugs at it carefully until the cloth pulls free. George's skin is pale, his lips shading toward blue but not quite there yet. The wound is a dark hole in the thicket of curling hair on George's belly, mysterious and clotted with black blood; when Slate lifts and rolls him to get off the rest of the shirt, he sees another hole in the back of him, larger, ragged and irregular, equally black.

"I did some nursing for a while, during the war," Verna says, returning. She has a wooden crate with bandages, forceps, alcohol. Part of the go-to-hell planning they'd told Slate about.

"You know he's dead," Slate says quietly. "A wound like this — sooner or later, he's already dead."

"Help or get out of my way." She shoves him aside and blots a square of gauze with alcohol and starts daubing at the wound. Slate stands back and waits.

When she speaks again it's not anything Slate expects: A start, a smashed-together "ohjesus." She's pulled back her hand like the wound just bit her. "Slate," she says. "Slate, come and look at this. Tell me I'm not seeing things."

Slate comes and looks. His brow furrows. "If you are," he says, "we both are."

Where Slate expects wet red meat and pink intestine there is a mesh of silver thread under the skin, crisscrossed and layered over itself, the old clotted blood washing right off it. Slate touches it with a finger and it feels hard and tense like metal wire, ready to sing. Beneath it he can feel vibration, motion, and he's not sure it's from George's breathing alone.

"Help me roll him," Verna says quickly, and again they get him up on his side. She cleans off the exit wound and there, yes, the silver thread has woven under George's skin, tiny bits of fat and muscle visible between its fibers, swiftly vanishing.

"I don't understand," Verna breathes. She looks like she wants to cry, because she's tired

or she's scared or she's happy or maybe just all three.

"The box," Slate says. "The metal box. Is he still holding it?"

And when they lay him down again, yes, there in his right hand the sleek metal box rests, smooth and featureless and vaguely L-shaped. They try to pry his fingers off it, but even in unconsciousness George's grip won't budge. Slate has broken men's fingers before; he's familiar with the pressure it requires. He lets himself get right up to the edge of it, trying to get George to let the thing go, before he quits.

The butt of the metal box, the grip, whatever — the part that meets the palm of George's hand — has roots or tendrils. Maybe they were always there. Maybe Slate just didn't see them last night. But the silver threads run into the meat of George's palm near the wrist, and through the thin pale skin Slate can see them running down the forearm, alongside the veins, before they vanish into him.

Slate puts a hand on the box and there's a strange electric hum in the back of his throat. He lets go and it stops, and he holds his hand over the thing, unsure.

"His pulse is steady," Verna says, her eyes wide. "All the blood he's lost, it should be barely there, he should be dead—"

"It's keeping him alive," Slate says.

After a moment, as if they've decided on it without ever speaking, they both take a slow step back from George. He lies there on the table, his chest rising and falling. Under his eyelids, small muscles dart and twitch.

Five

They carry George to the master bedroom, to a bed the size of an ice floe and just as white. Not the worst bed you could ever die in. But Slate's no longer sure George will die.

Slate and Verna are sitting on the fine modern sofas in the pit of the living room when Charlie finally comes in. He has soot and grease on him where they have George's dried blood. Charlie asks in a mouse-small voice how George is doing.

Neither Slate nor Verna tell him about the silver box. They say he's all right for now, that they've patched him up. That they'll have to wait and see. Charlie nods and swallows the news as if it came covered in brambles, and then he goes to the kitchen and gets a glass of water and just sits there, drinking it in slow sips.

At the back of the house Slate finds a small room that must have been the caretaker's. Unlike the rest of the house, relatively pristine, this is a lived-in mess. Slate looks over the rumpled sheets and wonders just what the caretaker and Verna got up to. If they even had the chance.

There's a small bathroom with a shower off the caretaker's bedroom. Slate stays under the water a long time, until the runoff pooling at his feet isn't tinged with red anymore. He uses the dead man's cheap soap and shampoo. Wherever and whatever Charlie and Verna are up to, whether George is still breathing, he just doesn't care about right now.

The caretaker's sheets smell stale and slightly sour and Slate doesn't care. The bed is soft and that's enough. He falls asleep naked and damp, almost instantly. When he wakes it's dark out; the radium dial of his wristwatch on the dresser says he's been out for twelve hours.

Another day closer to Santelli's deadline, now.

Slate rummages through the caretaker's closet — that sad little cache of nudie mags in the foot locker, beneath the great big beast of a .45 he must have taken home from the war. Eventually Slate finds a gray suit he might almost be caught dead in. It seems to have been the man's best one. Pity. It's an inch too long at the sleeves and the trouser cuffs, and the shirt bags slightly at the waist, but it'll do.

He keeps the suit hung up, out of the way of any dirt and grease, while he cleans out the .45. It's in pretty good shape, all considered. There's a box of bullets for it under a half-dozen well-creased Miss Whatevers in the foot locker, and Slate loads them one by one into the magazine.

When he's dressed and combed, the .45 ruining the line of his jacket, he collects his old clothes, rusty with dry blood, and goes out to burn them.

Passing through the living room he finds Verna asleep on the couch. Even in her sleep she looks worried. She's kicked her blanket to the floor with stockinged feet. Slate leaves it where it is.

Outside the air is cold and crisp, the day's heat not even a memory. Slate looks up at the cloudless sky, pocked with crowded stars, and wonders who might be watching. The dry air is muffled to near-soundlessness. Slate thinks he might hear the distant drone of an airplane, but it could just be the ringing in his bad ear.

Slate follows the light from the garage and finds Charlie there, stripped to his undershirt, sweating as he tries to clean the sand out of the crevices under the car's hood. A little potbellied stove is blazing in the corner, and Slate feeds his old clothes to it without so much as a fare-thee-well.

If the kid's noticed him, Slate hasn't cared enough to register it. But now as he shuts the door he hears Charlie behind him: "They knew we were coming." He turns to see the kid with a wrench gripped in one hand, laid across the open palm of the other, an implied threat. He's standing between Slate and the cool night air at the opening of the garage. "Someone talked."

"Was it you?" Slate asks, still as a stone. The kid's face wrinkles in disgust and surprise. "You think it was Verna?" Slate continues. "Maybe George?" The kid shakes his head.

"Well, if you figure out who you think it was talked, you let me know. Bring your friend along." Slate nods toward the wrench. "But while you're thinking it over, think on this. The Army doesn't much care about small fry like us. Those pals George mentioned, the ones paying? Uncle Sam might want to know about them. Dangle a little bait, see who bites, then they offer to throw 'em back in exchange for the big fish."

The kid looks down, twists the wrench in his hands. "And maybe they gut the fish instead, huh? What about that?"

Slate shrugs. "People get stupid behind a gunsight. People get stupid all the time."

He walks up to the kid, right within wrench distance, and stares him down. “You gonna get out of my way?”

Slate’s seen telegraphed swings before, but the kid practically writes him a letter. He snatches the wrench from Charlie’s hand before the kid can even get halfway to the follow-through. Doesn’t twist anything, doesn’t break anything, because at least the kid has guts, and Slate doesn’t need any more heartburn on this job as is. Charlie has whiffed at empty air before he realizes he isn’t holding anything.

“Don’t do that,” Slate says, tossing the wrench behind him. “I’m not your enemy. Don’t go making me one. You’re busted up inside. I get it. But you turn that into my problem, you’ll regret it.”

At first he thinks the kid is shaking with rage. It takes him a moment to see the tears glisten on Charlie’s cheeks. Slate has no idea what to do with this. He sits himself on the edge of a work table and just waits. The kid has one hand on the side of the car as if it’s all that holds him up, and he stands there with his eyes squeezed tight, his whole body trembling.

“I remember during the war,” Slate says at last, sidling up to the words as if he’s going to sap them when their back is turned, “George was pretty good with cars. Got a jeep running once after a shell-burst flipped it. He teach you anything?”

At this the kid nods. “Last year we worked some out at a garage in Harlow while he was putting something together. Just a few months.”

“You must learn fast,” Slate says.

“I do OK,” Charlie says. He turns his face away, like that way Slate won’t know he’s wiping away tears. Slate’s bad ear muffles what he says next, and it takes Slate a second to

untangle it: “Were you lying when you said he was all right?”

Slate folds his arms across his chest. “You ever seen a man gutshot before?” The kid shakes his head. “You know what happens, though. That it’s not like in the pictures.” A nod this time. Slate thinks a long time about what he says next, before he says it. “Right now, it’d surprise the hell out of me if he didn’t die. But who knows. A lot of things surprise me. Especially lately.”

The kid sniffs, smears a hand over his face, draws himself up straight as he turns back. “OK,” he says. He clears his throat, straightens the front of his shirt. His eyes stay downcast. “I gotta get that wrench.”

Slate steps aside and walks out of the garage, back towards the house.

George’s skin is clammy and pale, even in the glow from the bedside lamp. But when Slate checks his pulse the way the Army medics taught, he feels it good and strong, and George’s lips are moving, murmuring silent syllables. The silver box remains clutched in George’s hand, the little wires still burrowing away into him; Slate thinks about trying to pry it loose again, then thinks better of it.

Slate pulls a chair up by the bed and sits on the edge of it, mistrusting the marshmallow-soft cushioning, suspecting it’ll swallow him whole. The chair’s all wrong for the rest of the house. Maybe the rich man just likes a soft place to sit. Maybe the whole world’s a pain in the ass for him.

Slate sits and lights a cigarette — one of George’s brand from his coat pocket, still strange the second time around — and smokes it, blowing the smoke George’s way. As if that would wake him up.

“Aren’t you a sweetheart,” Verna says around a cigarette. She’s been watching from the

doorway with sleep-blearied eyes.

“Sure,” Slate says. He stubs his own cigarette butt out on the oilman’s expensive nightstand, and gets up to leave. Verna squares herself in the doorway.

“Awful lot of people doing that tonight,” Slate says. He waits for her to move. She uses her mouth to bob her unlit cigarette at him, and he gets the picture. Strikes a match from his box and lights it. She takes a deep drag, puffs out smoke, and steps aside at last.

“How is he?” she asks as he brushes past her.

“Same,” Slate says. “He should be dead. He isn’t.” She doesn’t ask about the box, and Slate doesn’t volunteer. That way it’s not so real for either of them.

She follows him into the living room. He looks back and raises an eyebrow. “You’re not going to sit by hubby’s bedside?”

“He was going to leave me,” she says.

Slate stops at this, turns. Sits himself on the back of a sofa.

“Did you know he plays the ponies?” Verna asks. When Slate says nothing, she goes on. “He’s no good at them. Lots of other things, but not them. He lost a bundle he didn’t have, to some people who don’t like losing.”

“So skip town,” Slate says. Racetrack bookies don’t tend to go much farther than the bus station. Not when there are fresh marks coming in the door every day. “Start fresh. I get the feeling you’ve done it before.”

Verna shakes her head. “Charlie’s on parole. Stupid. He stole a car and got pinched. I think he was trying to impress George. He was still a minor when it happened, so they didn’t jail him. Technically he’s still got a clean record. But for another year he’s gotta stick close, report in

every couple of weeks. He takes it on the lam and they've got him dead to rights. They'll lock him up and not think twice. I promised Mama, I swore on her deathbed, that I'd — he's my kid brother. He wants in on this life bad enough to taste it, you know? And I want anything but. At least for him."

"So there's George jumping one way," Slate says. "And you with a leash pulling the other."

Verna knots her hands together. "He never so much as said it. But I could tell. A man gets the itch about him, gets to sweating at night, talking in his sleep. He starts looking at the train station as if it's another woman. And when he says he loves you his eyes are already two states over."

Slate knows the answer already. He asks anyway. "So how'd you get him to stay?"

Verna folds her hands over her flat belly. She doesn't look at him. "Is it still a lie when you wish it were true?"

"How were you planning to break that one to him?" Slate asks.

"I was hoping sooner or later, I wouldn't have to," she says. "Let nature take its course and all that. But I guess I could always say I lost it." Her whole face trembles, quivers then, falls like a cliffside. She folds in on herself, a pinch of eyes and elbows, her empty womb the center of gravity. The words come out half underwater. "It's my fault. It's all my fault. Because of me he took this job and — and —"

"You lie to a man, that's on you," Slate says. "He believes it, that's on him."

She looks at him through tears. "So you don't hate me?"

He almost laughs, but his mama raised him better than that. At least sometimes she did.

“Not as long as I get paid.”

She’s brushing away tears — lot of crying in this family, more than ever ran in Slate’s — and staring at him now, searchingly. Slate gets an antsy feeling, like she’s rummaging around in drawers and cupboards he never asked her to.

“I think,” she says slowly, “that a long time ago somebody disappointed you. When you absolutely needed them not to.”

“That’s a nice little story,” Slate shrugs. He uncoils from the back of the sofa and turns toward the caretaker’s room. He’s not even remotely tired again, but the conversation bores him. Maybe the caretaker has something to read that isn’t pornographic. Or the oilman, maybe, if his tastes don’t run to lurid detective novels.

“Wait,” she says behind him. Closer than he’d expected. She’s bringing up a hand and he snatches it out of the air, expecting a slap. But that wasn’t her aim. He waits for her to tell him he’s hurting her. She does wince in pain. But not entirely in pain. And not entirely a wince. She doesn’t tell him to let her go.

“I saw you sleeping,” she says, low. He’s seen that look in other eyes before. “I watched you for a good long time.”

“Uh huh,” he says. “And what about dear old George? The proud papa to be?”

“He might die,” she says, as if it were three other words entirely. He feels her twist her wrist against his grip, chafing the skin.

“And if he doesn’t?” Slate asks. *Let her go*, the little voice says. *Let her go and walk away*. But he’s interested now. Not in her per se, but in this turn of events. At the very least, he’s no longer bored.

“Then maybe I want a chance to make that lie just a little tiny bit more true.” He’s close enough to feel her breath cool on his neck. He’s about to explain how she’s not his type, not even close. But then her mouth is on his, hard.

Maybe it’s because he’s got nothing better to do. Maybe he wants to take his mind off poor George, or Santelli, or the money for a little while. Or, hell, maybe it’s just that he’ll try anything once.

Six

Slate wakes alone, to a throbbing headache he'll ignore until it gives up an hour later, and the low, forlorn drone of an airplane engine cutting through the sky. The window in the caretaker's room is open just a crack, the just-after-dawn air beginning to warm, and in the jeweled light Slate can crane his neck and see a tiny speck doodlebugging across the cloudless sky. Too small to be a airliner. Too unlikely to be a private plane.

"I see you, too," Slate says, barely more than a whisper.

First comes a quick shower and a shave — the caretaker is kind enough, posthumously, to leave Slate a decent razor — and reassembling his clothing. The suit is all creased, but there's no helping that right now. He takes the gun out from where he'd hid it under the pillow in the dark, checks that it's all in order, and puts it back in the suit jacket pocket.

Second, through the living room past a discarded nest of couch blankets that suggest Charlie's already up and about, is a check on George. Slate finds Verna curled up next to him on top of the sheets, like a cat. Her hair is down, her stockinged toes curling and uncurling silently

in her sleep. George is still breathing, still murmuring softly, his skin warmer. Though his lips look chapped, the pulse in his neck feels stronger beneath Slate's fingers.

He lets Verna sleep.

Third he checks the garage. No way to get there through the house, so it's a risk. Slate hugs the horseshoe wall of the house, staying under the eave of the stucco roof. He finds Charlie again in an undershirt, a black grease smudge unconsciously knuckled under one eye.

The kid looks back at him, only a little jumpy, and then grins. "I think I've got her working," he says. He looks at Slate expectantly, and it takes Slate a moment to realize, uneasily, that in the absence of Big Brother George, Slate now seems to have become the nearest available substitute. Suddenly he becomes aware of all the ways the caretaker's suit doesn't quite fit.

"We can't go anywhere," Slate nods, trying to calibrate the delivery so that the kid's face doesn't fall too far in response. Not out of anything as stupid as feelings; it's just that Charlie seems like he'll be less of a pain in the ass if he doesn't see Slate as the enemy. Slate points up at the sky. "We've got company."

The kid's shoulders tighten. "Do they know where we are?"

"Not exactly," Slate guesses. "Not yet. But they're looking hard."

They sidle back to the house under the eaves, Slate's one good ear straining to filter out the noise from the bad one. The sky looks empty now, but he's still listening, hard as he can. Verna is up and in the kitchen, her hair pulled back, blinking sleep from her eyes. She looks at Slate as he comes in behind Charlie. But only for a second. He looks right back.

"Got some coffee going," she says. "Instant." She holds up a frying pan. "Thought I'd fry up some bacon and eggs. Charlie, you go wash up."

“How is he today?” Charlie asks, one hand wringing the other unconsciously.

“Better than expected,” Verna says. “But he’s still not awake. Go see him if you want.

After you wash up.”

Slate expects the kid to prick, to protest at this. But he does what he’s told. Must be used to living with big sister. Or maybe he’s just too tired to fight.

Verna hits Slate again with another look from under her eyelashes. Slate’s not sure what it means, if it even means anything. Maybe after last night she’s wise to Slate. Some people seem to get it right away, even if they’re not like him. Some people, it never occurs to. And some people figure it out sooner or later. They tend to be the worst. Not that it matters to Slate.

“Morning,” she says. There’s a point, a barb on that word, like the end of a fishhook. And there’s just a little fear, a little guilt, in her eyes.

“Sure is,” Slate says, and pads down into the sunken living room to sit and stare out into the desert and wait for breakfast.

The eggs aren’t too runny, and the bacon’s not too burnt, and Slate puts them down quick as any boxer taking a dive. He doesn’t always know when he’s hungry; sometimes it creeps up on him. None of them says a thing, clustered at one end of the rich man’s table, letting the scrape of fancy silver against fancier china do all the talking.

The silence lingers after breakfast, each of them drifting around the house as if they all haunted it separately, passing in the hallways without saying a word. Charlie finds a television in what looks like a guest room; all day, muffled from behind the door, Slate hears confident cowboy voices and the war-whoop of phony Indians.

Verna spends most of the day with George, as far as Slate knows. But one time, going to

the kitchen for some water from the tap, he sees her sitting out under the back veranda on one of the oilman's fancy wooden chairs, smoking. He can trace her gaze to a pile of rocks just visible on a sandy ridge beyond the back wall of the property. Smallish stones, fist-sized, piled by hand. About the size of a grave.

As for Slate, he finally gets around to finding the oilman's study — a Roman Coliseum of packed bookshelves built to intimidate, heavy velvet curtains drawn against the blazing sun. From the dust on the books, and the way they're grouped together haphazardly, all different languages and ages and subjects, Slate guesses he meant them just for show — just another way to buy respect, and then beat people over the head and shoulders with it. But Slate finds a copy of the *Inferno* in Italian, and scrapes some of the rust off what he learned back in the war reading it.

When he gets tired of that he peruses the pictures on the walls, counting how many faces he's seen from pictures in the newspaper or on television. In the oilman's desk he finds maps of the area around the house, and he unrolls them across the vast mahogany surface and studies them, learning where the roads crisscross, how the land rises and falls.

Way deep in the bottom drawer of the oilman's desk he finds — of course — a stack of cheap paperbacks, well-thumbed, spines creased. All garish come-on covers with half-dressed women and square-jawed tough guys. Sad little dreams, built at a penny a word. Like a schoolchild, the oilman has written his name in careful script inside each of their covers: *W. Herbert Prescott*.

As the sun gets higher a dry, drowsy heat suffuses the house. Slate feels his eyelids droop. He's about to take off his shoes and nap right there in the oilman's chair when he hears the motor

coming up the drive.

Slate remembers the padlock on the gate. And he realizes, only now, that no one bothered to fasten it again after they drove in.

He peers carefully out the window facing the drive through a gap in the curtains, careful not to move the fabric. An instantly forgettable car, the color of the desert, has parked in the drive next to the dry fountain, and two men sit inside, chatting, comparing notes.

Slate tucks the gun in the back of his trousers, moving quiet down the hall toward the front door. The air hangs thick, hot, and nearly silent; no sound of anyone else moving, just Charlie's cowboys and Indians faintly from the back of the house. He has to get to the door before they knock or ring the bell. Too many unknown factors with Verna and Charlie involved. Better to do this himself.

He opens the door to see one of the two men just opening his side of the car to get out. Slate shuts the front door behind him, squinting. A flat oven heat hits him open-handed from the sky; the house, stuffy as it was, felt cool by comparison.

"Help you?" he asks, shading his eyes with one hand, making a show of it.

One man — young, blonde, clean-shaven as an Arrow shirt ad — stays put in the car, hands hidden under the dash, watching Slate like a hawk. Clever boys. The other, shutting the car door behind him, is short and stocky, sweat shining on his brow.

"Afternoon!" the short man calls out, and ambles toward Slate with an odd gait that suggests he's gotten up close and personal with lead at some point. Can't have been in the war; as the man gets closer, Slate sees that one of his eyes points ever so slightly askew from the other, as if it were looking over Slate's shoulder. Dangerous, then. The G-men care about their

image. If this one hasn't washed out, he must be worth keeping around.

The short man puts out a stubby hand for Slate to shake, the palm slightly clammy. "Phew," he says, fanning himself with his hat, making sweat-slick strands of thin dark hair sway atop his head. "Devil's in the kitchen today, and no mistake."

"You fellas lost?" Slate asks, honeying up the words with just a touch of mama's old drawl. He stored it away a long time ago, but every so often it comes in handy. "This is private property, but if you need a phone or directions to the highway..."

The short man holds out a badge. "Name's Otto. Department of Fish and Wildlife. You're not Mr. Herbert, by any chance?"

"No sir," Slate says. "I look after the place when he's not here."

Otto takes a notebook out of his jacket, thumbs through it. It's obvious to Slate that he doesn't need to; whatever he's about to say, he's already memorized. "So you'd be Mr. ... Jack Ellerby, then?"

Slate does his best to look confused. "Is that the last fella had this job? I never met him. Just started a week ago Thursday."

Otto's eyes narrow slightly, but his slightly lopsided smile remains placidly in place. "Looks like our records are out of date. Any idea why Mr. Ellerby moved on?"

Slate shrugs. "You'll have to ask Mr. Herbert. He didn't say when he hired me. Asked me a lot of questions about whether I planned on having women out at the place. Whether I was a drinking man. Maybe that was it. You mind telling me what this is about?"

"Well, now, Mr. —" Otto trails off expectantly.

"Conroy," Slate says. "Hank Conroy." Slate used the name once for a weekend, a long

time ago, a couple of states away. No idea why it came to him now.

“Mr. Conroy,” Otto continues, “we’ve had reports of a pack of coyotes in the area. Possible danger to residents, livestock, pets, what have you. Any chance you’ve seen one?”

“Mister,” Slate says, “I’ve seen dirt and more dirt and some sand for variety, and that’s about it.”

Otto takes a crumpled packet of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and offers one to Slate. Not his brand, so Slate shakes his head. Too damn hot to smoke anyway, which doesn’t stop Otto from lighting up.

“These coyotes,” Otto says after a few cautious puffs, “they’re wily critters. They can come out of nowhere.” He levels his eyes at Slate, and his gaze doesn’t waver. “Thieving, too. They like to snatch up just about anything edible that isn’t nailed down. And tough. They can take a bullet to the vitals and still get away from you. Army convoy passing through here saw some the other night, as a matter of fact.”

“I didn’t know the army came through here,” Slate says, keeping his arms loose at his sides. Give nothing away. “I’ll have to let Mr. Herbert know. I get the notion he bought this place for the privacy.”

Otto takes a business card from his trouser pocket and hands it to Slate between two fingers. Nothing on it but a number. Not even an official seal. “Well, Mr. Conroy, if you do see one, you give us a call. We’re going to have hunting parties in the area, combing for them, so it’s best you sit tight for a couple of days if you can. Wouldn’t want anyone getting caught in the crossfire.”

“So that’s what you’re going to do with these critters?” Slate asks. “Shoot them?”

“Could be, if we have to,” Otto replies. “I prefer catch and release myself. Take them alive, hold them for a little bit till we figure out where they came from. Then move them on along to where they ought to be roaming.” He nods toward the business card in Slate’s hand. “Give me a call if you see one, and maybe we can do it my way.”

“Sure I can’t give you boys some water or something before you go?” Slate says, as Otto takes a step back. The short man shakes his head, mops some sweat off his brow, and gives Slate another funny little smile and a half-salute as he gets back behind the wheel of the car.

“Oh,” Otto says, leaning his head out the window as he starts up the motor. “Looks like you left your gate unlocked. Might want to see to that before any coyotes wander in.” Before Slate can say anything, he’s pulled his head back in and rolled the window up.

Slate stands in the drive and watches them circle around and head away down the drive. When he’s sure they’re gone, he follows the long, steep drive down to the gates. The iron’s hot to the touch in the sun, but he pushes the gate creaking shut and clicks the padlock home.

Call him, says the little voice. It’s the smart play and you know it. No way you’re getting paid now. No heist, no loot, no seventy-five thousand. Unless maybe the Feds have a reward.

Slate grits his teeth and starts the long walk back up the hill. The air’s as dry as cotton wool, the heat suffocating. Slate turns the card over in his palm.

You don’t owe these people anything. Not anymore. But you owe Santelli plenty. And he’s coming to collect. Be smart.

He sticks the card deep in his pocket as he opens the front door and steps back into the shade of the house. Verna is waiting for him, leaning on the back of the sofa. She holds a little .22 pistol at her side, loose and easy.

“You son of a bitch,” she says quietly. “What did you tell him?”

“We had a chat about Jack Ellerby,” Slate says.

Her face goes tight at the name, the color fading from her cheeks, but only for a moment. She raises the gun again. “What did you tell him?”

“Verna?” Charlie’s just come around the corner by the kitchen. He’s got his shoes off, and there’s a hole in the toe of one of his socks. “Verna, what are you doing?”

“We had company just now,” Verna says, keeping her eyes on Slate. “Government issue, from the looks of them. And Mr. Slate here took it on himself to have a private conversation with them.”

“I didn’t tell them anything,” Slate says. “I didn’t have to.”

“They’re wise?” Verna says.

“As owls.” Slate’s winded from the walk up the drive — *getting old*, says the little voice, *too many cigarettes* — and too tired to pretend to be intimidated by her little pistol anymore. He walks right past Verna, drops himself in an easy chair, and loosens his tie. The gun follows him. “If we don’t want to end up guests of Uncle Sam, we need to get out of here. Not now. They’re watching. But tonight, soon as it’s dark.”

“Shit,” Charlie says. Slate’s surprised how well the kid pulls the word off. He only wants to laugh a little bit, hearing it. Charlie’s face is pale, his eyes unfocused, staring off at some jailhouse future. “Shit, Verna, we gotta leave.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” she says, and her eyes flit to the closed bedroom door. “Not without George.”

“We can’t take the car,” Slate says. “Night or day, I guarantee you they’ll have men

watching the front gate. It's a long walk to the highway in the dark. Longer with a man on a stretcher. Harder to flag down a car once we do."

"So we just leave him here?" Verna says — not high, not hysterical, but with the flat hollow sound of someone looking down a well.

"Say what you will about G-men," Slate replies, "but I hear their doctors aren't so bad."

"They'd lock him up," Verna says, her chin quivering a little.

"Maybe so," Slate says. "But you'd be free. And so would Charlie."

Her face seems liquid for a moment; then it sets like concrete, the line of her mouth tightening. "We all go or none of us go."

Slate fishes his cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. Down to the last two smokes. He gets one out and rolls it between his fingers. "You do what you like," he says. "I'm gone tonight."

He watches an idea steal over her face, slowly. It makes her ugly. She jabs the gun at him. "What's to stop you from marching right up to the Feds and ratting us out? Saving your own skin?"

"Yeah, that's what I do," Slate says. "Talk my head off."

The idea puts down roots in her, makes itself comfortable. Slate sees her eyes narrow. "How do we know it wasn't you who queered the job in the first place?" She puts a little twist on "queered" just for him. Real amateur stuff. "Maybe you put the Feds onto us. Maybe there's a nice little reward waiting for you." Slate glances at Charlie, sees the idea resurface from where it sank the other day.

"Maybe you should sit down and cool off," Slate offers, putting the cigarette to his mouth. "Before all that hard thinking hurts your pretty little head."

She steps forward and cracks him hard across the face with an open palm. It stings some, but it could have been worse; she could have used the gun to do it.

“Verna, stop it,” Charlie butts in, but she’s not listening. Eyes burning, fixed on Slate.

“Why don’t you show us what’s in your pocket?” Verna says, and jabs the gun again for emphasis. “Go on. Show me and Charlie what the nice man gave you. I know you kept it.”

Slate produces the card, holds it up as if he’s doing a magic trick, then flicks it at her. It bounces off her rib cage and lands on the carpet. “Go on,” he says. “You want to call him, be my guest.”

She hits him again, and a third time. He just sits and takes it, feeling the sour bruise of a busted lip beginning to well in the corner of his mouth, the copper trickle of blood. She rears back for a fourth one, and he clears his throat.

“Take your time,” he says. “Make it count.”

Instead Verna cocks the gun, as if she were twisting the neck off a chicken. Puts the barrel right between Slate’s eyes.

“What,” Slate says to her, “you going to give old Jack Ellerby some company out there?”

“Shut up,” Verna spits.

“Maybe get kid brother to help you dig the grave?” Slate says. “Hot work out there. Tough to do it by yourself.”

“Shut up!” she roars, and for a second he thinks maybe he won’t have to worry about Santelli after all.

“The hell is this?” The voice is riverbed dry, all dust and rocks. Verna looks up and over Slate’s shoulder. Her face goes slack, and she takes a long, slow step back. The gun slowly works

its weight on her arm, until it dangles half-out of her fingers by her side. Charlie's eyes look fit to pop out of his head.

Slate stands up slowly, turns around.

George leans heavily on the jamb of the bedroom door, eyes bloodshot, shirtless, unshaven. One hand's holding him up. The other dangles down at his side, still clutching the little silver box.

George smiles. That just makes it worse. "Getting so a man can't get any rest around here," he says.

Seven

For now they dress him in a pair of the oilman's pajamas — too big by half, almost comical. But the way George stays quiet the whole time, the way he looks at them like he can see inside their bones, takes all the fun out of it. On his pale cool skin there is no trace of the entry or exit wound — just a few faint arteries of silver under the surface.

George doesn't speak again until they've sat him at the kitchen table. Charlie sits opposite, shifting in his seat, like he's not sure where to put his hands or how to act or what to say. Verna puts a glass of water in front of George, then goes to the icebox to get out some bacon and eggs. Slate leans against the counter on the opposite side of the kitchen and watches.

George keeps the hand holding the little silver box down under the table, out of sight. With his other hand, he reaches out to take the glass. He sniffs at it, frowns. "Doesn't smell right."

"It's fine," Verna says over her shoulder, cracking eggs. They sizzle in the grease of the hot skillet. "We've all been drinking it."

George glances at Slate, and Slate nods. George drinks and makes a face. “Tastes funny, too.”

“Could just be you’ve been out a while,” Charlie offers, hopeful. Waiting for that pat on the head. “I bet that happens sometimes, right? Your tongue gets a little funny?”

George stares at the kid — into him, Slate would say — for a long stretch of seconds. Then a grin splits his whiskered face, and he starts chuckling softly. Confusion pinches Charlie’s face.

“What’s the joke, George?” he asks.

“Nothing,” George says. “Nothing at all. Never mind. How long have I been out?”

“Almost two days,” says Slate. “What do you remember?”

“The job,” George says. “Getting shot. A little in the car.” The way he trails off after the last part of the sentence makes Slate think he had something more to say, and chose not to say it. “We didn’t get it, did we?”

“No,” Slate says. “The Army knew we were coming. Whole thing was a setup.”

George’s expression doesn’t change until Verna puts a plate down in front of him. Two eggs, sunny side up, and four crisp bacon slices. George looks at it as if it were abstract art.

“The hell is this?” he asks. He’s not even mad, Slate thinks, just baffled.

“It’s ... it’s bacon and eggs, dear,” says Verna. She holds the spatula very still in the air, halfway toward whatever she was intending to do with it.

George squints at it again. “It doesn’t ... is it supposed to look like this?” He takes a deep sniff. “It smells ... I don’t know. Dead, kind of.”

“I can make you some more,” Verna says quickly. “Other ones. Or we’ve got some

orange juice in the icebox—" She opens the door of it, fishes out the pitcher from the wan yellow light inside.

George takes one look and stiffens in his chair. "Get that shit away from me," he says sharply. When Verna doesn't move he lifts the arm with the silver box in a wild sweep. As if the box was doing the moving, and the arm just went with it. "I said get it away!"

Verna jolts back, the juice sloshing in the glass pitcher. "Okay," she says quietly, her face pale. "Okay, George." She puts it back in the fridge.

George sits there, breathing heavily. His eyes seem to refocus. "Verna," he says. "Baby, I'm sorry. I don't know what — I think I'm still out of it." He looks down at the silver box in his palm, his fingers clenched around it as if they were made for it.

"You want to tell us about that thing?" Slate asks, softly.

It takes Slate a moment to identify where he's seen the look, soft and velvety, that George gives the box. Then it comes to him: Mothers with new infants.

"That music is nice," George says, as if he didn't hear Slate. "What's that music?"

Slate, Charlie, and Verna all exchange looks. The oilman's hi-fi cabinet sits in the living room, silent, switched off.

"Darling, there's no music playing," Verna says gently. The fear starts at her eyes and, as far as Slate can tell, seems to go all the way down to her gut.

"Of course there is," George says, looking up, craning his neck as if he could see the sound. "Don't you—" He stops, tilts his head slightly, as if someone's talking to him. "Oh." He composes his face. "Never mind. Sorry. Forget it."

"George," Slate says again. "What's the silver box for?"

“I found it,” George says, staring at it again. “In the back of the truck. They had things in there ... like out of some picture show. Beautiful things. And it was just there waiting, first crate I opened. Like it ... I dunno how to say it.”

“George,” Slate continues. “Can you put it down? Can you let it go?”

George looks at him as if the question’s ridiculous. “Course I can. See? Done.” The box still remains tightly clenched in his hand. He hasn’t moved at all. The kitchen is so quiet, air thick with bacon grease, that all Slate can hear is the constant hollow drone in his bad ear. Verna’s eyes dart to Slate’s, and then back down at George.

“Well?” George barks, his face starting to flush red. “What’s everyone looking at?”

“It’s — it’s still in your hand, George,” Charlie offers timidly, before Slate can shut him up. “It’s right there.”

George looks down at it, blinks, the spell broken. “Huh. What do you know.”

“George, listen to me,” Slate says. “The Feds know we’re here. We’ve got to leave. Tonight. Ditch the car and—“

Mid sentence, George’s head whips around to glare at Verna, as if Slate hadn’t even been talking. “I’m not crazy,” he snaps.

“I didn’t say that,” Verna says. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Of course you did,” George says, irritation now mingling with confusion. “I heard you plain as day. I’m not crazy.”

“She didn’t say nothing, George,” Charlie says. He’s holding himself very still, and he’s leaned back in his chair. Any farther and he’ll start to tilt it.

“George—” Slate begins.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” George says, his voice rising, waving a hand dismissively at Slate. “Over the back fence and across the desert north-northeast, till we get to highway 21, and then flag down a passerby.”

Slate has just been thinking about these exact plans. He hasn’t said them to anyone.

“... That’s right, George,” Slate says. “That’s what I said.”

“Well, we’re not doing it,” George says, as if this is just part of a normal conversation. “We’re staying put.”

More silence. Slate finally says it: “Why are we staying put, George?”

George stares again at the silver box. “We’re getting the rest. We’re taking it all.”

“The rest of what?” Charlie asks. “The stuff in the truck? George, they probably got that locked up tight somewhere. Especially after we made a grab for it.”

“Then we’ll find it, we’ll get it back,” George says, with a hunger Slate’s never seen in him. “It’s ours. It belongs to us.”

“Pretty sure it doesn’t,” Slate says. “That’s why they call it stealing.”

“It’s not theirs,” George says. “They stole it first. They wouldn’t even know what to do with it. They don’t understand.”

“Okay,” Slate says. “Help us understand, then, George.”

George opens his mouth and just stops. His face goes blank, his eyes troubled. He looks like he’s just forgotten what he was about to say. Instead he looks down at the bacon and eggs.

“This doesn’t look funny to you?” he asks quietly, as if he’s no longer sure of the answer.

When no one says anything, he takes up the fork in his free hand and starts eating, slowly, one measured bite at a time, as if he’s never had eggs before.

The sun sinks, the shadows stretch, and the inside of the house turns gold, then pink, in the slanting light. Slate sits in the living room with Charlie, the two of them silent, marooned together, watching Verna and George come and go through the rooms of the house. George has changed into a spare set of clothes they'd laid aside for him in the go-to-hell planning. Slate can just hear her talking to him quietly, urgently, and his replies — terse little gunshot words.

As dusk breaks, Slate slips out the glass door to the rocky back yard. The ground and the walls of the house still radiate heat, but there's a cool wind just starting to blow from the east, and above Slate sees stars beginning to salt the sky. The line of the roof is low; Slate hops up off a wall, grabs the edge, and hauls himself up. He stays low, on his belly, shimmying up to the peak of the roof. And then, staying as flat and as still as he can, he gazes out across the landscape in the failing light.

High rock ridge beyond the property line to the east. They're trying to play it cool and quiet, but Slate sees four, maybe five men up there. The wrong kind of hunting party.

Down the hill from the front of the house, to the north. Two cars parked, lights off, in the scrub across the dirt drive. Motion glimmering through the windshield. Away along the little road, more pairs of headlights, moving closer.

Slate slides back down off the roof, slow and careful, and into the house. Charlie looks at him expectantly from the chair he's in, his bent knees hiking up his trouser cuffs to show off his mismatched socks. *Look at him*, the little voice says. *Practically a baby*.

"They're coming," Slate tells him. "Not now, but it won't be long."

"We're gonna be okay, right?" Charlie asks.

Slate just looks at him for a long few seconds, and then moves past him, following

George and Verna's voices to the bedroom.

"I'm telling you, baby, you don't need to worry," George is saying. Something's off with his voice — it's the same sound Slate remembers, but the cadence is different, a little slower, more hesitant. As if someone's broadcasting through him like a radio, reading lines in a distant studio. "Nothing's going to hurt us."

As Slate enters the room he finds George sitting on the bed, staring hard at the silver box in his palm. Verna stands in the corner of the room farthest from him, all the way back against the wall, her arms folded, her face tight as the head of a snare drum.

"And why is that, Georgie boy?" Slate asks quietly. "Is it because of your little friend there?" George looks up at him, and again Slate gets the sensation that George is seeing him in an X-ray, abstracted. Some humanlike shape with all its hidden insides visible.

"It's going to keep me safe," George says. "It's going to keep us all safe."

One time Slate had to unwire a dynamite bomb someone thoughtlessly left under his car. He remembers that experience now, the feeling of moving very slowly underwater, as if by going too fast you could fall right out of the world into somewhere else. Gingerly he pulls up the big soft chair by the bed and eases down into it, until he's facing George.

"Level with me, Georgie boy," he says. "This is Gunny. Your old pal. Tell me all about that little gizmo."

"I've tried," Verna cuts in. Her voice trembles on a knife's edge. "I've talked him up and down. That's a dead end."

"Maybe he just doesn't want to talk to you." Slate doesn't intend it as mean. Just stating a fact. He notes the way her face falls, how her eyes darken, as he'd note a passing cloud.

“It’s all right,” George says, looking back at the box. “I was scared at first, but it’s all right. It just does its job, same as any other machine. It does what you tell it. Tells you what it knows.”

“What does it tell you, Georgie boy?” Slate says.

“It sings, Gunny.” A smile creases George’s face. “Wish you could hear it. Sings to me about the world. Five men up on the ridge, but they won’t attack yet. They’re waiting for the signal. The signal is ‘magpie.’ I always thought that was a funny word. Two cars down by the main gate, two men apiece. Three more coming, bringing the big guns.”

“If you know all this,” Slate asks, “then why are we sticking? That much firepower, we should be out of here and gone as soon as it’s dark.”

“It sings to me all sorts of things,” George says. “Tells me the truth. Shows it to me like I’m reading it out of a book. A world without lies.” For a moment he looks like he’s going to cry, his face puckering, flushing red between the eyes and up the forehead. “I know it’s not real, Verna,” he says. “I know there’s nothing in you.”

Verna’s hand moves to her mouth independent of the rest of her, which might as well be a statue. It moves slowly, up over her chest, up her neck, until it dents the dimple under her nose. It trembles. Slate can see tears in her eyes, glinting in the faint gleam of the lamp.

“Nothing in you,” George continues, “and there never was. Just a big black hole.”

In his hand, the box begins to whine softly, more a pressure in the back of Slate’s skull than an actual sound.

“George, listen to me—” Slate begins, but George’s voice rises, and his fingers tighten around the silver box.

“I thought you, of all people,” he says. “You I could trust. Part of why I brought you in. I knew you could keep your hands off my Verna. I thought you didn’t ...” He looks so hurt. Like Slade’s mama looked the last day he ever saw her. “It says you don’t. But it also says you did. You and my Verna.”

George stands up from the bed now. The box is humming now, throbbing audibly.

“George, it wasn’t like that,” Slate says. He doesn’t move, doesn’t raise his hands or his voice. He can’t see how any of that would help. “It wasn’t anything at all. Was it, Verna?”

Verna shakes her head, quickly, her hand still over her mouth. A sob shudders up from the pit of her stomach, but her hand keeps it from slipping out of her. She just trembles a little.

George’s breathing is growing deeper, ragged. His face is flushing, and under the red Slate can just glimpse them, silver threads running beneath the skin of his face, bright silver glints among the red veins in his eyes. “Would you like to see?” he asks Slate. He holds out the box, and it keens, the sound cutting through the air. “Would you like me to show you what it can do?”

Verna pushes off from the wall, arms stretched out to him. “Stop, George!” she shouts. “We need him!”

George doesn’t even look at her — his arm just spins back, his legs planted, and he cracks her one across the face, sending her sideways onto the bed. Slate stands up — not even to take a swing, just to talk him down. Except George gives him a shove with the hand that’s not holding the box, and a truck hits Slate in the chest and the world rushes away from him until he smacks into the wall behind him, seven feet away, so hard he feels the plaster buckle, so hard he bounces. Slate is on the carpet trying to breathe again when Charlie comes through the door with

that little .22 pistol of Verna's — God knows where he found it — pointed at George, shouting something. Slate can't hear what — his bad ear's ringing like a church bell now from the hit, drowning everything else out.

George turns toward Charlie as of on reflex, as a dog might bite a hand coming out of its peripheral vision. He snaps the silver box up and squeezes it somehow — Slate sees George's forearm tense —

The world goes white. Slate's eyes slam shut but that doesn't matter, the light sears through them red, and someone just opened a blast furnace door, and Slate can smell the air itself burning, the chemical stink of the carpet and the paint and the wallpaper oxidizing.

It's over before Slate can even register that the light came without any sound. His face prickles, cooling after that sudden instantaneous scorch. He lies there gasping, spots slowly fading from his vision, until the purple-green clouds diminish and drift away and he can make out George standing rooted there, his eyes wide, panting. Verna on the bed, her cheek already purpling with the bruise, staring the same direction as George, her mouth open as if she's choking on a sentence she can't dislodge from her throat.

And Charlie on the floor, the doorway jigsaw-cut in strange shapes behind him, Charlie too shocked to move, to scream, just looking down at himself. At where the arm that was holding the gun now ends at the elbow, and the rest of him just stops in a black diagonal line moving down and across his abdomen from the bottom of his rib cage. And how all that remains of his legs and his hand and the gun are long, stretched-out shadows burnt onto the carpet and the wall.

Eight

Nobody says anything. George just keeps looking at Charlie, as if the kid were an abstract painting, and George were trying to puzzle out his meaning. At last a sob breaks loose from Verna, and then another, and she *can't stop looking*.

Slate? He feels a curious sort of relief, seeing the kid. That it's all been sewn up so cleanly, all the edges cauterized. Not even a stink of burning flesh. Slate knows that smell. He hates it. And he's seen men ripped ragged, all odds and ends. This seems so much more considerate.

"Verna, I..." George starts. His mouth moves, but nothing's coming out. Then his eyes go distant, and he says softly, "Magpie. Magpie. Magpie." Distractedly he straightens his tie, smooths out his suit jacket. "I'll be right back," he says, from a million miles away. He walks to the door of the room, stops, looks down at Charlie. Then he steps over the kid carefully, and out into the living room. After a few quiet seconds Slate hears the front door open, then shut.

And now Verna screams, at last. Just once. Not hysterical. A fully lucid scream. She

crawls off the bed and across the floor to Charlie, who looks at her with wide and pleading eyes. She goes to clasp his closest hand, but it's not there anymore, just a shadow on the wall, and so she just rests her hand on his heaving chest.

Slate puts an elbow under himself, and then a knee. He stands up, shaky, aching all over. He walks on lead-filled feet over to the two of them and leans heavily against the door. The burnt smell lingers in the air.

Verna's hands flutter over her brother, moving here, there, tracing contours where he ends now but didn't used to. "It's okay," she's saying quietly. "We'll just — we'll just — you'll be okay."

Charlie shakes his head slowly. Slate can see his adam's apple rise and fall in his throat as the kid swallows. There are tears in his eyes.

"It doesn't hurt," he says. His voice sounds so normal. "It's all right. It doesn't hurt none."

Verna looks up at Slate. "Tell him," she says. "Tell him he's going to be okay."

Slate slowly kneels down. He holds the wall for balance.

"The cuts look clean," Slate says. He wonders why his voice has become so quiet now. But it just seems right. "Cauterized. You're not going to bleed out, and you're probably not bleeding on the inside. You're missing—" he does a quick count, remembers the first aid training, the illustration of the visible man and all his internal parts — "a kidney, probably part of the liver. A lot of the intestine. You have enough left to live for a while. For a little while."

This sinks in, through the skin of the kid's face, through the muscles, down into the bones. And by the time it gets to the brain Charlie looks so old.

“No,” he says. He’s not pleading, not panicking. He says it simply and flatly, as if he were putting bills down to pay a check. “No I don’t.”

“Don’t say that,” Verna begs. She’s found his remaining hand now, clasping it, their fingers knotted together over the kid’s heart. “Please don’t say that. Please don’t leave me alone.”

Outside the windows, even through the curtains, light flashes bright as day. Slate hears a man scream, faint and far away.

“I don’t want to,” Charlie says. He swallows again. “But I can’t — I can’t feel—” He stops and squeezes his eyes shut, as if he’s trying to wring the tears out of them.

Slate eases the .45 out from the back of his trousers. He rests the pistol across the palm of one hand, holding the grip lightly in the other, and presents it to Charlie. “Are you sure?” he asks the kid.

Charlie nods, slow and solemn.

Slate looks at Verna, holds the gun out to her. She shakes her head quickly, the tears tracking through her makeup, running her mascara.

“All right,” Slate says. “Get me a pillow off the bed.”

She stands up stiffly, walks to the oilman’s vast continent of a bed, and finds one.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” Slate says to Charlie. “Nothing at all. Just sleep without the dreams.”

Verna hands him the pillow, then kneels down again and takes the kid’s hand. She squeezes it tight. He squeezes back.

“Tell me when you’re ready,” Slate says.

Charlie shuts his eyes and turns his head toward Verna. "It's not your fault," he tells her.

Verna nods, then realizes he can't see her. "Okay," she says, the word a single bubble in a vast ocean.

Charlie nods now, takes a deep breath. "I'm ready," he says.

Slate places the pillow across the side of his face, and presses the barrel of the gun deep into it. Then he pulls the trigger. Even through the pillow the sharp sound of it hurts his good ear.

He waits a minute or two until Verna releases Charlie's hand, lets it fall limp onto the kid's chest. She stands and runs her hands down the front of her dress, and lets out a shaky breath. A slow-spreading red stain darkens the black burnt hole in the pillow.

Outside gunfire chatters. More white flashes, lightning without the thunder. More screaming, louder and closer.

"Either you stay here and wait," Slate says to her, "or we go and go now. Whatever you say. I won't stop you." He puts the gun back into the band of his trousers.

She knuckles the last of the tears away from her eyes, mascara streaking her cheek like Indian war paint. And when she's done her face is as hard as Slate's ever seen it, her eyes pure poison.

"We go," she says.

The air's turned cold outside, just a little radiant heat still coming from the earth and the rocks. A helicopter's thrumming overhead, sweeping a beam down against the front of the house. More flashes. The chatter of what sounds to Slate like Thompson submachine guns. Up on the ridge, fires are burning. Five little fires. Each about the size of a man.

They cross the back yard under the deep blue-black sky and the countless stars and the

big, bright moon rising over the desert. Slate helps Verna up and over the fence, then hops up after, scraping his fingers on the rough stone of the walls.

In the dark they stumble away over the rocks, still warm to the touch from the sun even in the cold night air. From the oilman's maps, Slate has memorized the route, the landmarks — that tower of rock here, the two hills there.

Beyond the roof of the oilman's house a bright white beam lances up into the sky and cuts the helicopter in half. The rotors sputter, the searchlight fizzles out, and both halves just drop like a ruined kite onto the oilman's house, and bloom, and burn. A hot wind brushes past them and moves on.

Verna doesn't talk any. That's just fine by Slate. The distant sounds of gunfire diminish to a few short bursts, and then go silent. In their absence, everything is so quiet here in the dry air that the world feels unreal, like Slate has stepped into a picture show with the sound cut off. Even his shoes on the sand and the rock don't seem to make a whisper.

They walk like this for hours, the moon getting higher, casting silver light. The cold deepens. Slate can see his breath now. Verna shivers in her dress, but she doesn't ask for Slate's coat, and Slate doesn't offer it.

At last they crest a steep butte and see the highway just below. Slate and Verna pick their way down, Slate skidding sometimes on loose pebbles in his dead man's shoes. The road isn't much to look at — two lanes of cracked asphalt — but Slate figures sooner or later a truck or a bus or someone will come along. If that someone needs persuading, Slate still has the .45.

Verna finds a rock fringed in scrub next to the road and sits. She hugs her arms to her chest and runs her hands slowly up and down her upper arms. Even in the moonlight, Slate can

see gooseflesh prickling on her skin.

“What will you do now?” Slate asks, to pass the time. He half-expects she won’t answer. But when she does her voice is flat and tranquil. Slate knows the sound of it. Somewhere in her, now, there’s a door shut and locked, just like his. Maybe her brother Charlie’s knocking on it from the other side, with his only remaining hand.

“I’ve got a little money saved,” she says. “Enough to go away. Maybe to my sister back east. She’d love that. She’s never happier than when I’m disappointing her. What about you?”

“I have to see a man who thinks I owe him money,” Slate says.

“And do you?” Verna cups her hands and blows on them.

“He thinks I do,” Slate says. “Doesn’t matter to him whether it’s true.”

“And what are you going to do about that?” Verna asks.

Slate shrugs. “Die, probably. If we’re being realistic. Hopefully well.”

“That doesn’t seem to bother you,” Verna says.

Slate wishes he had a cigarette, but he must’ve left the packet back at the house. No matches anyway. “No point in getting bothered,” he says. “It’s going to happen regardless.”

Far away down the road in the still air comes the sound of a motor. Then two headlights glimmer over a distant hill, and dip out of sight again.

“Here comes our ride,” Slate says. He stands up straighter, sticks an arm out with a thumb up. The other hand he puts under the back of his jacket, resting on the grip of the .45.

The car — definitely a car, he can tell now — approaches, bright pools of headlight washing over the road. The light hits Slate and he squints, but manages to approximate a smile. He keeps his thumb out.

The car slows as it approaches, and stops in the middle of the road, about ten feet away from the both of them. The motor cuts off, but the headlights stay on. The car looks familiar. The color of the desert.

Run, the little voice tells Slate. But there's nowhere to run, for him or Verna, just the steep side of the butte to try to scramble back up. Too slow. Too exposed.

The driver's side door opens. A man gets out. Slate can hear a slow, steady hum coming from him. From the little silver box that glimmers as he steps into the beams of the headlights.

"Hello, Georgie boy," Slate says. "Long time, no see."

Verna stands up slowly, her fists clenched, her arms tight by her sides.

"I knew it," George says. His voice has the flat, distant sound of a man talking in his sleep. "I knew I'd find you right here. It told me so."

"Our friends back at the house," Slate says. "Did you leave any of them alive?"

"They didn't know," George says. "I tried to ask them but they wouldn't talk to me. I looked in each of them, but they didn't know. No one told them where the rest of it went. I have to find the rest of it." He frowns, furrows his brow as if he's trying to remember something. Then he looks at Verna. "They knew about you, though."

In the headlights, Slate sees Verna's face betray her — just for a second, before she puts back on the practiced calm, the flat expressionlessness. He admires it the way he'd admire a great performance at the pictures. It's so convincing.

"George, baby," she says. "You're not making sense."

"What did they promise you?" George says. "I know now what they told my buddy on the base. How they got to him. What did they tell you?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Verna says. Not a bad job this time, but it could use a little more fear, Slate thinks. Perhaps a touch of intimidation.

George takes a step forward, and in his hand the silver box starts to throb again. It almost sounds like a growl. “I can look in you, too,” George says. “It can tell me everything about you. But I don’t want that. I want you to tell me.”

“Verna,” Slate says, “the man seems to think you’ve been telling fibs.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” Verna says. “They promised me. They *promised* me. No one gets hurt. No one goes to jail. They hold us for a few days, they put on a show, they lean on us until George gives up the money men, and then we’re on our way. They said they’d pay us, even.”

“It was all about Charlie, wasn’t it?” Slate says.

Verna nods. “They said they’d wipe his record clean. We could go anywhere we wanted.”

“And when they shot me?” George says. His voice sounds sharper now, more awake. More like him.

“I swear I don’t know!” Verna says, her eyes widening. “Baby, they said no one would get hurt. Maybe it was like Slate said — maybe somebody slipped on the trigger —”

“Or maybe they got mixed up,” Slate says quietly. “Maybe they mistook George for me. Because someone told them I was surplus to their requirements.”

The implication hangs in the air. Verna doesn’t say a damn thing.

“I should kill you,” George says. But there are tears in his eyes now, and gleaming around the edges as they run down his cheeks. “I should —” he looks down at the box angrily — “Shut up! You shut up!” — and back at Verna — “I should kill you right here.”

“I did it for you,” Verna says. “I did for us, for all of us. You, me, and Charlie.”

The kid’s name makes George pause, halfway through lifting up the silver box in Verna’s direction. His hand trembles, and he lets it fall back to his side.

“What you should do, Georgie boy,” Slate says, “is listen to her.” He can’t tell who’s more surprised — George or Verna. But he keeps talking anyway. “You think anyone in this life doesn’t ever have even a moment where they’re just out for themselves, then you’re better off listening to that little box of yours. Except I’m pretty sure it wants something out of you, too.”

“That’s not true,” George says, but Slate can already hear the doubt in his voice. “It saved me. It tells me — it tells me —”

“Whatever you want to hear,” Slate says. “Verna, sure, she used you. Probably as bad as you used her. A wallet for your trips to the track. That’s what we do, us people. We latch on and we get what we can.”

Verna stands in the light with her eyes downcast, chewing on her lower lip, and takes a long time before she speaks. “Part of me would kill you dead right now if I could. But I love you, George. I think of being without you and it scares me. Scares me worse than you — than that thing in your hand — ever did or ever could.”

“Think about what you want, George,” Slate says. “Not the little box. Not the wires it spun up inside you. You. Whatever songs it’s singing, whatever pictures it’s putting in your head — do you really want that? Or do you want her? Do you want a real life, here in the world, with her?”

George falters, glances down at the box as if it’s got him by the head with invisible thread, and it’s tugging him toward it. Then he tears himself away. He holds up his other hand.

“Verna,” he says. He’s sucking in air in huge shuddering gulps, his eyes wet. “Baby. Baby, I’m so sorry.”

Verna takes a step toward him, glances over at Slate, and then another step. “I know,” she says. “It wasn’t you.”

“It’s me now,” he says. “Now and forever. Long as you’ll have me.”

She takes two quick steps into his arms, throws hers around his neck, and kisses him there, long and deep, in the light from the headlamps.

That’s when Slate draws the pistol from the back of his trousers and fires three times, right through the two of them.

The desert air eats the sound of the gunshots, smothers them away. Verna and George stagger, locked together, and then pitch sideways to the ground.

Slate waits a few seconds before he walks over. He nudges them apart with the tip of his shoe, taking care to avoid the blood that’s leaking out beneath them. Verna’s eyes are wide, staring up past the stars. She takes a few last short gasps.

George is still conscious. Already Slate can see silver threads twining their way around the edges of the three red holes in his chest. He looks up at Slate, somewhere between hurt and relieved.

“It’s better this way,” Slate says to him. “Better without her. Without that little box pushing you around.”

“I didn’t—” George gasps, and pauses to cough up a little blood. “I didn’t see — it didn’t tell me—”

“Nothing for it to tell,” Slate says. “I’m not sure there ever was.” He raises the pistol

again, centers the sight on George's forehead. "I'm sorry, Georgie boy. For what it's worth."

He fires until the gun is empty. Until there's too much missing for the little box to ever fix. The silver wires wither. George's hand goes limp, and the box slips from it to the asphalt.

Slate stands there under the stars in the hot white pool of the headlamps, looking down at the little silver box. He stands there for a very long time.

Nine

“Is he expecting you?” the hostess asks, fluttering her eyelashes professionally.

“No,” Slate says, “but he’ll want to see me.” The briefcase starts to weigh on his left arm, so he switches it to his right.

The girl calls over a broad wall of beef unconvincingly pinned into a dinner jacket, and whispers in the big man’s ear. He waits a second — perhaps it takes time for sound to travel the great distance through his skull to his brain — then nods and disappears behind a door marked “PRIVATE.”

Behind the girl, the orchestra starts up another tune, lively and bright. Calypso, from the sound of it. Must not be quite out of fashion here yet.

“Good crowd tonight,” Slate says, watching smartly dressed couples flock from their tables to go jitter around on the floor.

“It’s all right for a Thursday,” the girl nods, and goes back to filling out the crossword puzzle she’s got next to the reservation book. In another minute, the muscle reappears from

behind the door, and nods to Slate to follow him.

The music's muffled in the stairway. Slate follows the muscle up to a landing, then doubling back to the second floor. He's new, this one — not one of the pair that visited Slate almost a week ago. The big man stops at a heavy wooden door, knocks a couple of times, then opens it and steps aside for Slate to enter.

Slate's shoes sink into soft carpet as he moves into the room. Almost immediately he's flanked by two more familiar faces — there they are, his old friends from last week — who pat him down with more speed than technique. Slate doesn't mind. Feels sort of like his last Swedish massage.

"Mr. Slate," Santelli smiles from behind a big wooden desk. "You come early, I see."

"I don't like being in debt," Slate says.

The gorillas finish their search, fruitless, and lumber back to Santelli's side. The boss has his eye on Slate's briefcase. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Everything I owe you," Slate nods, and holds up the case.

"It better be," Santelli says. "You got balls coming here, I give you that. But I find even one dollar missing, maybe I make it that's not so true no more."

"You could always let me walk," Slate says. "Just let me and my case walk right on out of here. Forget this bullshit about me owing you money. Forget about squeezing a few bucks out of me just to show you can — just so you can feel like the big man."

Santelli's eyes narrow, his grin tightening. "And why you think I'd want to do that?"

"I don't," Slate says. "I just don't want to pay your price if I don't have to."

Santelli laughs. "Balls. Like I said." He makes a beckoning motion with one outstretched

hand.

Slate snaps open the briefcase and reaches inside. He shuts his eyes.

Again the light sears red through his eyelids. Again the air crackles, and the skin on his face scorches.

When he opens his eyes, there aren't men standing in front of him anymore. Just three wobbling sets of legs without their owners, the bottom half of a desk, three shadows on the wall, and the ruined remains of a briefcase in his left hand.

And a little silver box in his right.

It takes him a few minutes to find Santelli's safe. Points for originality: It's not behind any of the paintings. Slate finds it sunken into the floor under what remains of Santelli's desk. He takes careful aim with the silver box and shuts his eyes again. When there's no longer a door on the safe, he reaches in carefully, the edges of the metal still glowing, and draws out bundle after bundle of cash. Enough to get him a long way from here, and plenty more to set him up after that.

He finds a satchel by the coatrack, dumps out the papers inside, fills it with the cash, and walks quietly out of the club – the hostess doesn't so much as look up – into the warm night air. It's stopped raining now, but he can still smell it, feel the dampness on his skin. In the gutters, the water's running into the drains.

In his hand the silver box hums, pulses, sings to him. A little voice inside his head, promising him the world, the moon, the stars. Telling him what to do next, where to go next. He pauses at the curb and stares down at it.

"Shut up," he says to the box, and drags it inch by inch out of his palm, trailing silver

wires tipped in red. He tosses it down a storm drain, hearing it splash, imagining the current carrying it far away and out into the ocean. Then he starts walking, blood seeping from his palm onto the handle of the satchel.

He doesn't look back. And if there's any trace of that little voice left in his head, calling frantically to him, fainter and fainter and farther away?

Well, Slate just doesn't listen.

* * *