

Cyclone Rumble

By J.P. Voss

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1

The Scorched Iguana Bar was a sandblasted adobe shack at the base of the Black Mountains in Northern Arizona. A couple of dimly lit pool tables placed end-to-end filled one side. Opposite the pool tables, a bar made of hand-hewn Apache Pine rested on fifty-gallon whisky barrels. A dozen assorted stools lined the bar, and a weathered old woman with end of the road eyes stood behind it. Hank Williams cried from the jukebox.

I ordered a beer and flopped on a bench in a dark corner behind the pool tables. I slouched in my seat, tilted my head back, and flipped the long neck Tecate straight up and dropped it between my lips, like the jug on a water cooler. Cool suds ran down my throat until foam oozed from the side of my mouth. I turned the bottle up, choked the last refreshing mouthful down my gullet, then tapped my sun-blistered lips against the sleeve of my white cotton t-shirt. Rolling the cold bottle against my swollen cheek I thought—*I can't believe Harper split on me.*

Jukebox went quiet and the only sound was the hypnotic drone of a wall mounted A/C unit. *I'm tired of all the bullshit.* I slumped toward the floor, my chin touched my chest, and I slowly closed my eyes.

The bottom of my beer was still cool when the muffled thunder of iron horses rustled me from my nod. I blinked a couple of times, until the room came into focus, and kept my eye on the door as two mean looking hombres rumbled in like modern day saddle tramps. They stomped their boots, knocking the dust off their worn leathers, then stepped to the bar and ordered a beer.

Full patch members of the outlaw motorcycle club, Son's of the Serpent, they both displayed their club colors proudly. Their top rockers had the word Serpent embroidered in black gothic lettering. The infamous patch was a wicked looking winged cobra. Behind the serpent was a jagged thunderbolt. Below it written in script, "The Devil Fell From Heaven Like Lightning." Because the Serpents claimed no territory, the bottom rocker was the same for all members. It read simply—Purgatory.

I shut my eyes tight and took a shallow breath. *This is going to be ugly.* I started to stand up. I froze. T-bone was pissed.

T-bone was a burly ex con with a pug face and volatile eyes. His real name was Earl Tison. Some guy flipped him off one time, so T-bone beat the shit out of the guy and bit off his middle finger. When one of the Serpents asked him how it tasted—he said—'Just

like a T-bone steak'. That's when they started calling him T-bone. He was pretty burnt about something, so I held back.

The other Serpent was J.T. Lawson. A.K.A. "The Law", he was the uncontested leader of the Serpents. Over six foot and rawboned, he had gunmetal gray eyes and a scruffy salt and pepper beard that made him look like a war weary Tecumseh Sherman. He was quick with his fists, and he had a hair trigger temper. Nobody messed with Lawson.

Lawson was a Marine buddy of my older brother, Morgan Allison. I first met Lawson about eight months earlier. My mom passed away in December of '67. Two weeks later, New Years Eve, Lawson showed up at our place in San Pedro with a bottle of Wild Turkey in each hand. My brother Morgan, who's kind of a jarhead, made a big deal out of how they were in the 3rd Marine Division together. They spent New Years Eve getting drunk and talking about how they kicked ass on the NVA in some shit hole called Dong Ha. Actually, I was glad he'd shown up. Lawson helped snap my brother out of a pretty deep depression.

Lawson drank his beer and didn't say much while T-bone blew off steam. T-bone stopped talking, puffed up like a man who'd made his point, and tossed back a shot of tequila. Lawson signaled for another round, then shifted his attention toward me.

"Duff Allison," he called out. "Why you sittin' back there all alone in the dark?"

His winning drawl, with its commanding undertones, drew me reluctantly out of my dark corner toward the bar.

"Come on over here Duff—have a seat—we have things to talk about."

We may have things to talk about, but you aren't going to like what I have to say.

I leaned sideways against the bar, looking at Lawson's profile. T-bone was on the other side of Lawson, standing against the bar. The front door was at my back, twenty feet away. I felt better being closest to the door. At 5'10", a hundred forty five pounds, I didn't stand a chance if these two clowns started throwing punches. But I could definitely outrun them.

"You were supposed to be here two days ago," Lawson said.

"I told that lawyer you got me. I told him to let you know I needed a couple of days." I slapped the bar like I was flabbergasted. "I told him Lawson. I told that lawyer. Make sure you tell Lawson I'll meet him at the Iguana on the 4th of July at four in the afternoon."

Lawson scratched his chin whiskers while T-bone drank tequila out of a paper cup.

"I didn't get out of county lockup until almost midnight Tuesday. The cops were supposed to release me in the morning, but when they realized it was my eighteenth birthday, they held me until just before midnight. Sons of bitches thought it was funny. Cops working the jail can be real pricks."

"Why in the fuck weren't you here yesterday," T-bone barked. His head shook like he was having a spasm, and the fat cheeks on his pock marked face quivered, while his greasy hair and a mangled beard hardly moved. He threw his arm over Lawson's shoulder, pulling him close and mauling him as he blubbered in his ear, "I don't trust this punk. This whole thing could be a set up—he smells like a rat."

Lawson leaned in close and listened to his road dog. It was a little disheartening when Lawson nodded his head like he agreed.

“You known me,” I said, holding my hands flat against my chest, doing my best to look offended. “I’m no rat.” I tried to play it off. “Like I told you, I got out Tuesday night at midnight. I tried to hitch a ride, but it was too late, so I nodded out under the freeway overpass. When the sun came up, I hitchhiked back to San Pedro to get my truck. Shit man—I got here as soon as I could. What do you want—blood?”

T-bone slammed his fist against the pine bar. I locked eyes with T-bone. He had primitive black eyes, set wide like a sharks. And he smelled blood.

“I didn’t ask to get involved in this shit,” I said defensively, with just the right amount of resentment. “You guys aren’t doing me any favors.”

T-bone stepped back from the bar, grabbed his crotch, and announced he was going to take a piss.

With T-bone out of earshot, I leaned close to Lawson and told him in my most reassuring tone, “I’ve got it handled Law. I just need to talk to Morgan.”

Lawson spun his head and looked me straight in the eye for the first time. His gray eyes flushed black and his mouth tightened. “Fuck Morgan. I don’t give a rat’s ass about any of this bullshit. Right now, I only want one thing from you.”

Shit Lawson, I thought as I jerked back. You don’t have to be a dick about it.

“Do you understand me?”

I don’t have it.

Lawson gave a nod to the old broad standing behind the bar, and she quietly disappeared. He pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes from his jacket pocket and tapped out a smoke. He had hands as big as a King Crab. They made the cigarette look like a toothpick. He lit up, inhaled deeply, and casually blew out the smoke like he didn’t have a care in the world. For a second, it was like I wasn’t even there. Like none of this shit was even happening. And I was just watching Lawson in a dream.

Turning from Lawson I dropped my eyes and stared at the name of some drunk carved in the solid pine bar. *What the hell is going on?*

T-bone slammed the bathroom door on his way out. I looked up and watched him wiping his pug nose with the sleeve of his filthy jacket. He stopped to hock a loogie, and then launched the snot-green wad into the corner. He walked past Lawson and stopped directly behind me, close enough so I could smell his roadkill breath.

“What the hell is going on?”

T-bone smacked his right fist into his left palm, like a fighter warming up. He smiled, rhythmically punching his hand progressively harder, while his mad eyes got wider.

I turned to Lawson, hoping for a little understanding, and T-bone clutched my upper arm. I struggled to break away, and the Neanderthal clamped down with a death grip. He got his free hand around my neck, and hooked his thumb under my jaw. T-bone lifted me a couple of feet in the air and slammed me on the bar. He held my head against the bar while Lawson leaned over and poked his beak in my face.

“Do we understand each other,” Lawson said, smoke unfurling from his mouth and burning my eyes.

“Yeah—yeah, we understand each other.”

“Search him.”

T-bone held my face flat against the bar with one hand, lifted my t-shirt, and probed along the waistband of my boxers. He let go of my head, but kept a firm hand planted in

the middle of my back. He gave me a thorough pat down and checked the cuff of my Levis.

“He’s clean.” T-bone released the pressure off my back, but didn’t back away.

“Now that we understand each other,” Lawson said. “It’s time to take care of business.”

“What the hell was that all about?”

“Checking for a wire little man,” T-bone replied.

“Goddamn it Lawson. I told you—I’m no rat.” I pointed a backhanded thumb toward T-bone. “Tell this mug to back off.”

T-bone slapped the back of my head. “Shut the fuck up.”

“Where’s the backpack?” Lawson commanded.

“I’m not stupid enough to have it with me. I can get it tomorrow.”

T-bone leaned on me, squeezing me against the bar.

“I’ve got it covered. I just can’t get it today. Shit guys—it’s the Fourth of July. Don’t worry, it’s safe.”

T-bone threw his arm around my neck like he was throwing a right hook and locked me in a fatal chokehold.

Lawson reach down and pulled a coffin-handled Bowie knife out of his black engineer boot. “You ever see an ‘Arkansas Toothpick’ Duff?” Over a foot long, with a long curved top blade, damn thing could gut a grizzly bear. Lawson ran his thumb along the blade. “Good looking boy like you—it would be a shame if I had to cut that pretty face.” Lifting the knife, he pushed the tip just inside my nose. Quick as a lick, he slipped the Bowie knife back in his boot and stared straight ahead like nothing had happened.

T-bone clutched the scruff of my neck and pulled me close, nearly kissing my ear. “Remember—we can get to your brother in jail, so keep your Goddamn mouth shut.”

I threw out my arms, like I was adjusting my cuffs, and shook it off. I ran my fingers through my shaggy blond mop and thought, *I need a haircut—and a bath—and about three days sleep.* I shut my eyes tight, and rubbed my knuckles against my eyelids until they started to burn. When I shook my eyes open, Grandma Moses was back behind the bar setting up another round of ice cold Tecate.

A car door slammed out in the parking lot, and the old broad dropped a beer bottle. Glass smashed against bare concrete and the front door flew open. I turned. Blinding light, and a blast of hot air rushing in off the burning sand hit me in the face. A silhouette slowly filled the open doorway, like a full eclipse of the sun. Shards of light surrounded the massive hulk as it moved forward. The door closed behind it, and the silhouette took shape.

Shit. It’s a cop.

The cop stepped to the bar. I spun in my seat and acted like I hadn’t seen a thing. Nobody said a word. Bartender filled a paper cup with Safeway tequila and stepped to the far end of the bar, by the front door. She handed it to the cop, without taking cash, without saying a word, like it was expected.

I could sense the cop scoping me out. Seven or eight bar stools separated us, and I could still feel him breathing down my neck.

“Grab me a cold one honey.” The cop took a couple slow steps toward me. He leaned against the bar and tossed back his shot. He crushed the empty Dixie Cup, and threw it indifferently toward a trashcan behind the bar, missing it completely.

The bartender set a beer in front of the Sheriff.

He said, "I know I'm on duty, but it's mighty hot out there, and everyone breaks the rules now and again." The cop tipped his beer toward us, almost like a toast, "You boys look like you've done some rule breaking in your day."

T-bone nodded his head, while Lawson lifted his beer in mock salute. I swallowed a silent guffaw.

"Don't I know you?" He asked. The big deputy moved to where only two barstools separated us. I could feel his shadow.

I half turned and glanced in his direction. "You talking to me?"

A hulk of man gone to seed wearing a threadbare uniform held a Tecate to his lips. Looking down the bottle, like the sights of a gun, he studied me with curious eyes. "You know what it is—you look a little like that movie star—you know—Steve McQueen."

I checked my crumpled t-shirt and stuck a finger in my holy Levis. I stomped the dust off my second hand work boots and thought, *Yeah—I feel like a movie star.*

"No—too skinny." He leaned a little closer. "I know I've seen that face before—I just can't place it."

"Never been here before officer; just stopped in for a beer."

"You boys all together?" He sipped his beer, rubbed his swollen belly like a hillbilly Buddha, and contemplated the three of us.

Nobody said a word.

"What you boys doing up here?" He turned toward the bartender, lifted his eyebrows and smirked. "You know—we don't get many tourists up around here."

I'm not talking.

"You boys are awfully quite?" the cop asked, like we needed a reason to be quite.

"What's your fucking problem cop," T-bone blurted out.

I spun towards Lawson. No reaction. I didn't look at T-bone. The deputy slammed his beer bottle on the bar. When I turned, the sheriff's pudgy fingers were dancing on the handle of his Colt Commando.

"I want you two to keep your hands on the bar," the deputy said, pointing at Lawson and me. "And I want you," he commanded, pulling his .38 revolver and taking a bead on T-bone. "I want you to step away from the bar, turn around, put your hands in the air, and lean against that back wall over there."

T-bone did it like it was the most natural thing in the world. Lawson kept his hands on the bar and stared straight ahead, completely unfazed.

My eyes darted from T-bone to Lawson, and back to the hair trigger deputy.

Deputy kept his gun on T-bone. He turned to me and said, "I saw two motorcycles and pickup truck outside. You ain't wearing one of those leather jackets—so my guess is—you don't belong with these two highway hooligans."

Deputy nodded his head toward the door, and I jumped up.

"Yes sir officer—that's my pickup outside—I just stopped in for a beer."

I stepped toward the door. The sheriff put his hand flat against my chest and stopped me.

"You watch yourself young man." He waved his pistol toward the two Serpents.

"These two are a couple of rotten apples—don't get too close, or the rot will rub off on you." Deputy Sheriff gave me a look that reminded me of my high school counselor.

"You got the rest of your life ahead of you son—don't screw it up."

I slipped past the deputy and grabbed for the front door. It was like opening a blast furnace. I held the door open about six inches and looked back at Lawson. He was out of his seat. He took one step. Deputy sheriff stuck the muzzle of his Colt against Lawson's forehead, square in the middle. Lawson took a half step. Sheriff cocked the revolver. Lawson froze.

"You owe me Duff," Lawson demanded, standing perfectly still. "Anybody owes me—pays up."

"I'll be in Barstow at the Wonderland Ballroom tomorrow night after nine. If you two aren't in jail—drop by—we can settle up then."

I bolted from the Iguana and cut hard right toward my '41 Studebaker. Slipping in the gravel as I rounded the truck, I gripped the bed rail with my right hand and lunged for the door handle with my left. I threw open the door, jumped in, and started the truck before the door closed behind me. I jammed the shifter into second and stomped on the throttle. The rear wheels spun wildly, and I kept the throttle pegged, driving sideways through the parking lot.

I skidded to a stop at the main highway, and the hot metallic taste of burnt clutch filled the cab. While the cloud of dust settled in my rearview mirror, I scanned the highway northbound. The road to Vegas was empty. I watched my rearview for a couple of minutes, saw that no one was following me, then hung a right and headed south toward Kingman.

Evening sun held steady above the rust-colored hills as I passed through Kingman and turned west. When I got to Topock, I pulled off down by the Colorado River and ate the last of my chocolate chip cookies. While I watched the river flow south along the California-Arizona border, I could only think of one thing, *I've got to find Harper.*

I set the brake and hopped out of the truck. I shadowed the bank of the river, through some grass plumes, back up to the highway. I took a long hard look to my left and watched the night creeping in from the east. I looked toward California, and the sun dropped behind the Bristol Mountains, turning the sky above Devils Playground incandescent burnt orange. *Even this hellhole can be beautiful.*

I hustled back to my truck, hurried across the border into California, and found a secluded spot down by the river. It was best not to spend too much time in Arizona. I was out on a conditional release, and I wasn't supposed to leave the state. I thought about the deputy sheriff back at the Scorched Iguana Bar. *He sure saved my bacon. Maybe all cops aren't so bad.*

I unfurled my sleeping bag and curled up on the bench seat in my pickup truck. I closed my eyes and thought about the river, the way it rambled south without a care in the world. I felt sick to my stomach. A couple of weeks earlier, I had been just like that river. I had been cruising along without a care in the world. That was before I got myself—and Harper O'Neal—mixed up in the largest armored car robbery in the history of San Bernardino County.

If I had listened to Morgan, I wouldn't have gotten mixed up in this mess. I'll never admit it, but I really should have done what my big brother told me.

“On your feet maggot,” Morgan had roared as he kicked open my bedroom door.

I had rolled up in my bedding, slid my weary head under a pillow, and pleaded with my older brother, “Let me sleep.”

“I didn't hear you recruit.”

“Give it a rest Morgan.”

Without warning, he flipped on the light switch. “On deck Mister.”

I turned under my pillow, opened one eye, and looked sideways at my brother.

“Would you please stop with the Marine propaganda.” I rolled to my knees and faced the window next to my bed. I pulled back the Hawaiian print curtain and peered through the foggy glass into the dark alley behind our duplex. “No way.” I tumbled back in bed and scoffed at Morgan, who was standing at rigid Parade Rest. “I don't know why you keep acting like you're in the Marines. You sure as heck don't look like a Marine anymore.”

Morgan had been squared away when he was discharged. Sporting a razor-cut flattop, he had looked like a football star from the fifties. Seven months later, all that remained were the washed out baby-blue eyes. With full lumberjack whiskers and sandy blond hair creeping past his shoulders, Morgan had officially dropped out.

“You look more like a Berserker than a United States Marine.” I rummaged through my bed and fished out a t-shirt. I pulled the undershirt over my head, locked eyes with Morgan, and said with a condescending smirk, “Don't worry big brother, even if you don't look like a Marine anymore—you still act like a jarhead.”

“Out of bed hippie.”

“Just because I'm not ready to join the Marines, that doesn't make me a hippie. Being a grunt was fine for you, but I'm going to college first—I'm officer material. You may have gotten the brawn big brother, but I got the brains. *And the looks—And the charm.* Besides—I may join the Air Force. I heard they've got better chow.”

“Only pussies join the Air Force.” He grabbed a baseball mitt off my dresser and hurled it against the wall, next to my head. “Be a man; join the Marines.”

“I'll join the Foreign Legion if I want to. Whatever I do, it's going to be after I finish college.”

“Fuck College. You're going to be eighteen in few days; it's time for you to talk to a Marine Recruiter. I can't be your daddy forever.”

“What are you talking about? I thought this was all settled. You said we were going to be roommates.”

“Forget about it Duff.” He picked up my alarm clock and checked the time. “You graduated three weeks ago. All you do is read comic books and whack your pud. You need to get your lazy ass down to the Marine recruiting office.”

“Slow down big brother. We don't want to jump into something I might regret. You don't have to worry; I'm going to get a job. I just need a few more weeks Morgan. I'll cough up my share of the rent.”

“Even if you get a job—you can't run with me. You're just a kid. You think you're smart, but you don't know jack shit. You've got a whole hell of a lot of growing up to do

little brother. And I can't stand around holding your hand while you do it. I made sure you graduated from high school like I promised mom. Now—I've got my own life to live. Did you think maybe I don't want to baby sit while you play Joe College? I've got other things to do little man. You know I'm getting tight with the Serpents. Lawson and some of the other cats have been talking to me about wearing The Patch. If I become a Prospect, I'll be getting into some pretty heavy stuff."

I laughed out loud. "You mean Lawson and his band of war rejects. Once this hero worship thing wears off—you're going to see Lawson for what he is. Think about it Morgan—you aren't really going to join the Serpents?" I lifted my arm and sniffed my pit. I took a good whiff under the other arm and then looked at my brother. "Come on Morgan—you can't throw me out in the cold. Let's talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about," he said. "Put some pants on and meet me out by the garage." Morgan did an about-face and disappeared down the hall.

I spotted a pair of Levis on my weight bench, got dressed, and followed my brother. Down a short hallway, through the crummy kitchen of our two-bedroom one-bath duplex, I stepped out the back door onto the cold concrete driveway. The cool damp air made me glad we were back in San Pedro. Even the smell of diesel fuel and dead fish from L.A. Harbor was an improvement over Barstow. I glanced down the driveway, squinting at the sun peaking through the haze. I thought I heard a dog growl.

Staring at his surplus-green wristwatch, Morgan grumbled while pacing back and forth in front of his six-banger '49 Chevy pickup, which was backed up to the detached garage. When he saw me, Morgan turned and walked along the side of the pickup and into the open garage. I followed. Inside was a brand new Bultaco 360 El Bandito.

"Is this thing hot?" I asked. "Because I know you don't have the money."

"Don't ask stupid questions," he said, sliding a narrow wooden ramp from the truck bed.

"Nothing stupid about it. Stupid is getting busted with a stolen motorcycle. I know you're pissed off at the world these days; I just really hate to see you get in serious trouble. At mom's funeral, you talked about going to go to college on the GI Bill so you could coach high school football. You keep running with the Serpents—you're going to end up at the University of San Quentin."

I hopped in the back of the pickup, and Morgan shoved the Bultaco up the ramp. Grabbing the handlebars, I pulled the dirt bike into the back of the pickup. "I know you think Lawson is some kind of hero, but I don't trust the guy."

"J.T. Lawson is a righteous dude," Morgan said, sliding the ramp to the other side of the truck. "I told you how he saved my life in Nam."

"Yeah—about a million times. It was 1966, Operation Hastings. You'd been hit in both legs and couldn't move. Surrounded by the enemy, slowly bleeding to death, it was curtains. When out of nowhere, our hero, J.T. Lawson, crawled through a minefield and carried you to safety. I still don't trust the guy. And some of those other dudes belong in a freak show."

"You don't know shit."

Morgan shoved his '61 Norton off the kickstand and ran it up the ramp. I secured the 650 and then hopped out of the truck.

I said, "I know a lot more than you think."

"You're just a young punk. What the hell do you know?"

“I know this—you keep running around with the Serpents—you’re going to get bit. If you ask me, the whole bunch is rotten.”

Morgan took a lumbering stride and grabbed me by the shirt. “I’m getting tired of your smart mouth.” Morgan unclenched his fist and eased back, but his eyes were still pissed. “You’d better watch what you say about the Serpents. If you’re as smart as you think you are, you’ll keep your opinions about the Serpents to yourself. The Serpents are hard men, not like those high school pussies you hang around with. So unless you want your ass handed to you some day—watch what you say.”

“What’s with you and the Serpents? All you talk about lately is how great the Serpents are. Time for a reality check Morgan. It’s Lawson and T-bone, and a couple of shattered war vets. What’s so great about the Serpents?”

“You don’t get it—do you Duff? The Serpents are a family, only tighter, and more organized, like a squadron. They’re willing to fight and die for each other. I’ve been getting tight with these guys. I really feel like they’ve got my back.”

I popped him in the chest with open palms. “The Serpents don’t have your back. They’re in it for themselves. What happens if you get arrested? Is Lawson going to go to jail for you? We’re family Morgan, real family. Did you ever think I might need you? To hell with the Serpents.”

“You know,” he said with a far off look on his face, like he hadn’t even heard me. “A lot of those guys have been to Nam.” He said it like going to Nam was some exalted ritual of manhood that mere mortals like myself couldn’t possibly understand.

Morgan checked his watch one more time. “Put your shoes on. You’re going to drive me up to a little cabin near Sidewinder Mountain. Fuckin’ Vince was supposed to drive, but he’s late, and I can’t wait any longer.”

“He probably met some beach bunny. He’ll be here. Cousin Vince always comes through. Sometimes he’s a little late, but he always comes through.”

“I don’t have time for Vince’s bullshit today. I’m on a tight schedule.”

“What’s your schedule have to do with me?”

Morgan gave me a look like an overhand right. “After you drop me and the dirt bike off, you’re going to drive my truck up to Barstow and park it at Tubby’s Truck Stop.”

“Then what—I’m supposed to sit there and wait?”

“No! You drop the truck off at Tubby’s and split. You can ride my Norton back. You park the truck out back, unload the Norton, and haul ass back to San Pedro. I don’t want you anywhere near Barstow this afternoon.” I guess Morgan could tell what I was thinking. He said, “And I don’t want you sitting over at the diner eating cherry pie trying to put the moves on Harper. That chicks bad news—besides, she’s too old for you.”

“Stop being a chump. Harper’s not the reason you got fired from the mine.”

“I got fired because the system sucks.”

Morgan finished securing the bikes. I went inside and scarfed a bowl of Sugar Frosted Flakes. When he came in the house looking for me, I was putting on my Salvation Army work boots. Morgan checked the front door, and I grabbed a Snickers Bar out of the freezer. We walked out the back door together. Morgan locked up, and I jumped behind the wheel.

We cruised west on Summerland Ave. through an early L.A. mist. I turned up the northbound onramp to the Harbor Freeway, and Morgan pulled a Browning Automatic

Pistol out of the glove box. He released the magazine and started popping cartridges out with his thumb.

“What the hell is that for?”

“It’s for whatever I need it for.” He counted twelve out loud as he reloaded. He slammed the magazine shut, racked the slide, and then set the Browning back in the glove box. “You’ve always got to be ready Duff. I learned that the hard way back in Nam.” Morgan stared straight ahead for a few miles then started rocking like a football player getting psyched up for big game.

As we drove through South Central Los Angeles, I turned to my brother and said, “You aren’t in Vietnam anymore big brother. I know it’s a jungle out there, but I don’t think you’re going to need the heavy artillery.”

Morgan got wide eyed, pulled the military-grade Browning from the glove box, and displayed it in the palm of his hand. “Heavy artillery—hell—this is a pop gun. You should see the ordnance the Serpents have stashed.”

I just let it go. I kept quiet and drove while Morgan chain-smoked. A half a pack of cigarettes later, we ended up in the orange groves out in the middle of nowhere, the sign said Rancho Cucamonga. From there I turned north. Morgan lit his last cigarette at the base of the Cajon Pass. We started up the grade, and the old Chevy struggled, so I shifted down and pulled into the truck lane. While we made the slow ascent up the 5,000-foot pass, I turned to my brother and said, “You know Harper O’Neal isn’t the reason you got fired from the mine.”

“Reason enough.”

“That’s bullshit Morgan.”

“I don’t want to hear about it,” he said, slamming his fist against the dashboard. Morgan gripped my bicep and dug his fingers into my arm. “Stay away from that bitch.” He let go of my arm and pointed past the horizon. “I’m going to need you to turn off just past Victorville, I’ll show you where.” A couple minutes later he clinched my arm, and shook me like I was asleep and the house was on fire. “Do you understand me Duff—I’m serious. I don’t want you hanging out at the diner.”

I lifted my elbow high enough to break his grip, and then yanked my arm free. “Yeah I get it Morgan. You know I’ll be eighteen in a few days, and I won’t have to take anymore guff off of you.”

Morgan sat up and put his hands on the dashboard. With his eyes focused up the road he said, “If you don’t like it, you can go down and enlist on Monday, or you can get a fucking job and move out on your own. Until then—like the judge said—I’m your legal guardian. You do what I say.”

Any time we got in an argument, Morgan loved to throw that legal guardian bullshit in my face. Every time he said it, I could picture him in his Dress Blues at the custody hearing. Morgan had just gotten out of the Marines when my mom died. Since our dad had been killed in the Korean War, and because I was still seventeen, there was a custody hearing. Although Morgan was only twenty-five, the judge was impressed with how mature my brother appeared. He had secured a good job as a maintenance mechanic at the McCord Mine out in Barstow, and his hair was high and tight, just like the judges. The judge gave a speech about how great it was that he had served his country and what a shame it was that all those ungrateful hippies were out in the streets protesting. *If that judge could only see Morgan now.*

Leaving the cool San Bernardino Mountains, we crested the Cajon Pass. The road flattened out, and we headed north into the Mojave Desert. We blew through Victorville. A few minutes later my brother pointed at a mile marker and told me to pull over. I drifted onto the shoulder, slowed down, and eased off the asphalt onto a dirt berm. Morgan pointed to a sign that read No Admittance.

“Take that road. Hurry up.”

“When did you become such a dick?” I asked, slamming my foot on the gas pedal. Gravel peppered the undercarriage and the truck shot through an opening in a barbed wire fence.

We headed east through the rocks and tumbleweeds toward Stoddard Ridge. A half hour later we started up a rutted old fire road that ran along the backside of Sidewinder Mountain. A mile or so up the trail, the old Chevy struggled through a dry wash. On the other side of the wash, we descended into a gorge, turned a short corner, and drove up on an old pecky cedar miner’s shack. Place had a rickety front porch, and there were seven or eight motorcycles out front, mostly Harleys. A tall lanky dude with a wiry beard wearing a stovetop hat stood on the porch. He looked like Abraham Lincoln on smack. With a shotgun cradled in his arms, like he was holding a baby, the guy swayed forward until it looked like he was going to fall off the porch. Then he’d sway back. I don’t think he even noticed us pull up.

“Looks like a junkie,” I mumbled as we rolled to a stop.

“Shut the fuck up Duff. I’m serious motherfucker. You keep your goddamn mouth shut.”

“What’s your problem Morgan?”

Morgan wasn’t listening; he was focused on the shack. Lawson and his motley crew were spilling out of the front door. Lawson looked toward my brother and lifted a sleeveless Denim Jacket over his head with both hands. The crusty group cheered, and my brother roared—‘Oorah’. The jacket had a Prospect Rocker on it, and Morgan left me hanging while he ran up to get his new club patch. Lawson gave my brother a bear hug while the others slapped him on the back.

I got busy unloading the motocross bike. As I pulled down the tailgate, I could hear my brother coming around the front of the truck, talking tough. Morgan had his arm around Lawson’s shoulder. T-bone followed, on Lawson’s flank. The burly ex con had a WWII grease gun in one hand, and a bottle of bourbon whiskey in the other.

“Who the fuck is this,” T-bone said, waving the submachine gun in my direction.

“He’s cool,” Morgan said. “It’s my brother Duff. Don’t you remember? He always had his head in a book. You called him Poindexter.”

“Looks like a rat to me.”

“I’m not a rat. I never told on anyone in my life. Besides, there’s nothing to tell.” I turned to my brother. “Unless bad manners are a crime.” I spit some dust. “Don’t ask me to do you anymore favors Morgan. You’ve been giving me crap all morning, and now your retard buddy is giving me a ration. One of your asshole friends can drive the truck up to Barstow. I’ll hitchhike back to San Pedro.”

T-bone took offence and started toward me. Morgan stepped around the back of the pickup and cocked his arm. I pulled my chin.

Morgan said, “Goddamn it Duff. I told you to watch your mouth. I ought to...”

Lawson stepped in front of T-bone and asked my brother. “What the hell happened to Vince?”

Morgan lowered his arm and looked back at Lawson. “Vince didn’t show up. I was running out of time. I didn’t have any choice Lawson.”

“I don’t like it,” T-bone said. “He looks like a punk.”

I heard T-bone; my eyes were on Lawson.

Callous eyes stared from behind the shadow of a scowl. Lawson said, “Morgan says you’re a smart kid”

“Smart enough.”

“That’s good, because I need you to be smart. Be smart and forget you were ever here. If I find out you’ve been running your mouth, I’ll have T-bone cut your tongue out.”

T-bone sucked air as he laughed, like a hyena with a tracheotomy.

T-bone stopped laughing. Morgan didn’t say a word. Lawson watched.

“Like I said, there’s nothing to tell.”

“Just make sure you remember that. Your brother’s life may depend on it.”

Lawson took off his club jacket. He motioned for Morgan to do the same. Then he handed them to T-bone. Morgan didn’t like giving up his new Patch.

“Don’t sweat it man,” T-bone said. “You’ll get it back. I’m going to stash them all in the shack. We don’t need to do any advertising today.”

“We’re leaving in ten minutes,” Lawson said. “Get your shit together.” He followed T-bone toward the shack. He stopped and turned around. “Make sure your brother knows what the fuck’s going on. If he fucks this up, you’ll pay the price.”

Morgan hustled, hopping in the truck and quickly untying the dirt bike.

I pulled out the wooden ramp and asked, “What the hell was that all about?”

“He was testing you. Lucky for us—you passed the test. Now all you have to do is keep your mouth shut.”

“Lawson is schizoid. He’s like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” I looked toward the shack and caught an eyeful of T-bone pissing off the front porch. “And T-bone is a Mongoloid.”

“Goddamn it Duff. You nearly got your ass kicked a minute ago. You need to watch your mouth. A guy like T-bone will bust you up for the fun of it. Out here in the middle of nowhere, I won’t be able to stop him.” Guiding the dirt bike down the ramp, he said, “Jesus man—you got a death wish.”

“So this is it?” I asked. “You’re going to live out here in the dirt and rocks with a bunch of snakes?”

“Nobody lives here little man. We’re just using this shack for a base of operations.”

“What are you talking about—base of operations?”

“Me and my bro’s are heading out in the desert for some serious recon this afternoon.” Morgan opened the fuel line, stood up on the foot peg, and romped on the starter. The two-stroke engine screamed to life and Morgan called out, “Grab my Browning out of the glove box. You never know when you’re going to get into a firefight.”

When I grabbed the pistol, I heard what sounded like a buffalo stampede. Half a dozen filthy bikers spilled out of the shack. They all turned their jackets inside out. The tall lanky dude with the shotgun, who looked like Abraham Lincoln on smack, strolled

over and straddled a chopped Harley. Five other greasy looking sons' of bitches followed. One by one the motors roared to life and the riders took off. That left two motocross bikes, and Lawson and T-bone standing on the porch.

I handed Morgan the gun and asked, "What the hell is going on here?"

"The Serpents are about to strike."

"What the hell are you talking about? You make it sound like a military operation."

Morgan tilted up his Ray Ban Aviator Shades. His eyes bore into me. "The Serpents are an army. There's over a hundred members nationwide. Lawson could make a phone call and have every one of them here in less than three days. Most of them have military training, and anyone of them could snuff you out in a second. The Serpents are some bad motherfuckers Duff. You don't want to piss any of these guys off, especially Lawson."

"Get serious Morgan."

"I am serious. Lawson was in the Marines for fifteen years. He did three tours in Nam. Believe me, Master Gunnery Sergeant J.T. Lawson knows how to kill a man. I'd follow him into combat any day. A lot of men did. I'm not the only Marine who owes his life to Gunny. He really watched over his little grunts. He kept in touch with a lot of them. Lawson didn't just show up out the blue last New Years Eve. He came to recruit me."

"You're crazy."

"You know what's crazy Duff? Crazy would be for you to tell someone what you saw today. That would be crazy."

I didn't say anything after that. Morgan told me about five times to park the truck at Tuby's Truck Stop, in the northwest corner by the cinderblock pumphouse. Then he told me a half dozen times to leave Barstow as soon as I got there. And he told me to stay away from the diner. I don't know what he told me after that. I wasn't listening.

3

Lawson and T-bone stood on the porch, sucking the last couple of desperate hits off a joint. T-bone snorted the roach, while Lawson mounted a Husqvarna Viking and fired it up. He clamped down on the hand brake, cranked the throttle, and kicked up a whirlwind of dirt and rocks. When the bike started to fishtail, he released the brake and rode like hell into the open desert. T-bone did a one-handed wheelie, while chugging a fifth of Old Grand-Dad, as he blasted by us and disappeared into Lawson's dust. Morgan followed, going nowhere. *The Three Stooges*. I threw a rock at a lizard and cursed my brother. Then I threw a rock at his truck and cursed his asshole friends.

I double checked the tie downs on the Norton, turned Morgan's '49 Chevy around, and put the hammer down. Old truck pitched and rolled as I purposely slammed through potholes. When I got back to the highway, I turned north and spent the next hour chugging along in Morgan's piece-of-shit truck trying to tune in a decent AM radio station. Just outside of Barstow, a smooth talking country boy on the local station told me it was ninety degrees at two o'clock, Friday the 28th of June.

I made the eastbound transition to Highway 40 and took the first exit east of Barstow, County Road 1712. Barreling down the off ramp, I stomped on the brake pedal

about fifty feet from the stop sign. The brakes disappeared and my foot smashed against the floorboard. Frantically pumping the brake pedal, I crammed the shifter into second and popped the clutch. Rear end locked up, old truck shuttered, tires screeched, and the smell of burnt rubber filled the air. I skidded through the stop sign with my hand smashed against the horn. When I came to stop at the centerline of the two lane county road, I was looking to my left, checking for any southbound traffic, and the blast from an air horn lifted me out of my seat. A forty-ton Peterbuilt hauling low-grade ore from the McCord Mine passed my front bumper, missing it by less than a foot. The driver held his hand out of the window, flipping me off, as he passed under the highway and turned left onto the westbound onramp.

“Damn—that was close.”

I cranked the steering wheel left and followed the truck under the highway. I passed the westbound onramp and rolled to a stop at the frontage road. Straight ahead to the right was the High Desert Trailer Park. That’s where Morgan and me lived for five months while he worked at the mine. Harper O’Neal stayed there too. Harper was my best girl in Barstow.

Across the street to my left was Tubby’s. It was like most truck stops. Positioned parallel to the highway, with a fifty-foot neon sign, it had the usual oversized fuel islands and industrial looking repair shop. Best part about Tubby’s; it had a great diner, The Tubby Tease Cafe. All the ladies working there were really nice, and the food was good. I spent most of the time we lived in Barstow hanging out at the lunch counter.

I rolled across the intersection and hung left into Tubby’s. I tapped the brake pedal a couple of times, just to make sure they were still working, and then took a slow cruise around the back of the diner to where all the big rigs were parked. The parking lot was packed. I passed about fifty semis, parked side by side, as I made my way slowly toward the back of the lot. I spotted the cinder-block pumphouse in the northwest corner and squeezed Morgan’s truck between the pumphouse and a telephone pole, just like he told me.

“What a piece of junk.” I jumped out of the truck and slammed the door. I dropped the tailgate, pulled out the narrow wooden ramp, and then untied the Norton 650. After I lined the back tire up with the ramp, and made sure I was headed straight, I sat there for a minute getting psyched. I was about to do a blind side kamikaze down the ramp when I got a hand from a three hundred pound freight hauler named Bubba wearing a wife beater t-shirt and a greasy Cornhuskers baseball cap. Bubba told me to step aside, and I watched with my mouth open as the Good Ole Boy lifted the Norton out of the truck and set it gently in the dirt, like it was nothing. Bubba slapped me on the back, like Bubbas do, and told me I ought to try the Early Bird Special. That’s what he was going to do.

After I rolled up the tie down ropes, I checked the glove box for a smoke. There weren’t any cigarettes, but my flaky brother did have a couple of past due speeding tickets and a travel brochure for the Hawaiian Islands. Under the papers I found a pad lock. Slamming the glove box, I stepped away from the truck and kicked the door shut. I scanned the parking lot looking for a place to stash the Norton. *My brother is out of his mind if he thinks I’m not going to go say hi to Harper.*

I noticed the metal door on the old pumphouse had slide bolt with padlock eyelets, but no lock. When I looked inside, there was plenty of room to stash the Norton. I grabbed the padlock out of my brother’s truck, rolled the Norton inside the old

pumphouse, locked up, and pocketed the Masterlock key. I combed my hair in the side-view mirror, tucked in my t-shirt, and beat feet for the diner.

I was up on my toes when I sailed through the back door and into the diner. I gave the Truckers Only Section a quick glance, and when I didn't see Harper, I turned up the hallway that led out to the Family Area up front. As I pushed through the spring-loaded double doors, it was like a blast of Benzedrine. The high-output fluorescent lighting, designed to perk up the weary traveler, and sunrise-orange Naugahyde upholstery, set against polished black and white linoleum floors, all trimmed in chrome, made Tubby's the kind of place you could sit and drink coffee all night. A row of booths lined the front, and when it wasn't too crowded, I'd sit by myself beneath the cantilevered widows, and watch the cars and trucks head west on the open highway. Some were on the interstate going to L.A.; others were on the road to dreams.

I spotted an open stool at the counter and grabbed a seat next to a chubby guy, wearing a huge Aloha-print shirt, and an autographed Dodgers Cap. He was shoving chicken-fried steak in his mouth and crying to the guy next to him about how he lost all his money in Vegas. He was sure his old lady was going to throw him out for good—This time. When he called out for more ice tea, Harper came through the kitchen door holding a jug of ice tea and two pots of coffee, decaf and regular.

Dressed in nice fitting jeans, and a white sleeveless western shirt, Harper O'Neal was the kind of girl who looked like she belonged on a horse. Kept her butterscotch hair pulled back in a sassy little ponytail, held taught with an ordinary rubber band. And she had eyes like a clear morning sky, bright and hopeful. All I really knew about Harper—she was from Texas—and she had the smile to prove it.

"Ice tea—coming right up," she said with a subtle twang.

All the single men at the counter stopped eating and watched while Harper graciously topped off the guys ice tea. She asked him if he needed anything else, and was just about to tell me she'd be right back for my order, when her mouth dropped open.

"Duffy James Allison!"

"Nobody calls me Duffy."

"I'll call you Duffy if I want to young man." Harper dropped the beverage containers on the counter and came around with her arms open wide. I stood up and gave her an awkward hug. Standing there with a silly grin on my face, looking at the floor, I felt like a dufus, until she touched my arm and I looked up.

"I'm so glad to see you. I was beginning to think I'd never see you, or Morgan, ever again." She punched me in the arm like a girl. "I can't believe you left and didn't say goodbye." She looked past me and asked, "Is your brother here?"

"No. And I'm not supposed to be here either. So if he shows up later, don't say I was here."

"Why not? Has your brother forbidden you to talk to me?"

"Not in so many words, but he sure is pissed at you? He thinks you're the reason he got fired from the mine. I tried to talk some sense into him, but Morgan's got a thick skull."

"That's a load of horse manure," she said, shaking her head in protest. She smiled. "Not the part about Morgan's thick skull, that's absolutely true."

"It's like steel reinforced concrete." I rapped my knuckles against my skull. "You need a jackhammer and a blow torch if you want to get through to him sometimes."

Harper nodded her head, like she knew exactly what I meant. “Besides, that’s not why he’s mad at me. He knows darn well that I didn’t have anything to do with his getting fired.”

“He sure acts like that’s the reason. Why else would he be mad at you?”

Harper crossed her arms and took a deep breath. She was about to tell me ‘It’s a long story’, when a whisper of a voice coming from a booth by the front door called out for more ice tea.

“You stay right here,” Harper said, while gently pushing me back in my seat. She gave me the evil eye and pointed an accusatory finger, “Don’t you dare leave. I’ll be right back.”

Balancing two coffee carafes in one hand and a big pitcher of ice tea in the other, she moved across the room with the strength and confidence of an accomplished horsewoman. Stopping at a booth occupied by an elderly couple, Harper set the coffee down and asked about their day. The silver-haired little old lady lifted a shaky hand and touched Harper on the wrist. She told her they were on their way to Anaheim. Their granddaughter had given birth to a little boy, and now they were great grandparents. Grandma told Harper how much she looked like Grace Kelly in the movie High Noon. She said it a couple of times and then called to her husband, seeking confirmation. Old guy looked up, gave Harper an inquisitive squint, nodded his head in agreement, and went back to slurping his soup. Harper gave the little old lady a kiss on the top of her head and then moved along the booths supplying refreshments, like it was a Sunday barbeque. She was charming the socks off a little boy in an Engineer Bill outfit when Dessie, my second best girl in Barstow, came over and bopped me on the back of the head.

Dessie was tall and bony, always looked a little tired, smoked too much, and had a heart of gold. She always gave me double portions, and if I were broke, she’d feed me on the cuff. Standing like she was going to kick my ass if I didn’t give her the right answer, “Now just where in the hell did you disappear to? Better make it good mister.”

“I was abducted by aliens.”

“You look like it with that hair,” she said, ruffling my blond mop with the palm of her hand. “Doesn’t look like they fed you too good on that spaceship either. You want something to eat.”

“Double cherry pie and a tall coke.”

“You better have yourself a sandwich first. We’ll talk about the pie later.”

“I might be a little short.”

“Honey—all the men I know are a little short. I’ll put a burger on your tab.”

Dessie went around the counter, stuck her head into the kitchen pass-through window, and called in my burger. She loaded one arm with four platters full of food, and somehow lifted a round drink tray, holding it above her head like a French Waiter. When Dessie came back around the counter, Harper came up from behind me and rested her elbow on my shoulder.

Dessie said, “I got it now sweetheart. Thanks for staying late and helping out—you’re a life saver.”

“You’re very welcome. I was happy to help.”

Harper filled a couple of fountain glasses and then led me over to an open booth by the front window. She leaned across the table and looked me square in the eye. “What’s

going on? I haven't seen or heard from you in almost a month. I've been really worried about the two of you. What happened?"

"What happened?" I scratched my head for a second. "I don't know what happened. I thought you could tell me what happened."

"I don't know what happened. I'm asking you Mr. Allison. I went to work one Saturday morning, and when I came back, you and Morgan were gone. You couldn't come see me and say goodbye?"

"It wasn't my fault. The day after I graduate from high school, Morgan came home early from work and told me he'd been fired. He had a couple beers, jumped on his bike, and took off. He showed up the next morning around ten and tells me to get my stuff together—we're leaving. I tried to slow him down, but he was stinking drunk and pissed at the world. I didn't want him driving. So I figured I better stick with him. I didn't think we were actually going back to San Pedro for good."

"That's it."

"That's all I know."

She sipped her 7-Up through double straws and looked into me, like she thought I might be holding back information, and if she stared hard enough, I'd crack under the pressure.

"What did Morgan tell you?"

"The only thing he'll say is that you're the reason he got fired. If I dig any deeper, he just gets pissed off."

Harper looked satisfied with my answer and relaxed, sliding back in her seat. She checked the time on her delicate Art Deco wristwatch. "Is Morgan coming to pick you up later?"

"Why?"

"No reason. Are you signed up for college yet?"

I hesitated for a second. I didn't want to tell her about the fight I had with Morgan, and how I might be forced to enlist if I couldn't find a job.

"You are going to college, aren't you? You'd better. You're too darned smart to end up driving a truck or working in a factory."

"You're too darned smart to be a waitress."

"There's nothing wrong with being a waitress."

"You're right. My mom supported us being a waitress. But she didn't have a choice. She had two boys when my dad was killed, and she needed to put food on the table. You have a choice." I gave her a smartass look. "So tell me again, why are you still working here?"

She took a deep breath and sighed. "That's a long story Duffy."

"You always say that when you don't want to answer a question. You're my best friend in Barstow. Why is it I don't know anything about you? I told you my whole life story over a bowl of peach ice cream, but I really don't know anything about you."

"That's not true."

"Yes it is. All I know about you—you're from Texas, and you decided to stay in Barstow because you needed time to think. Anytime I ask you why, you change the subject, and we end up talking about me."

"You're exaggerating."

"No I'm not."

“Okay Mr. Smarty Pants—ask me a question?”

“I asked you one time if you owned a horse back in Texas. You told me it was a silly question.” I gave her my best Perry Mason look, “Miss O’Neal, remember, you’re under oath. Did you own a horse back in Texas?”

“No. It’s still a silly question.”

“Didn’t you live on a ranch?”

“Dallas is a very sophisticated city. I lived on a tree-lined street in the Highland Park District. It’s not the wild west.”

“I thought for sure you were a cowgirl.”

“I am a cowgirl. I’m a cowgirl with a pink VW ragtop.”

“See what I mean—you never told me you had a car.”

“It’s in the garage at my stepfathers house.”

“I didn’t know you had a stepfather. When I asked about your mom and dad…”

“I said it was a long story?”

“You said it was complicated. What else don’t I know about you?”

“Ask away,” she said. Falling against the back of the booth with open arms, she assumed a melodramatic pose. “My life is an open book.”

“Why are you living in Barstow?”

“That’s a silly question. You know why.”

“I know this: four months ago a Greyhound Bus heading to Texas, with you on it, broke down just outside of Barstow. The bus was fixed the next day, yet you’re still here. Why? Barstow is a dump. You don’t belong here. Actually—nobody belongs here, but especially you.” I leaned across the table. “Did you embezzle funds from your job, like Janet Leigh in Psycho?”

“No.”

“Are you on the run from gangsters?”

“No.”

“Were you involved with a married man?”

She stuck her index finger in the 7-Up, hooked a piece of ice, and threw it at me.

“Who are you Harper O’Neal? And why are you living in this God forsaken town?”

She took a deep breath, like she’d had enough. “I told you Duffy; I needed time to think.”

“You told me you needed time to think. You didn’t tell me why.”

She shook her head, like she’d really had enough. “I need to freshen up. Why don’t you come over to my place and have some peach ice cream? I want to know what you, and that brother of yours, have been up to.”

“After I eat,” I said as Dessie plopped down a big cheeseburger, with a double order of fries.

“You eat. I’ll go back and freshen up. I’ll meet you at the trailer. You do remember where it is? The High Desert Trailer Court.”

“Don’t be smart.”

Harper winked and walked away. Dessie slipped into her seat and lit a cigarette.

I asked, “How old is Harper?”

“I don’t know exactly, twenty three, twenty four, something like that. Why?”

“Is that too old?”

“Too old for what?”

“Oh I don’t know—I was just thinking about something my brother said.”

“Where is that no good brother of yours?” Dessie looked a little miffed. She inhaled a deep dose of nicotine and then pointed out the window toward Harper, who was walking across the parking lot. “That no account brother of yours owes that young lady a big apology.”

“What’s up between Harper and my brother?”

“You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“Harper and Morgan.”

When it dawned on me, I must have looked a little stupid. I sure felt stupid. “Harper and Morgan. You mean like boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“It was a little more adult. And the fact of the matter is, and don’t tell anyone I said this, but they never even kissed. Although you’re a-hole brother did make a clumsy attempt, which blew up in his face, and resulted in his immature reaction. The boy owes Harper an apology. And I really wouldn’t care to talk to him until he does.” She looked at me like I was the densest person on the planet, “You really didn’t know?”

“I’m beginning to believe I don’t know anything about Harper O’Neal.”

4

The smell of deep-fried potatoes and charred beef intermingled with the carbon monoxide waste from Dessie’s cigarette and the thought of my brother kissing Harper. I felt a little sick. I must of looked funny because Dessie laughed out loud. She mussed my hair and went back to work, while I looked out toward the parking lot and watched Harper walk away. *Sure looks nice in those blue jeans.*

Harper came to a slow stop and turned back, like someone behind her had called her name. Holding her hand level across her forehead, shielding her eyes against the midday sun, she pondered the ominous shrill of a civil defense air-raid siren coming from Barstow.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a dust devil. Looking south across the highway toward the McCord Mine, I watched a desert thermal spin dirt and debris fifty feet into the air and then disappear like a ghost. Through the fading apparition I heard the first few beats of a high priority alarm, like the dive warning on a submarine, coming from the mine. *A cave in?*

When I looked back toward Harper, a couple of sketchy looking characters on choppers had pulled up on either side of her. One of them lunged for her, and she quickly slipped beyond his grasp.

I was out of my seat and through the front door. The bikers were revving their engines, and the souped-up motors pumped out a ferocious thunder. Harper backpedaled, while the two bikers howled. Simultaneously, they stomped their bikes into gear and did a choreographed standing burnout. Vaporized rubber filled the air, and Harper became a silhouette in the smoke.

I sprinted toward Harper. Off to my left, I spotted a couple of mechanics heading our way. One of the bikers caught sight of the encircling citizenry, so he signaled his buddy,

and they both took off. One of the assholes did a wobbly figure eight around the fuel pumps while the other guy screamed past me and gave everyone in the restaurant the finger. Then they hightailed it out of the parking lot and jumped on the interstate going west.

I got to Harper first. "Are you all right?"

"They'd hang those boys in Texas."

The sound of a wide-open two-stroke engine, coming from the other side of the highway, closed in behind me. I turned, and an incredibly loud echo reverberated from the underpass. Some maniac riding a motocross bike, wearing aviator shades and a blue bandana across his face, came flying through. He ran the stop sign, like it wasn't even there, and rode full blast across the intersection. When he entered the parking lot, one of the mechanics stepped in his path. The rider laid it down, and he went one way, while the bike went another. Motorcycle slammed through some oilcans and bounced off the gas pumps. Rider slid across the concrete fuel island on his back, arms and legs tucked, using his backpack as a skid plate, and was up on his feet before he came to a stop. He swung around and came in our direction, scrambling for his bike.

Harper said, "That's Morgan!"

"What?" The same clothes and scruffy hair, it was Morgan.

Harper started running toward him, and I followed. Morgan didn't see us, or he didn't care. His only concern was the bike. With the motorcycle upright, he repeatedly stomped on the starter peg. It quickly escalated into a frustrated rage.

Harper got to my brother, called his name, and the bike kicked over. Blue smoke and the distinctive odor of Castrol shot from the exhaust. Harper covered her face and ducked as she turned away. I was standing behind her, and when Morgan turned to look, we locked eyes. It only took a split second; one quick glance said it all. He was fucked, and he knew it. Then he was gone, straight down the isle toward the back of the parking lot. At the far end, he laid it over like he was racing speedway and gunned it for the pumphouse.

The fluctuating air raid siren from Barstow and the pulsating disaster alarm at the mine played in syncopated rhythm. While I ran after my brother, the chilling sound of multiple police sirens chimed in. I sprinted to the back of the lot and rounded the corner. Slipping in the diesel-soaked gravel, I came down hard. With gravel imbedded in my hands and knees, I bit my lip and sucked up the pain. I got to my feet, and a cop car came tearing around the corner. Driver locked 'em up, and the tires dug furrows in the gravel where the car came to a stop. Driver stayed behind the wheel, while the bulldog looking cop on the passenger side burst from the car, swung around, and leveled a shotgun on the roof, pointing it in my direction.

I held up my hands and backed away shaking my head. The cop's adrenalin-fueled eyes wanted to shoot. And he might have, except the driver pointed toward the pumphouse and called out, 'There he is'.

The squad car pulled away, and I focused on my brother's truck at the far end. Morgan was squatting like a baseball catcher, with his hand up under the back fender, feeling around on top of the tire. I felt my front pocket. *Was I supposed to leave the keys?*

With the cop car closing fast, my brother was on his bike and gone. I stepped behind the engine cowling of a Mack Truck and peeked around the radiator. The cop car slid to a stop by the pumphouse. Unable to continue into the desert, the driver called it in, while

the other cop jumped out and ran after Morgan. I couldn't see past the pumphouse, but I could hear the wide-open throttle, and rapid-fire shifting, as my brother hauled ass into the Mojave. I heard a shotgun blast and feared I'd hear another. When I didn't, and the sound of the engine kept getting further away, I knew Morgan was alive.

I heard footsteps crunch the gravel behind me. I spun around, expecting to see a cop with his gun drawn. It was Harper rubbing smoky tears from her eyes. I swung back toward the pumphouse and the police car sped away with its siren blaring. I followed the sound the long way around the parking lot and back through the fuel islands out toward the highway. Sounded like they went west on the frontage road, shadowing Morgan.

"Looks like my brother really stepped in it this time."

"What happened; where's Morgan?"

"Morgan took off like a wild man. He's somewhere out in the desert. Follow me."

With Harper in tow, I started to run toward the pumphouse. We only got a few feet before a stunned truck driver spilled out of his sleeper and almost knocked us down. I looked around and noticed a rapidly emerging crowd, curious customers drawn to the excitement, and some pretty frazzled employees running around making sure everyone was okay. We slowed down and melted into the crowd. We retraced Morgan's path along the pumphouse and took a couple of steps into the open desert.

Harper said, "I heard a gunshot. Is Morgan okay?"

"What's your definition of okay? I don't think he's been shot, if that's what you mean. But it looks like he's a long way from okay."

"What did he do Duff? Tell me—what did Morgan do?"

"I don't know anymore than you do."

"I know this," Harper said. "The police are going to come back and start asking questions. We should get out of here."

"Sounds like a good idea. I know I don't want to talk to the cops right now."

Harper took my arm. "Let's catch our breath over at my place. I need a soda, and a couple of minutes of personal time."

With a firm grip around my upper arm, she was leading me past Morgan's truck, when I stopped short. "Hold on." I pulled my arm free and fished the truck keys from my pocket. I reached up under the rear fender and set the keys on top of the tire. "Morgan might want these—if he makes it back."

"He might want this too," Harper said.

She was standing on the shortbed step, with one leg in the air, doing an arabesque, as she leaned over the bed rail into the truck bed. When I stood up, she let out a delicate grunt, and pulled a frazzled army-surplus backpack up off the truck bed floor. Resting it against the sidewall, she looked past me, and discreetly pulled back the flap. It looked like somebody had shoveled money into a sack. I stuck my hand into the crumpled mess and pulled out a stack of twenties, still banded together. I fanned the packet of bills, then dropped it in the backpack and pushed the flap shut.

"What should we do?"

She nibbled on her thumbnail, and I could almost see the gears turning inside her head. "If we turn in the money, and tell the police what we saw, Morgan is toast. We can't leave the money in his truck. They'll just trace it back to him. We can hide the money someplace close. But there's a good chance it won't be there when we come back. Our best bet is to hide it at my place until we can figure out what happened."

I unlocked the door and opened it wide. Harper jumped through the driver's door and slid across the bench seat. She was balled up against the passenger's side door, twirling her ponytail, with her eyes wide and bright, like a little girl watching a late night horror flick.

Fresh sirens filled the air as I slid behind the wheel, and I could hear the sound of diesel motors grinding to life all over the parking lot. Air brakes started popping, and drivers started grinding gears. The smart ones were leaving; about twenty big rigs pulled out all at once. I slipped in behind a Kenworth, pulling a flat bed trailer loaded with heavy machinery, headed for the back exit. The KW was taking a wide right, heading toward the highway, and I slipped through an opening on his left. Looking back across my shoulder, I could see across the flatbed trailer. Three cop cars, cherry tops blazing, were setting up a roadblock at the intersection. I made a sweeping right turn and rolled slowly into the High Desert Trailer Park. It was laid out like a motor court, with a pool in the middle, and trailers lined up on a cul-de-sac. I passed the place where Morgan and I used to live, drove around the pool, and pulled to a stop in front of Harper's trailer.

"Morgan isn't coming back. Too many cops." I looked in my rearview mirror and the local sheriff pulled up behind me. "Way too many cops."

Harper looked out the rear window and smiled. Undoing the rubber band around her ponytail, she let her hair fall across her shoulders and eased out of the truck. She strolled around behind the pickup and crossed over to the driver's side. "I sure am glad to see you Officer Martin."

Through my rearview mirror, I could see the cop staring my way. I glanced down to my left, and watched Harper in the side-door mirror. She bent over and folded her arms across the open squad-car window, then arched her back, and leaned into the car. *Sure looks nice in those blue jeans.*

After Harper stuck her chest in the guys face, she stood up and did a suggestive stretch. She said, "I was scared to death Officer Martin. I feel so much safer knowing you're here."

My eyes darted back to the rearview mirror. The cop pointed in my direction. Then he turned to Harper and said something.

"That's Duffy," she said. "You don't have to worry about him. He's one of the good guys. He helped save me from those nasty bikers."

The cop stopped staring at Harper and looked toward me. Our eyes locked in the mirror. He was young, for a cop. With freshly coiffed hair, a regulation mustache, and starched epaulets, he looked like the kind of cop who wouldn't slack off. He'd leave if he was satisfied, if not, he'd be a big problem.

His reflection moved out of view, and I heard him get out of the car. I looked over my shoulder, through the rear window.

The cop adjusted his gun belt. Then he started to put on his shades, stopped, and looked down at Harper. "A witness just told me you called one of the bikers by name. Is that true? Did you recognize one of them?"

"No. I don't associate with those type of people. Why would I call one of them by name? Somebody's telling you stories Officer Martin."

"So you're telling me you didn't chase after one of the suspects and call him Morton, or Morgan, or a similar sounding name?"

Harper hesitated, looked a little nervous, and then started to laugh. “I did. I was so mad. I did chase after one of them. When I caught him, I called him a moron. I guessed that was his name. He was sure acting like one.”

“Hold on.” The cop leaned in the car and turned up the two-way radio. Grabbing the mike out of the saddle, he gave a quick response. He turned back to Harper and said, “You go on in the trailer and lock the door. If anyone you don’t know comes to the door, don’t answer it. Call the police. Call in anything that looks suspicious.”

“What happened?”

I leaned out over the door so I could hear better, and turned my head so I could see the cop.

He looked my way, glanced around the trailer court, and leaned close to Harper. “Less than an hour ago, several unidentified men on motorcycles ambushed and robbed an armored car out at the McCord mine. We don’t know how many men were involved, at least two, possibly five.” The sheriff tipped his hat and slid behind the wheel of his cruiser. After he started the car, he leaned out the window and said, “As of right now, no one has been apprehended. These men are armed and dangerous. Please be careful Miss O’Neal.”

“Aren’t you going to stay?”

“I just received an APB. The Park Ranger at the Calico Ghost Town spotted an unidentified motorcycle rider heading southeast toward Yermo. We’ll have this one in irons before nightfall.”

The cop turned on his flashing red light and pulled away. Harper stood waving like he was a brave soldier going off to war. The cop pulled out into the street, hit the siren, and punched it, going southbound in the northbound lane. Harper ran over, hopped on the side step, and leaned into the truck. Lifting the fully loaded field pack with both hands, she dragged it out of the truck and across the carport. She struggled up the steps and through the sliding-glass door.

When I came through the door, she was standing in the kitchen area, holding a jar of maraschino cherries, pouring the syrup into a can of 7-up.

“Would you like a Shirley Temple?”

“I’ll take a beer, if you’ve got one.”

“I have soda pop, if you’d like.”

“How much bread do you think is in the pack?” I walked over and sat down in the living room. I jumped up, stalled, and fell back in my seat. “What are we going to do with all that cash?”

Harper came out of the kitchen and sat next to me on the love seat. Her eyes had refocused, enveloping a singular light, and a deep blue confidence. Calmly she said, “The money’s safe here, for now at least. I’ll move it later if I need to. The money is like the all-powerful queen in chess. As long as we have the money, we control the game. If we can locate your brother, and keep him under wraps, everyone else will be like pawns. Insurance companies don’t care about your brother. They only care about money. We return the money, they agree to not press charges, and Morgan comes out of hiding, just like it never happened. If they catch him, things might be a little trickier.”

“You don’t sound like a waitress right now. You sound more like a mob lawyer.”

“I know what I’m doing. Believe me Duffy—I know all about insurance executive backroom board meetings. Trust me.”

“Even if the insurance companies are willing to make a deal, what about the police, and the mine, and the god damn armored car company. Somebody is going to want some blood.”

“Insurance companies control the purse strings, everyone else gets in line. In the end—somebody may have to take the blame—it just won’t be Morgan. We can work that out later. Do you have any idea where Morgan might go?”

“The rider they spotted going toward Yermo. Might have been Morgan. He could of circled back. The guy who got him the job at the mine lives over there. If it was my brother, that’s where he’d go.”

Harper laid her hand around my forearm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Be very careful. It won’t help your brother if you get arrested.”

“You’re way too cool about all of this.” I shook my head, like I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Who are you?” I stood up and patted my pockets for a cigarette. I went over and looked in the refrigerator for a beer. I opened a cupboard for no reason, peeked out the kitchen window, and then walked back over and sat next to Harper. “I really don’t know you at all.”

“Maybe you don’t know some of the details about me. We’ve really only known each other a few months. And what with your mother passing at the end of last year, when we first met, you had a lot to get off your chest. You needed someone to talk to. I was here to listen. Right now—your brother needs us both.”

“You’re doing this for my brother?”

“Whatever your brother may have done, Morgan is a fine man. I know that. Sometimes a man needs a woman to save him from himself.”

“I can’t believe you want to help after the way he treated you.”

“Your brother never treated me badly. He just shut me out. Morgan has a problem letting people explain things.” She sat there sipping her soft drink through double straws, as calm as could be, like she had it all figured out. “I’ll show him what a loyal friend I can be.”

Morgan doesn’t deserve you. I walked over to the sliding glass door and looked back at Harper. “I’m going to go see if I can find my brother before the cops do.”

As I walked away, I heard her say ‘I’m here for you Duffy’. I stopped in front of the truck and looked over toward Tubby’s. Red and orange lights were spinning everywhere. It looked like every cop within a hundred miles had shown up for the shindig. Reminded me of Disneyland, the time Cousin Vince and me dropped orange-sunshine acid and went on Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride. My mouth tasted like baked dirt, and my head was starting to pulsate. *Sure wish I had a beer.*

It must have been around six when I slid behind the wheel. With the sun directly in my eyes, I flipped down the visor, draped my sorry ass over the steering wheel, and pulled out to the street. It was complete gridlock. Off to my left, the cops had shutdown the intersection, and a row of tractor-trailers sat idling in the street.

I didn’t want to deal with the cops, so I hung a right. About two miles north of the trailer court, County Road 1712 came to an unceremonious end when the truck dipped off the pavement onto a dirt road. I tuned in the local C&W station. Hank Williams was lamenting the Lost Highway, and we cursed the day together. While Hank faded into the setting sun, I turned right at the power lines. Using a little know utility company maintenance road, it wasn’t ten minutes before I caught sight of the Old Calico Mine. I

glanced in my rearview mirror, noticed a big pillow of dust behind me, and let up on the gas. The dust began to settle, and my stomach started to churn. A black and white was coming up fast behind me. He flipped on his siren, and I slipped my foot off the gas. I eased over to the right, and the cop car flew by. When I started to speed up, the cop jammed on his brakes, whipped the steering wheel hard right, and slid to a stop, sitting sideways across the dirt road. The cop was out of the car and crouched behind the trunk, with his gun out, pointing directly at me, when I realized I didn't have any brakes.

I was about forty feet from the Highway Patrol cruiser, and the truck wasn't slowing down, when the Chippie abandoned his defensive position. Moving laterally to his right, he set up in a combat crouch on my left flank. He brought his weapon up in a two-hand grip, and fired a warning shot over my head.

I yanked the steering wheel right and went over a low berm into a shallow ditch. The front bumper slammed into the opposite bank, truck came to a dead stop, and I broke three ribs on the steering wheel.

I was still trying to catch my breath when the Highway Patrolman pulled me out of the truck by my hair, tossed me face down in the dirt, and stepped on the back of my neck. My chest heaved off the ground, and my lungs struggled for air. I felt a steel muzzle against my ear, heard the hammer click, and I didn't struggle anymore.

5

The cop secured his firearm, stuck a knee between my shoulders, and then cuffed me, like I was the prize in a calf-roping contest. After he frisked me, he stood up and planted his hard-sole uniform shoe directly on my lumbar vertebra. "You got any identification boy?"

"I don't remember; I don't think so."

"What kind of answer is that hippie?" He spit a big wad of macerated chaw into a Creosote bush. "You been smoking marijuana boy?"

"No—but I could use a beer if you've got one."

Pressing his heel into my back and twisting his hip, he ground the stiff leather sole into my flesh. When he was sure he had my attention, he gave his service revolver a love pat and said, "You better not move—you Goddamn hippie son of a bitch. You try and get away from me again—I'll blow your Goddamn head off." He chomped the corner off a fresh plug of tobacco and puke-red spit dribbled from the side of his mouth.

While the cop searched the pickup truck, I rolled onto my side. Except for the California Highway Patrolman uniform, he looked like an old dustbowl sharecropper. The CHP grabbed something small out of the truck bed and then opened the passenger-side door. He poked his face in the glove box and pulled out the past due speeding tickets. "Morgan Allison huh, looks like you got a couple of traffic warrants."

Lying on my side in the fetal position, with my hands cuffed behind me, I was using my forehead to keep the pressure off my broken ribs. I lifted my face out of the dirt, scraped my tongue against my lips, and spit out a mouthful of grit. "I'm not Morgan."

The CHP looked like I'd called his mother a whore. He stepped up out of the shallow ditch, took a couple of steps toward me, cocked back his foot, and nailed me in the gut. "You Goddamn hippie son of a bitch. Don't lie to me."

His toe caught me in a tender spot, just below a broken rib, and a muscle spasm lifted me off the ground. My vision blurred, and I struggled to catch my breath. When I could breathe again, the cop stuck his shoe under my chin and lifted my face. He fanned a packet of banded twenty-dollar bills and asked, "Where's the rest of it boy?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I didn't see it, or even feel it, but I know he hit me with something, because the next thing I remember, I was laying face down across the back seat of the Highway Patrol cruiser. The sun was still up, so I knew I couldn't have been out for too long.

Without thinking, I twisted my torso and pulled myself up off the backseat. My broken ribs ripped into tendon and triggered a wave of mind-bending pain. I jerked in a convulsive fit, and I almost lost my cookies.

"Pipe down you whimpering sissy."

"I'm not whimpering, and I'm not a sissy. Why'd you kick me?"

"Pipe down boy. I ask the questions around here." We turned up the back road into the old Calico Ghost Town. "I ask the questions, and you'd best have the answers."

"I don't know anything."

The cruiser came to a stop behind a weather-beaten shed.

"What the hell are you doing?"

The gnarled old cop got out and opened the rear door. "Get out of the car boy."

"I didn't do anything."

The cop pulled a leather slapjack from his back pocket and wrapped the lanyard around his wrist. I rolled out of the squad car, with my hands cuffed behind me, expecting to get nailed. I crouched with my head down, staring at his holster.

"I thought you'd see it my way," the CHP said. He concealed the low-profile weapon in his back pocket. Then he threw a roundhouse slap with a cupped hand and whopped me up side the head. "Look at me you little faggot."

I rolled with the slap. Cautiously, I lifted my eyes. "I don't know anything. I want a lawyer."

He took the banded bills from his utility belt and started slapping me with it. I spun around, and he beat the back of my skull. When he stopped to spit, I turned to look, and he threw the packet in my face.

"You don't need a lawyer boy. You need a miracle. It's going take a goddamn miracle for me not to snuff your sorry ass." The crazy cop got in my face and started choking me. "You know how many fucking piece of shit hippies I've left in the desert. You better start telling me what I want to know."

With both hands clinched around my neck, he crammed my face against the squad-car window. I tried to spin away, tripped, fell to my knees, and landed with my back to the cop. I expect to feel the sting of his leather slapjack, when a police siren blasted a quick crescendo, filling the air with a startling reverberation. I turned to look, and the local Deputy Sheriff, Officer Martin, got out of his car. The young deputy came around the vehicle with his baton at the ready.

"Everything all right here Patrolman?"

“Son of bitch tried to get away,” the CHP said. He shook hands with the deputy and introduced himself as Leonard Elmore Masterson. “My friends call me Lem,” he said. “I was part of a three-unit team set up over by Tubby’s on County Road 1712. We had everything secured, nobody in or out. When I see this little prick slumped over the steering wheel of his pickup truck, sneaking out of the trailer park. When I caught up with him, he refused to pull over. I pulled in front of him, trying to block the truck, and the crazy fucking hippie tried to run me over. Kid must be on drugs. He’s been talking nonsense ever since I cuffed him.”

The deputy was staring down at me while the CHP told the story. After the CHP stopped talking, the deputy dialed me in with eyes like a telescopic sight. “That’s where I’ve seen you.” He turned to the CHP. “Did you say that he was driving a pickup truck?”

“Yeah, little prick ran it into a ditch over by the power lines. I found this packet of twenties in the truck bed. It’s got to be part of the stolen money. He won’t tell me where the rest of it is. Not yet anyways.”

“And you observed him exiting the High Desert Trailer Court?”

The CHP nodded yes.

The young deputy started moving toward his car. “Secure your prisoner and follow me.”

“Right behind you deputy,” he said, taking hold of my handcuffs and jerking me off the ground.

The deputy sheriff was almost in his squad car when he stopped and called out, “Patrolman Lem, notify one of your team members to block the exit at the High Desert Trailer Park. And notify your dispatcher to put out an APB on Harper O’Neal, blonde, female, blue eyes, 5’7”, 120, early twenties.”

The CHP tossed me in the back of the cruiser, called in the APB, and took off after the deputy. Both cops drove with total disregard for public safety. A few minutes later at the trailer park, we drove the wrong way through the exit and came to a screeching stop in front of Harper’s trailer.

As the deputy stepped up to the trailer door, he reached for his holster and unlatched the safety strap. He rapped on the sliding glass door three times. Repeating the pattern, he repeated it again, getting louder each time. Finally, the deputy called out, “Miss O’Neal, if you’re in there, answer the door. I won’t ask again.”

He stepped back, pulled his nightstick, and smashed the sliding glass door. While the deputy was exchanging his baton, the CHP was through the door with his pistol drawn. He reconnoitered the small trailer, before the deputy even got his gun out. They started walking toward me. I didn’t like the look on their faces. The CHP ripped me out of the backseat and jammed me up against the car.

The deputy stepped in. “Where’d she go?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I want a lawyer.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Morgan Allison,” the CHP said. “At least that’s what was on the registration and the delinquent speeding tickets.”

The deputy gave me an uneasy look, like what he knew and what he was being told didn’t fit. “That’s not what the girl called you. What did she say your name was?”

“I want to talk to a lawyer.”

The CHP reached in his back pocket and started to bring out his slapjack. Something stopped him. When I turned to see what it was, another Highway Patrol cruiser came to a commanding stop. The man on the passenger side got out and started toward us. He had on a freshly pressed uniform, replete with ribbons and lieutenants bars. As he approached, the two low level cops in front of me stepped back.

The Lieutenant said, "I heard the APB. You men have a lead on the stolen money? Who's this O'Neal woman? What's her connection?"

The psycho CHP showed his lieutenant the cash and told him the bullshit story about me trying to escape. The deputy connected the dots back to Harper.

The lieutenant examined the cash and tried a new approach. "What's your name son?"

"I'm not saying another word. I want a lawyer."

The CHP supervisor game me a stern look. "You're in a lot of trouble young man. Your only choice is to cooperate. You need to tell me everything you know. Now. Before it's too late. If we don't recover the rest of the money, you'll be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. How would you like to spend the next fifteen years in prison? It would be rough on a good-looking young man like you."

"I want a lawyer."

The lieutenant had his subordinates toss me in the back seat of his cruiser, where I landed in the lap of another prisoner, whose clothes smelled like ninety-weight grease, stale smoke, spilt beer, and fermented body odor. His eyes were a dark-bottomless sinkhole, and his pallor was junkie jaundice. When he turned his back to me, so I could see the Serpents patch, I recognized him as the guy standing guard at the shack where I dropped Morgan off.

The lieutenant sat down in the passenger seat and told his driver, "Return to home base." He turned back to me and said, "This is the time to tell me what you know. If the money is recovered based on information that you've provided, I'll be happy to talk to the district attorney on your behalf. But if you insist on being a tough guy, and you choose not to cooperate, I'll do my best to see that you are punished to the full extent of the law. Do we understand each other young man?"

"I want a lawyer."

"That's right kid. Keep your mouth shut. Fuck these pigs."

The lieutenant said, "Keep out of this."

The rancid biker said, "Fuckin' cops are so full of shit."

The lieutenant took off his cap. Using the palm of his hand, he brushed back the spoiler on his buzz cut. "Don't listen to this miscreant. I'll bet it was a lowlife like him who talked you into this mess."

"Fuck you pig," the decimated lunatic sitting next to me ranted. The biker leaned over and stuck his face six inches from my ear. "I seen you before motherfucker. Don't think I don't know who you are. You keep your fuckin' mouth shut."

"Don't be a fool son," the lieutenant said. He adjusted his hat in the rearview mirror then turned around and said it again, "I'm going to give you one more chance young man. You need to tell me everything you know. You need to do it right now. Your only hope is for us to find the money before it disappears. The money is holding you up son. It's your only card. Once the money is gone, you'll be left hanging in the breeze."

"I want a lawyer," was the last thing I said to the CHP Lieutenant.

The last thing he said to me was, “You made the wrong choice son.”

The driver pulled into the Barstow CHP office and drove around to the employee’s entrance. The lieutenant got out of the cruiser and told the driver, “County Jail.”

When the cop pulled back on the highway headed for San Bernardino, things really started to close in on me. It was claustrophobic in the back seat. And the guy next to me smelled like a dead hobo. With my hands cuffed behind my back, I had to lean forward, which put more pressure on my broken ribs. If I moved, the spot where the cop kicked me felt like I had a burst appendix. That wasn’t the worst of it. The worst part, the part that kept messing with my head, I couldn’t do a damn thing about it. The cops could do anything they wanted to me.

The CHP driver turned us over to the San Bernardino Sheriffs, and they dumped us in a holding cell without air. The stench was so bad, I forgot about my ribs. I stepped past the toilet, which was more like an open sewer pipe, and rolled onto a concrete bench. I pulled my t-shirt up over my nose, and watched as my junkie bunkmate shivered with a bad case of the cold sweats. When he upchucked into the toilet, I stumbled to the bars and called out for help.

The jailer dragged his feet as he came over. He held a pen to his clipboard and asked my name. I told him I wanted to see a lawyer, and he looked at me liked I’d asked for a steak dinner. He turned without saying a word and walked away. When he came back, he had a pissed off looking sergeant with him.

The sergeant pointed at me and asked, “You the one who wants a lawyer?”

I nodded my head yes.

He turned to the jailer. “Put him in the closet. Keep him there overnight; see if he’s got a name in the morning.” He turned back to me. “When one of my men asks you for your name, they don’t want any bullshit, they want your name.”

“Kids these days got no manners,” the jailer said. He opened the cell door and looked at me like I was a boil on his dog’s ass. “On your feet junior—time for a attitude adjustment.”

I stepped out of the cell and stopped. The jailer was behind me. He put his palm against the back of my head and shoved me as hard as he could. I stumbled forward. After I caught my balance, I looked back at the jailer, and he pointed toward a solid metal door with a deadbolt lock. We passed through the door into an unbelievably bright hallway. The walls were whitewashed concrete, and the ceiling was a battery of high output security lights. It was like looking into an acetylene torch. At the end of the short hall, there was another solid metal door. Beyond that, there was nothing.

I stepped through the threshold into a dark concrete vestibule. I could feel the heat from the lights in the hall behind me. There was no lighting in the room. And the security lights in the hall cast a dreadful shadow on the boilerplate door in front of me. When the jailer told me to strip, I looked back at him, and the light stung my eyes. I did what I was told, like the man said, and felt my dignity fall to the floor. I reluctantly kicked my clothes into the hallway, and turned my shame into the dark.

The jailer told me to grab the handle and open the iron door. I felt the bottom of my soul drop out, and my knees buckled. When I heard the guard chuckle behind me, I got pissed, opened the door like I owned it, and walked in tall. It was another concrete box, only much smaller, with no lights, and nothing in it. The jailer kicked a steel mop bucket through the opening, slammed the boilerplate door shut, and secured the slide bolt. I

could still see a few cracks of light around the edges and at the bottom of the door. As I reached out to touch the light, the jailer shut the hallway door, and all signs of life disappeared.

I could feel the filthy floor under my feet, and I could hear my trembling breath. But I couldn't see a goddamn thing. I didn't move until a bug ran across my naked toes. I jumped back, bounced off a wall, and dropped to the floor in a pile. I felt myself start to lose it, so I took shallow breaths to calm down. I was miserable. I was also exhausted. I closed my eyes and passed into a world of twisted dreams. I was in a room with a thousand doors, and I could hear my mother's voice crying for help from behind everyone of them. I was running from door to door, opening each one. In one room, my brother was being tortured on a Medieval Rack. In another, a million black snakes with no eyes slithered along the floor and crawled up the walls. I snapped awake. I was cold, tired, sore, and hungry. And I was scared. I was scared until I got pissed off. I held onto pissed off. It was all I had.

When I heard the outer door open, and light from the hallway came through the cracks at the bottom of the boilerplate door, I guessed it was morning. Someone popped the slide bolt, and the door opened.

A large silhouette stood in the doorway and tossed my clothes into the box. "You aren't going to give me any trouble are you? I heard you were some kind of jailhouse lawyer calling for the ACLU before they even got you booked. I don't need it this morning. I don't need it at all. I ate some leftover corned beef for breakfast, and I'm already on antacids. I'll make a deal with you. Don't cause me any problems, and I'll help make your stay here down right tolerable."

While I got dressed, the constable in the doorway came into focus. Blossoming into middle age, ready for the next size uniform, he had a thick head of curly red hair, and could have easily played the sidekick in one of those old serial westerns. He popped an antacid in his mouth and let out a monumental burp.

"You can call me Curly," he said. "You got a name partner?"

"Duff Allison."

"You look rode hard and put away wet mister. Let's get you booked, fumigated, orientated, and fed. Once that's done, things aren't so bad around here."

"I think I need a doctor."

"You can still stand up, so it's going to have to wait. That's policy around here. First I book you. Doctor won't even look at a prisoner without a file."

Curly was pleasant enough while he processed me, and I cooperated to a point: name, rank, and serial number. He booked me on suspicion of armed robbery, possession of stolen property, evading arrest, assault on a police officer, and attempted murder. I asked, but he wouldn't say anything about the robbery or the attempted murder charges.

He did say, "All I know is—you got swept up in a wide-area dragnet. The local boys got on the phone and called every agency within 200 miles. All those different departments converged on the scene at once, and there was no way to coordinate that much manpower that quickly. Everyone was running around pell-mell. The boys may not have had much of plan, but they sure are being thorough. They're dropping a net on anything that moves. It's open season on the bummers and drifters out there. All the suspects are getting dumped here." He pointed to a packed holding cell. "A lot of these

desert rats will be out tomorrow morning. Probably won't even get booked. Looks like you're going to be sticking around for awhile."

Curly turned me over to another guard, who had me strip while he checked all my holes. That dude handed me over to another guard, who herded me into a shower and sprayed me for bugs. After another guard issued me a jailhouse jumpsuit, the guard who looked up my butt handed me back over to Curly. He led me past a large holding cell, packed with about twenty dudes, and around the corner to a smaller holding cell, which was about 12'X12', with a metal toilet and two concrete benches.

On one of the benches, some guy was stretched out using his leather jacket for a pillow. He reminded me of a carnival roustabout. I could tell just by looking at him, this wasn't the first time he'd been in jail.

Curly held open the cell door and handed me a brown sack lunch. "Told you it wasn't going to be too bad as long as you cooperated. You settle in here and have something to eat. The big boys upstairs are still deciding what to do with you. They've got a special interest in your future."

I sat down on the open concrete bench and started to eat my Wonder Bread and bologna sandwich. The chips were stale, but the milk was still cold, and it all tasted pretty good. I stuffed it down and slumped against the wall. I was staring off into space, not talking to anyone, when I started lamenting the previous twenty-four hours.

"Damn—I can't believe all the bullshit. I lost my brother. Then I lost my girl. Now I lost my freedom." When I remembered the roustabout, I looked his way and said, "At least I don't have anything else to lose."

"You could lose your life," he replied.

6

The cops finally let me make a phone call, which I used to call my cousin Vince, who had a party pad down by the boardwalk at Venice Beach. Some space-cadet flower child picked up the call and told me Vince was out trying to score some weed, and that I should call back later. I told her I couldn't call back later, that I was stuck in San Bernardino County Jail on some trumped-up charges, and I needed Vince to come get me the fuck out. She said, "Bummer man." Then she gave me some hippie bullshit about the universe being perfect, and how I was probably in jail for something I'd done in a past life. I was going to tell her to shove it, but I was desperate, so I asked her nicely to please give my cousin the message. Then I slammed the phone down.

Late that afternoon, I finally got to see the doctor. Old codger looked like he needed a doctor. He spoke with the dull rasp of a forty-year smoker, had coffee-colored teeth, and really bad pastrami breath. He poked me a few times, told me that I had three cracked ribs, and offered me a hand full of aspirin.

I ended up in a secured area, in a cell by myself. I was actually getting comfortable, and was looking forward to some sleep, when the guards came and got me. A couple of muscle-bound bullies in uniform hauled me out of my cell and dumped me in an interview room. It was fluorescent white, with a metal table, four chairs, and two suits.

Leaning against the far wall wearing a puke-green madras sport coat, a middle-aged burnout with a botched haircut gnawed on a toothpick while he scraped the crud from under his fingernails with a plastic stir stick. He stopped his impromptu manicure, checked his Timex, then scoped me out with a pair of close-to-retirement eyes. His twenty-year baby blues narrowed as he took my inventory and said, “You’re on my shit list you little turd. I retire in six weeks. No way in hell I’m going out with an open file because of you—you little piss ant. You’d better cough it up, or I’m going to personally flush your life down the toilet.”

He walked over and flipped the plastic stir stick at my face, poking me just below the eye. He sat down and plopped his leg up on the steel table, displaying a white polyester pant leg, and a two-toned leather cowboy boot with a fancy inlaid leather star on the sleeve. When his boot hit the table, the other detective looked up.

He was young, didn’t look old enough to be a detective. Dressed in a sharp blue suit and conservative tie, he studied an open file folder with a self-assured demeanor that reeked of arrogance. He snapped the file shut, looked at me with obvious distain, and ordered me to sit down.

“I’m Detective Sanchez,” he said. “This gentleman is my partner, Detective Zico.” He flipped open the file. “It says here your name is Duffy James Allison?”

I nodded my head.

Sanchez glanced at his gold watch, adjusted his gold cufflinks, straightened his red & white blazerstriped tie, then stood up and slapped me across the face with a lightening fast backhand. “You think because I’m Mexican you don’t have to talk to me? You think I’m just some wetback you can nod your head at. When I ask you a question, I want an answer. You nod your head at me again, and I’ll knock your back teeth out. Comprene?”

Zico could hardly contain himself and doubled over with laughter. After he caught his breath, he stood up and threw his toothpick at me. “You better not mess with the Super Mex,” he said. “You ain’t dealing with some East L.A. greaser you little turd. Detective Sanchez here graduated from Stanford University. He’s the youngest man ever promoted to detective, and he’s going to be the first Mexican Chief of Police. You piss him off, he’ll fry your chicharrones.”

Sanchez studied the file while the fire in my cheek burned. He took his sweet time and let the emasculating sting settle into my psyche. He closed up the file and set it neatly on the table. “Do you know what happened to Morgan?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I replied cautiously. “Is Morgan alright?”

“Why wouldn’t he be alright Duff? Is your brother in some kind of trouble?”

“Do I get to see a lawyer?”

“Do you need a lawyer?”

Do you always answer a question with another question?

Zico flopped in a chair and swung his boot up on the table. He pulled a twisted paperclip out of his top pocket and started cleaning the wax out of his ear. “Where’s the girl?”

“What girl?”

“You’re not too fucking bright,” Zico said. He asked Sanchez, “What’s this little turd’s name again, Duff, duf, dufus? That’s it, dufus.” He flung his paperclip toward me, and I leaned to the right, letting it sail past my head. Zico sat up and said, “Listen to me dufus. The next time you answer a question with a question, I’m going to take you down

in the basement and beat the livin' shit out of you. The worst that can happen to me—they put me on administrative leave—and I retire in six weeks on a full pension. You can play it that way if you want to. Or you can be a smart boy and tell us what you know. You help us, and we can help you out with the district attorney. I'm going to ask you nicely just one more time; where's the girl?"

Tell them what they know.

Sanchez said, "We want the girl."

"That's right," Zico said. "We want the girl. Whole Goddamn Sheriffs Department wants that little bitch."

"Detective Sanchez, Detective Zico, I'm willing to cooperate, I've always been willing to cooperate. I have no clue where you got the idea that I wasn't willing to cooperate. I'm just a little confused. Which girl are you talking about?"

"Harper O'Neal," they said in unison.

"I know a girl named Harper. She works at the truck stop in Barstow. I don't know her last name. I think she said she was from Oklahoma City. I'm not sure. All I did was give the girl a ride home. How could I know where she went?" I shrugged my shoulders and tried to look innocent. "If I knew where she was, I'd tell you. She's just some chick that works at the truck stop. I hardly even know her. If you're trying to find her, you might want to talk to the manager at Tubby's, or at the trailer court. They know a lot more about her than I do."

Zico stood up and scratched his balls. He cracked his neck and said, "The kid's full of shit. You're in this knee deep you little piss ant." He grabbed the file from Sanchez. "Let's go. We've got enough evidence to hold this little turd indefinitely." Zico got in my face and threatened me. "I'm going to put together a rock-solid case against you boy. Then I'm going to ram it up your ass."

Detective Sanchez opened his coat and pulled out a pack of Pall Malls. He leaned back in his seat and lit a cigarette. "You've got one chance. We want the girl. You help us find her, and we'll tell the prosecutor to go easy on you."

"If we don't find her," Zico said. "You'll take the weight, all of it, and a little extra."

Sanchez said, "Think about that tonight after the lights go out, and think about how it's going to feel celebrating your thirtieth birthday in San Quentin."

"You want some advice kid?" Zico stood up and headed for the door. "Don't pick up the soap in the shower."

Sanchez said something in Spanish that sounded like an insult and followed Zico out into the hall.

The lights were bright, the room was hot, and I stewed in my own misery for a long time. When a guard opened the door, I was glad to be going back to my cell. I started to get up, and a tall man with salt and pepper hair wearing a gray-flannel suit walked past me. He placed his black attaché case on the table, unbuttoned his coat, and sat down. I fell back in my seat.

"I'm Special Agent Andrews," he said. "I'll get right to the point Mr. Allison. The local authorities like you for armored car robbery. They don't have a very strong case, but that won't stop them from creating one. The Sheriffs Department thinks you were working with the O'Neal woman. The local deputy sheriff in Barstow felt humiliated by the girl. He described her as a femme fatale who used her feminine wiles to distract him.

He's convinced the money was in your brother's pickup truck when he questioned her at the trailer park. The Sheriff's Department is taking this one personally."

"I don't know where the girl is. I don't know where the money is. I don't know anything."

"You misunderstand my meaning Mr. Allison. I'm only trying to convey to you the severity of your situation. I don't care about the girl, or the money." He opened his case and arranged several files on the table. "I do have something you might care about." He flipped open one of the manila folders. "Look familiar?"

"What's that?"

"It's a copy of your brother Morgan's arrest report. That's his mug shot on top."

"Where is he? Is he okay? Can I talk to him?"

"We have him in custody. He's safe for the time being. You don't seem surprised by his arrest."

"The other cops told me," I said.

"The local authorities have no knowledge of your brother's arrest."

"How do you know?"

"I work for the Federal Government Mr. Allison. As an agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, I have knowledge and influence that far exceeds that of the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department. I know what they know, and I know things they couldn't imagine."

"If you know so much, what happened to Morgan?"

"Your brother was apprehended yesterday by the Military Police at Fort Irwin. He was traversing the perimeter on foot when a motorized patrol spotted him. Your brother was arrested on federal property while engaged in the commission of a felony. And he is currently in federal custody."

"I really don't know anything."

"That's what your brother said. He's sticking to it. I think you're smarter than him. I think you're smart enough to realize that you're going down in flames. And you're smart enough to realize that I'm the only person who can help." He opened a manila folder and scanned the contents. "I've reviewed your high school records Duff. You're an honor student who's never been in any serious trouble. Armed robberies are not your modus operandi. My guess is—you're in way over your head. If you want a way out of this mess, I can help."

"How?"

"I can get you out of here," he replied. "And I can offer you protection."

"What's your deal mister FBI man?"

He opened another manila file and flipped it around so I could see the photo inside. A United States Marine Gunnery Sergeant with battle-station eyes, decked out in his Honor Guard Dress Blues, stood proudly at Parade Rest.

"Do you recognize this man?"

"I may have seen him before."

"Look closer." Agent Andrews came around the table and started dealing 3"X5" photos in front of me. They were all various shots of my brother and Lawson. I could barely see them in one photo, because the focus was on me in the background.

"I'm going to ask you a question," he said. "I won't ask twice."

I nodded my head.

“Do you know this man?”

“It’s Lawson. He’s a Marine buddy of my brother. That’s all I know.”

Agent Andrews focused on me with a fire in his eyes and pointed to the photo of Lawson. “This man is no Marine. He was given a dishonorable discharge almost a year ago. Do you know why he was given a DD?”

I nodded my head no and said, “I don’t like Lawson either, but he’s just a burnt-out Marine.” I started to laugh. “His mind is shattered. He’ll go schizoid at the drop of a hat. But he’s no big deal. Seriously! I can handle Lawson.”

“Is that what you think?” Andrews asked. “You have no idea how dangerous this man is. You know why he got drummed out of the Marines?” The contempt in his voice came from some place deep down inside. “Lawson got blind drunk one night, and for no apparent reason, he assaulted a young second lieutenant. He sucker punched the young officer. Startled by the unprovoked attack, and dazed by the blow, the lieutenant stumbled back. That’s when Lawson viciously attacked the defenseless young man with an empty beer bottle. The lieutenant remembers getting hit in the eye with the bottle and falling to the ground. The last thing he remembers is Lawson kicking him in the stomach. He was unconscious, and Lawson was still kicking him, when the police finally showed up. Lawson spent the next six months in the stockade; the lieutenant spent the next six months in the hospital. The officer had extensive internal injuries, and he almost lost an eye. That young Lieutenant is my son Jeffrey. That’s why I first took an interest in J.T. Lawson. I’ve since come to believe he is evil incarnated. If you give me Lawson, I can offer you a new life.”

He pulled another stack of photos out of his case and flipped them one at a time onto the table in front of me. They were all Serpents, in various stages of disarray. In one picture a couple of guys wearing handcuffs were sitting on a curb behind a cop car. One photo showed some poor citizen getting his ass kicked by a half dozen Serpents. There was even a crime scene photo with a dead Serpent, shot through the temple. He had a couple dozen shots of Serpents getting drunk at different biker runs. And there was a picture of T-bone completely shit faced. I started to laugh. He looked like he’d been drunk for a month, and he’d pissed himself.

The agent looked at me like I’d farted at a funeral. “There’s nothing funny about these men. They are the worst kind of criminal mercenaries.”

I replied. “It’s just this guy is so drunk, he wet his pants.”

The agent grabbed the picture of T-bone. “Do you know this man?”

“I think I’ve seen him before.”

“That’s convicted felon Earl “T-bone” Tison. Do you know how he got his nickname?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “A certified public accountant in the San Fernando Valley made the mistake of being in the same city as the Serpents one Sunday afternoon. A dozen or so Serpents, half drunk and high on amphetamines, were hell bent going a hundred miles an hour on Roscoe Blvd., when this poor guy pulls out from a shopping mall. The Serpents were going way too fast and the accountant barely missed them. All the poor guy did was honk his horn and give them the finger. T-bone pulled a u-turn and caught up to the guy at a stoplight. As T-bone came up to the driver’s door, the light changed, and the accountant tried to pull away. T-bone dragged the guy out of his moving station wagon. He beat the guy senseless while his wife and daughter watched. Then he took the accountants middle finger and bit it off. When one of the Serpents asked

him how it tasted, he said, 'Just like a T-bone steak'. That's when they started calling him T-bone."

"Okay, so he's a freak. Tell me something I don't know."

"I'll tell you something very few Americans know," he said. "And something very few in the Bureau are willing to accept. The Son's of the Serpent are not what they appear to be. This is not just another ragtag motorcycle club. In the few short months since his dishonorable discharge, J.T. Lawson has created the foundation for a vast and powerful criminal network. The Serpents are only in their embryonic stage. Now is the time to destroy them. If you can help me do that, I'll get you out of here. If not, I've wasted our time."

I held my breath while I debated the pros and cons. I didn't like Lawson. He could be cool sometimes, but most of the time he was a prick. And he was dragging Morgan into his bullshit. I didn't want to be a rat, but I did want to get Morgan and me out of jail. The FBI guy talked a good story, but I really didn't trust him. Then again, I didn't want to piss him off. *I've got to drag this out.*

"I need to talk to my brother."

"I can arrange that. But I need something in return."

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and waited for the FBI Agent to tell me, 'All you got to do is sell your soul. It's easy—just sign your name in blood'.

The door flew open. A fat guy wearing a sharkskin suit and a pencil-thin necktie walked over and put his fat-sweaty palm on my shoulder. A huge hunk of gold in the shape of a horseshoe, studded with diamonds, was on his ring finger. His pinky finger was dressed in rubies, and his wristwatch looked like it cost more than an FBI agent could make in a year. His watch may have come from Tiffany's in New York, but his accent came from south of the Mason Dixon Line.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced," he said, extending his pudgy hand. When the man offered his hand, Agent Andrews turned and started picking up the photos. The big man held his hand out for an inordinate amount of time, until the Agent finally rejected his offer with a scornful gaze. He responded by holding his palms up in mock surrender. "No need to get hostile detective."

"I'm not a detective."

"Of course not," he said. "The suit is much too nice. And your photo array is much too extensive to be the work of any run of the mill police detective. If I were to venture a guess, I'd say my client was being interviewed by an agent from The Federal Bureau of Investigation. Without counsel present, I might add."

Agent Andrews locked his attaché case then handed me a business card. "Call me." He looked at the big man. "And get a new lawyer."

The big man's face contorted into the melodramatic frown of a circus clown. After the Agent walked out the door, the big man started to laugh, and his belly jiggled with delight.

He grabbed the Agent's business card out my hand and stuck it in his pocket. "It's not safe to be talking to G-men." He looked around like someone might be listening. "Certain people might get the wrong idea." He offered his hand. "Jefferson Trace Thibodeaux, attorney at law, at your service."

"I'm Duff," I said, taking hold of his chubby stub.

“Of course you are. Call me Trace young man, all my friends call me Trace.” He pulled a tortoise-shell snuffbox out of his inside coat pocket, dipped a pinch, and blasted it up his nose. He offered me a hit. I passed. And he sat down.

“Are you a lawyer?”

“At your service sir.”

“I don’t have any money.”

He leaned across the table, like he was telling a secret. “We have mutual friends Duff. And friends take care of friends. Don’t they?”

I nodded my head yes. “Do you work for Lawson?”

“The Serpents pay me a retainer. I represent them individually, and as a group.”

“Are you going to get me out of here?”

“We’ll have to wait for arraignment,” he replied. “Your day in court will come sir. I will make arrangements for your release—at that time. Right now we have urgent matters to discuss. I believe you know what I’m referring to. I spoke with Morgan at the Federal Building. He says he put the package in the back of his pickup truck. And you were arrested in the pickup, with a small portion of the contents.”

“I don’t know where the money is. I don’t know where the girl is. You need to get me out of here.”

“What girl?”

Shit—he didn’t know about Harper.

“Does she have the package?”

I said, “Don’t worry about the girl. That’s some wild goose chase the cops are on. You need to worry about getting me out of here.”

He got a wild look in his eye. He came out of his seat pretty fast for a fat man. He clutched my bicep and jerked me out my chair. “Listen to me little man, or I’ll squish you like a bug.”

I leaned into him and brought my knee up hard and fast, aiming for his balls.

He doubled over, dropped back in his chair, and started wheezing like an asthmatic.

I said, “Keep your fucking hands off me fat man. I’m tired of getting slapped around.” I took the snuffbox from his coat pocket and blasted a shot up my nose. “Here’s the deal fat boy. I know where the package is. You’re Goddamn right I know where the package is. You can tell Lawson that he’ll see the package after I talk to Morgan. And that means you have to get me out of this fucking place first.”

7

Saturday night the guards dumped me in a cell where the light never went out. I wrapped the burlap blanket around my face and tried to sleep. One of the guards would come by every half hour and rap on the reinforced wire-mesh observation portal until I showed my face. It went on like that until Monday morning when I was taken to my arraignment.

At the courthouse, I met with my lawyer in the prisoner interview room. The large southern barrister had a noticeable limp, and walked with the help of an ivory-handled cane.

I said, "Sorry about kneeing you in the groin Saturday night. I'd been slapped around so much I finally lost my temper. Thanks for showing up for my arraignment."

"Apology accepted," he replied with a tip of the hat. The big man lowered himself into a chair and dabbed his forehead with a monogrammed silk handkerchief. "Tensions are running high right now. And I wouldn't want to fan the flames. I'd suggest you adopt a similar policy." He leaned in my direction. His brow arched, and his pupils dilated. The exaggerated urgency of his baritone voice had a theatrical flare. "Outside forces are starting to exert considerable pressure. It would be in everyone's best interest if you were to tell our mutual friends what they want to know."

"I'm not nearly as concerned about our mutual friends, as I am about getting my ass out of jail. Like I told you before—I'm not telling anybody anything until I talk to my brother."

The hyperbole and bravado that were the big man's stock and trade faded from his face and he looked at me with a deep-seated fear in his eyes. "I've been in contact with our mutual friends. These men are not to be trifled with. They want the package. They're convinced you know where it is. My best legal advice would be for you to tell our mutual friends what they want to know. Sooner—rather than later—would be in the best interest of all concerned."

"I appreciate the legal advice," I said. "But I'm holding pat. You do your job; get me out of jail. Once I get out of here, I'll talk to Morgan. That's my hand. That's how I'm going to play it."

"You should be more concerned about your brother's welfare. Morgan has more to worry about than a few wasted years in Leavenworth."

"What's that bullshit supposed to mean?"

The big man looked shocked. "Morgan was responsible for the package. And he was responsible for you. If the package is returned, our mutual friends will be considerably less agitated."

"They'll get their package."

He dabbed his double chin and then stuffed the crimson handkerchief into his coat pocket, taking care to leave a poof out the top. His beady-little eyes bore into me. "And your continued silence sir, can we count on it? It is imperative that you do not cooperate with the local authorities, and you must not under any circumstances engage in negotiations with the FBI."

"I'm going to back my brother's play. I'm not sure you got this before, so I'm going to say it again. I'm not talking to anyone until I talk to Morgan."

"Are you sure Morgan won't talk?"

"I'd bet my life my brother won't tell on his jerk-off friends. I'm not sure why; they're complete assholes. But I know my brother; he won't be a rat. He can't do it."

"Bigger men have fallen," he said. "Don't underestimate the power of the FBI. They've managed to put together a fairly strong case based on circumstantial evidence. They're calling the Serpents a criminal enterprise. Federal boys claim Morgan is an active participant in an ongoing criminal organization. They say he's in violation of the RICO Act. If convicted, your brother is facing a considerable amount of time in Federal prison."

“You’re telling me Morgan is going to spend more time in jail just because he knows a couple of motorcycle bums? How does the FBI even know the Serpents were in on the robbery?”

“It’s pure speculation on the FBI’s part,” he replied. “The Serpents are victims of an unfortunate juxtaposition. Members of the Serpents gentlemen’s club were in the Barstow area at the time of the armored car robbery. It’s purely coincidence. The FBI claims they were part of some far-flung military style diversionary tactics. The worst offence any of them could be charged with was disturbing the peace. With the exception of a few questionable parole violations, they’ve all been released.”

“What about Lawson and T-bone?”

He said, “I don’t believe Mr. Lawson, or Mr. T-bone, were in the Barstow area at the time of the robbery?”

That’s bullshit!

The bailiff came and broke up the meeting. I stood before the judge and pled not guilty. He ordered me held without bail.

Back at county jail, the cops put me back in the cell where the light never went out. Continuous light, constant bed checks, and the unrelenting pain in my ribcage, kept me from getting any decent sleep. The next morning the guards came and got me. Walking down the gangway, I felt like the undead in one of those low-budget black & white zombie movies.

They took me, in cuffs this time, to another interview room. The lights were brighter in this room. The FBI Agent was sitting facing me. On his right was the prosecutor who called me ‘A menace to society’ at my arraignment. Sitting with his back to me, head down, shoulders slumped, was my brother. Wearing an orange prisoner jumpsuit, he was in shackles, chained to the floor. Agent Andrews nodded toward the open chair and I sat down.

Andrews stared me down, like he had me all figured out. The prosecutor was reviewing a stack of file folders. He looked like an older version of a kid at San Pedro High who used to tell the teachers when my friends and me smoked cigarettes out by the handball courts.

My brother looked up, our eyes locked, and I felt a chill. He had my mother’s blue eyes. That morning they were hollow blue; just like the day my mom told me she had terminal cancer.

Morgan looked at the prosecutor and said, “What the hell have you done to my brother? He hasn’t done anything. He didn’t know anything about any armored car robbery, and he didn’t have anything to do with it.”

The pipsqueak prosecutor looked up. “Is that a confession?”

“That was nothing,” Agent Andrews said.

“Let me know when he has something to say.” The prosecutor went back to perusing his file folders.

“I’m here as a courtesy.”

“Do tell.”

“I don’t want to see your department waste valuable man hours pursuing a case you can’t possibly win.”

“Tsk-Tsk, Agent Andrews,” the prosecutor said. “I don’t believe for one second that the FBI is interested in our little armored car robbery. You’re up to something much more devious.”

“You’re right; I’m not interested in the robbery. I’m interested in justice.” Andrews pointed to Morgan. “Listen to what this man has to say. Then you can decide for yourself.”

“Go on.”

“This is off the record.”

The prosecutor nodded his head in agreement.

Morgan said, “You need to let my brother go. I’m ready to confess to the whole thing. I pulled the robbery alone. I asked Duff to drive me out to the desert. That’s all. He didn’t know anything about it.”

“Now do you understand?” Andrews said. “If you waste your time going after the kid, his brother will pull your case out from under you. What’s worse—if he takes the fall—the real bad guys will get away.”

“That’s all you have? I have no intention of releasing anyone.” He crossed his legs like a girl. “Agent Andrews—this case is my express elevator to success—or failure. If I let the boy go, I’ll be kissing my career goodbye.”

“Didn’t you hear what he said? If he confesses, you’ll have to release his brother. You won’t have enough evidence to get a conviction.”

“Let’s try this,” the prosecutor said. “You turn your prisoner over to the San Bernardino Sheriffs Department, and I’ll write your supervisor a nice letter telling him what a big help you’ve been.”

Andrews said, “This meeting is over.”

The prosecutor stood up. “It’s over when I say it’s over.” He handed the FBI Agent a large photo of a motorcycle. “The Sheriffs found this out in the desert north of Barstow. It’s been identified by the driver of the armored car as the same motorcycle used in the robbery. And it’s got Duff’s fingerprints all over it.” He handed the agent another photo, the banded twenties. “The little juvenile delinquent’s fingerprints were on these bills, which have been identified as money earmarked for delivery to the First National Bank of Barstow. They were stolen from the armored car and recovered in the back of Morgan Allison’s pickup truck, which my prisoner was driving. And we found his prints all over the O’Neal woman’s trailer. She’s magically disappeared, and so has the money. He may not be the mastermind, but he’s in it. And he’s going to pay.” He raised his limp wrist and pointed at Morgan, “You come be my prisoner, and we can talk about reducing the charges against your brother. All you have to do is clam up darling. When the FBI realizes you can’t help them, they’ll happily turn you over to me.” He gathered his files and snapped the clasp on a caramel-colored messenger tote. “I’ve got a news flash for you Agent. This is my case, and this meeting is over.”

The prosecutor sashayed out of the meeting while Morgan mumbled obscenities. When the door closed, Andrews slammed his fist against the table and called the prosecutor a ‘Goddamn fairy’.

“Morgan!”

“Keep your mouth shut,” he said.

Agent Andrews called for the jailer and then mocked me with contrived laughter. "That's right Duff. Listen to your big brother." Agent Andrews glared at me. "How's that working out for you Duff?"

"Don't listen to this fuckin' guy," Morgan said.

"We need to talk."

"You can talk all you want," Andrews said. "It's not going to change a thing."

"Listen to the big shot FBI Agent. You couldn't even get me out of county jail."

"I tried to help."

"You aren't trying to help me, or my brother. You're out to get Lawson. That's all. You think I'm the weak link. You got me figured for young and scared. You get me out and then I owe you. You act like my buddy, and I start to trust you. Pretty soon I turn rat. I do it to save my brother, but I'm still a rat. And once I go over, you think my brother will follow. You're a smart cop, but you forgot one thing. The Allison brothers aren't rats."

Agent Andrews looked at me like I was delusional. "Stop acting tough in front of your brother. You need to start cooperating."

"Don't listen to him," Morgan said. "I'll get you out of this."

Two jailers came through the door. One guard unlocked Morgan's chains from the iron eyelet buried in the concrete floor, while the other stood by me and motioned for me to get up. Morgan told me to 'Hang tough'. The guard led him out of the room and Andrews followed. My guard prodded me, so I shuffled out the door and back to my cell.

I spent the next few days in the cell from hell. They never turned off the light. I couldn't sleep, and I was starting to get a migraine headache you wouldn't believe. When the guard came and got me, I didn't know if it was day or night. I didn't even know the day of the week. The guard told me it was 4:00 in the afternoon, Friday, June 28th. I asked him when I could take a shower, and he dumped me in another interview room.

I knew it was my lawyer before I even saw his face. He smelled like seafood and Jade East cologne. He had a big-fat grin on his face. I sat and watched him pick his teeth with a gold toothpick.

"How does it feel?" he asked.

"I lost all feeling two days ago."

He had a boisterous laugh, exaggerated, but somehow genuine. I could tell he was pleased with himself.

"What's going on? You're up to something."

"I am indeed Sir," he replied. "I alone have brought the San Bernardino Sheriffs Department, and the California Highway Patrol, to their knees. And this afternoon, I cut the heart out of that little weasel of a District Attorney." He leaned back in his seat with a satisfied look on his face, like he'd just finished Thanksgiving dinner. "Do you know the four most beautiful words in the world?"

"No."

"Illegal Search and Seizure."

The big man went on to tell me how his investigative team had produced a witness to my illegal arrest. The witness claimed the CHP forced me off the road, and then beat me unconscious. The lawyer convinced the judge the CHP had violated my Search and Seizure Rights. The judge ruled my arrest was illegal, and all the evidence recovered as

the results of that arrest, had magically become inadmissible. The big man started to wax-poetic about his extraordinary legal skills.

“What’s that all mean to me?”

“That’s why I asked you how it felt,” he said. “How does it feel to be a free man?”

The big man told me the judge was letting me go on the condition that I didn’t leave the State, and he promised me the paperwork would be down first thing Monday morning. I was going to be released sometime Monday, and if I knew what was good for me, I’d be at a little bar called the Scorched Iguana by 4:00 Tuesday. He unfolded a small map of Arizona and pointed to a spot about an hour north of Kingman.

“I can’t be there until Thursday,” I said. “Tell Lawson I’ll be at the Scorched Iguana at 4:00 on the Forth of July.”

8

My release paperwork didn’t come down on Monday. Tuesday Morning, July 2nd, my eighteenth birthday, I had warm milk and cold oatmeal for breakfast. After I finished, the guard who picked up my tray told me I was going to start out-processing.

When the guards realized it was my eighteenth birthday, they purposely misplaced my paperwork. I had to spend my birthday in jail. The sons of bitches thought it was funny. They finally released me at ten minutes to midnight.

I stood in front of a liquor store and bummed enough change to make a phone call. I called my cousin Vince, and the operator told me the phone had been disconnected. I walked over to the 10 Freeway, turned up the westbound onramp, and stuck out my thumb. Over the next couple of hours, three or four cars went by, and none of them looked remotely like they were going to pick me up. I slept under the freeway overpass. In the morning, I walked over to a gas station and bummed a smoke off a construction worker who’d just finished using the payphone. I smoked my breakfast and then tried the onramp again.

I stuck out my thumb and a young dude, sporting a long blonde ponytail, driving a rusty ’55 Citroën with a surfboard tied on top, stopped and gave me a ride. He took me all the way to Santa Monica. He dropped me at PCH and turned north toward Rincon. I walked across Coast Highway and pointed my thumb south. A Hare Krishna smoking hash out of a modified toilet paper roll, driving a VW Micro Bus with a psychedelic paint job, pulled over and gave me a ride down to Venice. I got out at Washington Street and walked over to Vince’s place. He wasn’t home, but my truck was in the driveway. I figured it would be. I’d lent it to him a week before my arrest, and Vince was the kind of guy who just kind of held onto things.

The driver’s door on my ’41 Studebaker didn’t lock, and the key was under the seat, as usual. When I cranked it over, the gas gauge was pegged on E. I only had a few pennies for gas, but I found three cases of coke bottles on the side of Vince’s apartment.

At the local liquor store, I turned the bottles into two bucks and change. I bought a Hostess Cherry Pie and a Royal Crown Cola, then went across the street and put the rest in the gas tank.

When I got back to my place in San Pedro, there were two notes on the door. One from the phone company, and one from the landlord, who'd stopped by for the rent. My house key was on my other key ring, and was probably still in the ignition of my brother's truck, so I broke in through a back window.

The only thing in the refrigerator was some sour milk and a couple of frozen Snickers Bars. I shoved a Snickers Bar in my mouth and jumped in the shower. As I melted in the steam, thick nougat drool oozed from the side of my mouth.

I barely dried off before I fell in bed and passed out. I woke up in a panic. For a second, I didn't know where I was. I took a deep breath, and the salty air reassured me I was back home in San Pedro. I looked for my alarm clock and found it dead on the floor. *What time is it?*

I grabbed my last Snickers Bar out of the freezer, sat down on an aluminum lawn chair in the living room, and flipped on our second-hand B&W TV. The eleven o'clock news was on. The Dodgers lost to the St. Louis Cardinals 2 to 1, Kekich pitched.

"Oh well, we'll get 'em tomorrow. Osteen's pitching."

I fell asleep with the TV on, and woke to the buzz of the Indian Head Test Pattern. *I need to get going.* I stood up and headed for the bathroom. I was going to splash some water on my face, but I missed the bathroom, and drifted into my bedroom.

When I woke up, I checked my alarm clock. It still wasn't working, so I threw it against the wall as hard as I could. I shoved all the junk off the top of my dresser, and my body shook with pent-up rage. I stalked into the living room and kicked one of the lawn chairs about six feet in the air. "Fuck!"

The early birds started talking, and the sky through the front window turned from black to dark gray. I went back in the kitchen, dug through the cupboards, and found a stale box of Sugar Frosted Flakes. I walked around the house in a daze wearing my boxer shorts eating dry cereal out of the box.

How am I going to get to Arizona? I don't have enough gas to get out of L.A. And I need to find Harper. First thing I need to do is get some money for gas. Then I need to talk to Morgan. Then I can go look for Harper. After that I can meet Lawson at the Iguana. This day is gong to be fucked.

"I'm not old enough to be in this much trouble." I dropped the box of cereal. "The rent."

I tossed Morgan's bedroom and found two hundred bucks tucked away in the Centerfold of a Playboy magazine. I pulled myself together and left the house. After I filled up the truck with gas, I bought a family-size bag of chocolate chip cookies, and hit the road.

I blew a tire in Pomona, and it took me four hours to get it fixed. When I was putting the wheel back on, the tire iron slipped off the lug nut and the side of my face smashed against the fender. "Fuuuuuuck."

By the time I got going again, I was out of time. I didn't have time to go see my brother or look for Harper. I needed to check in with Lawson. The guy was a mental case as far as I was concerned, and if he got out of control, he might take it out on Morgan. I'll calm him down first, and then I'll go look for the money.

I gunned it the whole way to Arizona, backed off a little around Kingman, and then punched it again on my way north to meet Lawson.

Down a washboard gravel road, the Scorched Iguana Bar was a sandblasted adobe shack at the base of the black mountains in northern Arizona. A weathered old woman stood behind the bar, and Hank Williams cried from the jukebox. I ordered a beer and flopped on a bench in a dark corner behind the pool tables.

My meeting with Lawson at the Iguana Bar had gone better than expected. I had gotten out alive. Which is better than I had expected. That hillbilly cop had sure saved my bacon. Maybe my luck had changed. I'd made it clean out of Arizona and back across the border into California without incident. And I had gotten a good night sleep down by the Colorado River. After ten days in San Bernardino County jail, curling up on the front seat of my '41 Studebaker in a sleeping bag was down right luxurious. I felt refreshed. Now all I had to do was find Harper. *No problem.*

9

Friday morning, after I dunked my head in the Colorado River, I looked up and caught a burst of hot light coming from the east. The sun moved above the horizon, and the cool morning disappeared fast. I hit the highway focused, but it wasn't long before the desert started to mess with my mind. It's bleak between the California Border and Barstow. It gave me way too much time to think.

I don't think the cops have found Harper. Why haven't the cops found Harper? If they can't find her, how in the hell am I? I'd better find her. If I don't have the cash by tonight, Lawson and T-bone are going to kick my ass.

I pulled off at County Road 1712 and parked outside the High Desert Trailer Park, on the south side by the entrance. The one-way driveway went around the pool and exited over by the manager's office. Using the pool house for cover, I slipped in the park and stopped at the second trailer, the one were Morgan and me had lived. I checked through the window, saw that it was still vacant, and then checked under the trailer frame by the front steps. I felt around for the key I'd hidden, but it was gone, so I tried the door. I barely touched the knob, and the door plopped open.

I went into the living room and peeked through the curtains. A pudgy little kid with his swim trunks hanging half way down his butt was doing belly flops into the pool while his dog barked. When the manager's wife stormed over and yelled at him, the kid ran home, giving me a clear view of Harper's trailer on the other side of the pool. *I'd really like to go look around. Maybe I'll talk to the manager first.*

I was contemplating whether I should ask the manager for permission, or just break into Harper's trailer, when a stock white '67 Plymouth Fury whipped past the window, drove around the pool, and stopped in front of Harper's trailer. Detectives Zico and Sanchez got out of the car.

The cops went in the trailer, and I slipped out the back door. I crouched down and moved toward the five-foot wooden fence that ran along the outside of the trailer park. Without bothering to look, I hopped over. When I realized I was going to land on a

Hedgehog Cactus, I contorted my body in midair, and landed off balance. I tucked, rolled, and came to a stop in a stack of tumbleweeds. The brown stems were lined with rigid, needlelike spines. At the bottom of the pile, impaled on one of those spines, was a fifty-dollar bill.

I deftly wrestled the bill from its captive and slipped it in my pocket. As I bolted to my feet, the sharp spines pricked my flesh and tore tiny holes in my t-shirt. I cursed the tumbleweeds bitter kiss then ran around the corner and hopped in my truck. I flipped a bitch, and in seconds flat was headed west on the interstate with the cops none the wiser. I made a quick transition onto Highway 15 and drove south.

The Feds were holding my brother in a small jail below the Federal Courthouse in San Bernardino. It was different than county jail, more serious. All the cops were Federal Marshals, and they never smile. I had to wait a couple of hours, but they finally let me see Morgan.

A Marshal with no facial expression and no desire to speak led me down a dark corridor. It felt like he was taking me the back way into hell. He guided me through a metal door that led into a concrete-block visitation room the size of a short hallway. On my right, a very large mirror was built into the wall. I assumed it was one way, and that the Marshall would be standing behind it, probably the FBI too. I stepped to the first empty chair, turned to my left and stared through the partitioned security glass. I did it four more times. At the last booth, I lowered myself onto a cold-metal stool and picked up the phone. Morgan picked up on the other side of the glass, and we stared at each for a long minute.

I broke the silence. "We need to talk."

"Watch your mouth. The marshal, and probably a couple of FBI agents, are standing behind that mirror."

"No shit Sherlock." I turned toward the mirror and said, "The Feds don't care about you." I focused on the mirror and tried to see through it. "Isn't that right Agent Andrews?" I turned back to Morgan. "The Feds don't care about you, the armored car robbery, or me. Agent Andrews has a bug up his ass about Lawson."

"Keep your mouth shut."

"Fuck you Morgan. I spent my eighteenth birthday in county jail because of your bullshit. I'm tired of you, your war-reject buddy Lawson, and his ass-wipe sidekick T-bone."

Morgan stood up and puffed up, like an angry alpha dog. "You keep your Goddamn mouth shut." A steel door echoed in the background and Morgan sat down, leaning toward the glass. "You listen to the lawyer. You do exactly what he tells you to do, and everything will be cool. Don't try and do something smart Duff."

"I'll do what you say, but only on one condition."

"What?"

"Answer me one question."

"This better be good."

"You remember how you told me you thought some girl was the reason you got fired from the mine. Tell me why?"

"Don't fuck with me Duff."

"I'm not. Answer my question."

Morgan dropped the aggressive posture and got red in the face as he sunk in his seat. “That chick was married. Can you believe it?”

“Married! What do you mean she was married?”

“I couldn’t believe it either,” Morgan said. “She’d been coming on to me hot and heavy for weeks. One night I tried to put the moves on her, and she pulls up lame. She starts getting all female on me, and then she blurts out that she’s married.”

“She said she was married?”

“That’s not the half of it. It turns out she was married to the big boss at the mine.”

That doesn’t make any sense. Why would Harper be working at a truck stop, living in a two-bedroom trailer, if she was married to Morgan’s boss at the mine?

“She told you she was married to your boss? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Not my boss—The Boss. And I don’t care if it makes sense or not. I told you what you wanted to know.”

I let the phone fall from my ear and stared at my brother with my mouth open until I saw his lips move. I lifted the receiver back up to my ear. “What was that?”

“How the Dodgers doing?”

“They lost four in a row,” I replied. “Just dropped below .500.”

A Marshal came up behind Morgan, tapped him on the shoulder, and motioned for him to get up.

“Do what the lawyer says.” He stood up and hung up the phone. Morgan put his palm against the glass, and I could barely hear him say, “Take care of yourself Duff.”

Seeing my brother behind the glass really zapped my head. When the Marshal took him away, it was like watching my brother fall off a cliff. I wanted to grab him, but all I could do was stand there and watch as Morgan fell into the abyss. I started to kick out the security glass, but I swallowed my rage in the face of the unmitigated futility.

10

I ran out of the Federal building and got the hell out of San Berdo. After I cleared the city limits, I punched the gas and didn’t let up until I saw a sign that read Barstow 15 miles. A few minutes after that, I pulled over on the side of the road and started to cry. When it dawned on me that mommy wasn’t around anymore to make it better, that I was eighteen now, and it was time for me to be a man, I slapped myself in the face a few times, then got back on the road more determined than ever to get Morgan out of jail.

I made the eastbound transition to Highway 40 and pulled off at County Rd. 1712. I drove around the back of Tubby’s Truck Stop and parked by the cinder-block pumphouse. My Masterlock was still on the door, or at least one that looked like it was. I reached in my watch pocket and pulled out the key. It slipped right in, but it wouldn’t turn. “That was too good to be true.”

The pumphouse had to have been searched. Morgan’s Norton 650 is probably in some impound yard alongside his piece-of-shit Chevy truck. *I’ll deal with it later.*

I found Dessie in the Truckers Only section sitting alone in a booth, filling saltshakers, with a cigarette dangling out of her mouth. I sat down, and the ash from her cigarette fell in her lap. Dessie came out of her seat like a praying mantis. Her bony

fingers clutched my shirt collar, and she dragged me off like she was about to eat me. She pulled me into the Women's Bathroom and locked the door. "What in the hell did you boys get yourselves into?"

"I didn't do anything."

Dessie frowned. "Ain't that just like a man. Caught red handed, and you still won't fess up."

"Don't you believe me?" I tried to look like my feelings were hurt. "I thought we were friends?"

She mussed my hair and said, "We are friends sugar. I'll bet I'm the best friend you have around here."

"I hope so, because I need a friend right now." I stepped to the sink, splashed a little water on my face, looked for a towel, and then dried off with the bottom of my t-shirt. "Have you seen Harper? I really need to talk to her."

"Seems like everyone wants to have a conversation with that young lady. I've been questioned by the local cops a half dozen times. And there's been a good looking FBI Agent by the name of Andrews asking about her."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Disappeared into thin air."

"What did you tell the cops?" I asked.

"Not much," she replied. "I told them she was a good worker who got along with the customers...and how she didn't seem like the criminal type."

"That's all?"

"I answered their questions. And I told them what I'd heard Harper tell other people. She told everyone she was from Dallas. You knew that. And how the Greyhound Bus she was on broke down, and how they towed it into Tubby's for repair. She just happened into the diner for a 7-Up. When she saw the sign advertising for temporary help, she asked about the job."

"Did she fill out a job application?"

"Tubby told the police she did, and that he just couldn't find it. I know she didn't. All she had to do was smile, and the job was hers."

"Don't they take taxes out of her paycheck? You have to fill out some kind of paperwork for taxes when you get a job."

"Tubby didn't pay her with a check. She lived in the trailer rent free, and the tips were hers. The job was only supposed to be a temporary arrangement. Birdie, you remember Birdie, the big Negro woman with the Louisiana drawl. She stayed there. When her mom got real sick back in Bogalusa, she went home to help. Tubby promised Birdie her job back when she was ready. Harper wasn't supposed to stay more than a few months."

"I didn't know that." I sat down on the toilet and rubbed my temples. "I wonder why Andrews was interested in Harper. What did he ask you?"

Dessie pulled a lipstick out of her sock and dabbed a little on her lips. "That Andrews is a real good looker, but I didn't fall for it." Using the lipstick case for emphasis she said, "You know I was born and raised in Pigeon Forge Tennessee. My daddy used to make sour mash, and I've got a natural distrust for Revenuers."

"I was born and raised in San Pedro, and I don't trust them either. What did you tell the FBI?"

“The first time he came in, I gave him the same story I told the police. When he came back, he told me that FBI officials had contacted every O’Neal family in Texas. And not one of them had a family member with the first or middle name of Harper. He wanted to know if I could think of anything else. He was a persistent little bugger, so I told him about the problem Harper had with Lance McCord. I figured that would keep him running around in circles for awhile.”

“Who’s Lance McCord?”

“He’s the Big Mucky Muck out at the mine.”

“Is that the guy Harper’s married to?”

Dessie let her rear end rest against the sink and started to laugh. “Who told you that whopper?”

“Morgan told me Harper was married.”

She held up her right hand, palm out, with three fingers pointed upright, like she was administering the Boy Scout Oath. “Do you swear you’ll never repeat what you’re about to hear to another living soul so long as you live?”

I stood up and returned her salute. “I do.”

“Harper is married, but it ain’t to that blowhard Lance McCord.”

“She never told me she was married. Does everyone else know she’s married?”

“Nobody else knows she’s married. We had a few beers after work one day, and she opened up some. That’s how I know. Your asshole brother only found out because he forced the issue.”

“Who’s she married to?”

“I don’t know who. Harper didn’t tell me his name. She did say he was a no-good two-timing cowboy who made a living riding wild bulls on the rodeo circuit. Said the marriage barely lasted six months, and that she’d already filed for a divorce. Poor girl started to cry when she told me how her mother had warned her not to marry him. That’s why she took the job at Tubby’s. She was on her way back to Texas, but she didn’t want to face her mother. She needed time to think.”

“I wonder why my brother thought she was married to the boss?”

“I might of had something to do with that.”

I clamped my hands firmly on her shoulders, swung her around in a tight circle, and sat her down on the toilet. “You need to tell me everything you know. I’m serious. You can’t hold anything back.”

Dessie’s tired-brown eyes lightened up and she gave me a maternal look. “I’m not so sure your tender young ears should hear this kind of thing.”

“I’m not a kid anymore. I turned eighteen in county jail. I took all the State Troopers, Sheriffs, and the FBI could throw at me. And I didn’t back down. I’m a man now Dessie.”

“Well I guess you are,” she said with a big wide grin on her face. She stood up, clamped her hands on my shoulders, swung me around in a tight circle, and sat me down on the toilet. She leaned her butt against the sink and pulled a pack of Old Gold cigarettes out of her apron. Using a cigarette for emphasis she said, “I swore I would never tell anybody this, but this is an unforeseeable situation.” She looked up at the ceiling. “God forgive me for breaking my word.”

Dessie lit a stick match with her fingernail and took a couple of humungous drags off her cigarette. After she'd gathered her thoughts—she said, “I told you how there were sparks flying between Harper and your brother.”

“I don't understand how that happened. Did Morgan hypnotize her or something?”

“She looked hypnotized,” Dessie said. “He definitely put a spell on her.”

“What's that mean?”

“You may not know this, but your brother is a regular Knight in Shinning Armor.”

I laughed so hard I almost fell on the floor.

“Go ahead—get it out of your system. You're just jealous.”

“I am not.”

“Then stop acting like a fool, and let me tell you what happened.”

I didn't like the taste of it, but she was right, so I sucked it up. “Give it to me straight—I can take it.”

“The whole thing started one night after Harper had been working here for about a month. We were both working the swing shift, and things had been pretty slow. Harper was looking a little melancholy, so I told her she could go home early. She walked out around eleven and showed back up about a half hour later with your brother in tow. She didn't even look like the same girl. She had the brightest eyes, and the biggest widest smile you'd ever want to see.”

“What happened?”

“I'm getting to it.” She doused her cigarette in the sink and dropped the butt in the wastebasket. “When I saw them come in, I had to stick around and find out what happened. Harper and your brother set up camp in a booth out front and talked until two in the morning. When your brother finally stood up and told her he had to be at work in three hours, and he'd better go home and get some sleep, I conveniently arrived at the table. He offered to walk her home, but Harper was still bright eyed and bushytailed, so I told him not worry about it, I'd watch out for her. He didn't seem to like the idea, but Harper nodded her approval, and he reluctantly left us alone. After he left, I asked her right out.”

“Asked her what?”

“What in the hell happened? That's what.” Dessie turned and examined her teeth in the mirror.

“What did she say?”

She turned back to me and said, “The girl didn't say a word. She turned and looked out the window and watched your brother walk across the parking lot. Her eyes glazed over like a love struck teenager.”

“You're right. I don't think my tender young ears can take this.”

“I'm just getting to the best part.” She lit another Old Gold and blew smoke out her nose as she talked. “At first, I couldn't understand what Harper was telling me. She said that earlier, after she left work, three men out in the parking lot had accosted her. She didn't look like a girl who'd been accosted. She went on to tell me how three drunken truckers herded her between two tractor-trailers and corralled her. Harper said they were fat slobs with bad teeth and unbelievable BO. They wanted her to have a drink with them, and when she said no thanks, they started getting unruly, invading her personal space, trying to force the booze on her. That's when Morgan walked up. I guess the biggest one

of the bunch told Morgan to mind his own business, and that if he knew what was good for him, he'd scam."

"Morgan doesn't scam," I said. "What happened next?"

"This is the part I liked best. It wasn't so much what happened next, although it is a good story, but it was the look in Harper's eyes as she told me. I could tell that poor girl was struck by love, and there wasn't a darned thing she could do about it. I believed I was looking at the happiest tortured soul on the planet."

"What did she say?"

"I guess the biggest of the three gorillas made the mistake of throwing a punch. Harper said your brother knocked him unconscious with one shot to the jaw."

"Yeah—Morgan's got a hammerhead overhand right."

"Then the other two turned on him. Harper said Morgan didn't back down an inch. He hit one of them in the gut, and the lollipop dropped to his knees. I guess the last guy was the smart one. He held his hands up and surrendered. He started walking backwards, Morgan took a step toward him, and he turned around and ran."

"I would of done the same thing as my brother."

"I'm sure you would of Duff." Dessie started to take a puff on her cigarette and stopped. "That deal with the three drunks put the hook in her, but what sealed her fate, was when Morgan saved the kitten."

"I heard about the cat. A couple people over at the trailer park told me they watched him shimmy up the power pole and rescue a little kitten. I got to admit, that took some balls. That first outrigger must be thirty feet up."

"I thought Harper was going to swoon. Normally—that's a good thing, but it's a tortuous thing for a woman that's already married."

"I get your drift." I tried to take one of Dessie's cigarettes, and she swatted my hand away. I rubbed my knuckles and said, "What's the deal with Lance McCord?"

A gentle rap on the door was followed by a soft voice asking, "Dessie?"

Dessie called out, "I'll be right there." She doused her smoke and slammed the butt into the trashcan. "Lance McCord is a blowhard. He got fresh with Harper one night, so I told him he'd better watch out. I let him know that Harper's boyfriend was a big strong ex Marine who worked at the mine, and would kick his butt if he didn't watch out."

"Morgan did get fired because of Harper."

"No. Harper didn't have anything to do with it." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to make this fast. Lance McCord's granddaddy was Milford W. McCord. In case you don't know it, Milford McCord was a turn of the century carpetbagger who made a fortune swindling ignorant Indians out of their oil leases. I don't know much about the rest of the family, but a little birdie told me Lance had been arrested in an Oklahoma City hotel room with a couple of underage girls and some marijuana. The family had enough pull to get the whole thing swept under the table, but the Oklahoma City Police were still pretty unhappy with Lance's past behavior and general disregard for law and order. Rumor has it, the family wanted to let things cool down, so they decided to exile him out to the mine. I guess they figured even he couldn't get in any trouble out here in the middle of nowhere. Sure proved them wrong." She took another deep breath. "He'd only been in Barstow a few days when he came in and got fresh with Harper. I didn't even know who he was. I didn't know his family owned the mine, and sure didn't know he was going to fire your brother."

“So Morgan did get fired because the system sucks.”

“No. Your brother got fired because he’s got a hammerhead overhand right.”

11

Dessie had a big grin on her face as she walked out the door, and I sat dumbfounded on the toilet seat in the Women’s Restroom. *My brother slugged his boss. And he blames Harper for getting fired. What a chump.*

A female trucker walked in the restroom, and I felt my face flush. I stammered an apology, jumped up, tiptoed around the woman’s ample girth, and gently removed myself from the Lady’s Room.

In the darkest corner of the Truckers Only Section, I slipped into an unoccupied booth and lay across the cool Naugahyde upholstery. Resting my head on the seat, I could see under the table. I reached over and grabbed the newspaper off the opposite bench. It was the Las Vegas Sun. I separated the sports page and let the other sections fall to the floor. On page three, I found the National League box scores and got lost in the numbers. As my mind drifted, the newspaper slipped from my hand, and landed on the floor, back-page facing up. On the lower right-hand side was an advertisement for the Las Vegas Rodeo.

Maybe Harper’s ex husband is at the Las Vegas rodeo. She could be with him.

“Probably not.”

“Probably not what?” an unfamiliar voice called back.

I picked up the newspaper and moved kitty-cornered across the isle. I sat down opposite an average looking guy, with a five-o’clock shadow, wearing a forest-green flannel shirt and matching John Deere cap.

“Just thinking out loud,” I said. “My chick split on me. I was thinking she might of gone to Vegas, but it’s a long shot.”

He shoved a honkin’ piece of meatloaf in his mouth and chewed while he talked.

“That sounds exactly like a woman. My ex old lady ran off to Reno. Took every penny I had out of the bank, and ran off with a Goddamn used car salesman. Blew my entire life savings at the crap tables.” He dumped a mound of mashed potatoes into his mouth and said, “You can’t trust women. I know that much. They’ll break your heart, take all your money, and leave you holding your dick.”

“She’s not like that.”

“They’re all like that, every single Goddamn one of them.”

“I trust her. She wouldn’t rip me off.”

He shook his head like he was disappointed in me. “You didn’t give her any money—did you?”

My chin fell, and my eyes focused on the driver’s ravaged meatloaf. “She wouldn’t do it. I don’t believe it.”

“You better believe it. And you’d better get your butt to Vegas before she spends all your cash.”

I stood up and said, “You know something Mister; you’re a boatload of fun. I’ll bet you’re the life of every party.” I grabbed my newspaper. “I’m going to go make a couple of phone calls. Thanks for the advice; I’ll take it for what it’s worth.”

I got a couple bucks worth of change from the cashier and sat down at a payphone. I called the operator, and she connected me to the FBI in San Bernardino. The switchboard connected me to Agent Andrews.

“Special Agent Andrews speaking.”

I cupped my hand over the mouthpiece. “Agent Andrews—is that you? I can barely hear you. This is Duff Allison.”

“Speak up Duff. What’s this about?”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to help you get Lawson, but only if you can get Morgan out of jail. Can you get my brother out of jail?”

“If you provide information that is instrumental in the arrest and prosecution of Lawson, I’ll help you in everyway possible.”

I jiggled the coin-return lever in a staccato burst. “Here’s what I’ve got. It’s big, so write it down. I’m going to meet Lawson at the Wonderland Ballroom tonight at 9:00.”

“Did you say Lawson?”

I held the mouthpiece by the phonebook, fanned the pages, and talked sideways into the receiver. “Yeah—Lawson. I’m going to meet him at the Wonderland Ballroom tonight at 9:00. It’s two miles south of Highway 40 on County Road 1712. You can’t miss it. The money from the armored car robbery is supposed to be there.” I tapped the phone on the counter. “Did you get that? The money exchange is supposed to happen tonight. Lawson is going to be there.”

“Is Lawson going to have the stolen money on him?”

“What was that?”

“Lawson—is Lawson going to have the money?”

“Yeah Lawson’s going to be there, and the money’s supposed to be there too. We’ve got a really bad connection Agent.” I hung up.

I dropped another dime and waited for the operator. She was a nice lady who put me through to the San Bernardino Sheriffs Department. I asked for Detective Sanchez. Zico picked up the phone.

“Robbery—Zico.”

I held one nostril closed and tuned my voice up a couple octaves. “Are you one of the detectives assigned to the armored car robbery?”

“Who’s this?”

“My name’s Aldous Huxley.

“What kind of queer name is that?”

“It’s the name my mother and father gave me sir. If you wish to disparage me further, I’ll take my valuable information to the FBI.

“Take it easy partner. What you got for me?”

“I have it on good authority that the money absconded during the now infamous armored car robbery will exchange hands tonight. The exchange will take place at the Wonderland Ballroom at 9:00. If you wish to close your case, I’d suggest you be there. And you’d be wise to bring along a few of your associates.”

“What’s your connection to all this?” Zico Asked.

“That’s not important. What’s important is that the largest armored car robbery in the history of San Bernardino County is an open case. More to the point, it’s your open case. If you want to close your case, be at the Wonderland tonight. Things might get a bit dicey, so I’d suggest you bring some of your friends.”

“What’s your name again,” he asked. “Wait a second—let me find a notepad.”

“The only thing you need to remember is this: Wonderland Ballroom in Barstow, and tonight at 9:00. Write it on the back of your hand if you can’t remember.”

Zico asked me to spell my name, and I hung up. I flipped through the yellow pages and found the number to the McCord Mine. I told the receptionist I was an old friend of Lance McCord, and she put me through.

“McCord here.”

I tried to sound like a lower east side tough guy in one of those old Jimmy Gagney movies. “You the same Lance McCord who got popped in Oklahoma City smoking reefer with a couple of underage girls?”

“Who is this?”

“I’m the man with the photographs.”

“What photographs?”

“I got a dozen 8”X10” pictures of you and a couple of high school girls, buck-naked. If their parents see these, the unholy wrath of the PTA is going to drop on your head. You aren’t going to be able to lie your way out of this one sweetheart. These eight-by-ten glossies will get you ten years.”

“There aren’t any pictures.”

“Suit yourself junior. You can play it that way. I’ll sell ‘em to the scandal rags. Don’t say I didn’t give you a chance.”

I didn’t say another word. And he didn’t hang up. I stared at the wall clock and watched fifteen seconds tick off. I said, “I want \$5,000 dollars for the pictures and negatives. If you want to stay out of jail, meet me tonight at the Wonderland Ballroom at exactly nine o’clock.” I hung up.

I went out front to the Family Section and parked my butt in the only empty stool at the lunch counter. I ordered a chocolate shake, some chili fries, and waited for things to slow down. I wanted to ask Dessie some more questions, but she was pretty swamped, and she really didn’t have time to talk. I did manage to ask her what Lance McCord looked like. She told me—“He’s a pudgy little thing, and he always dresses like he’s about to go on stage at the Grand Ole Opry.”

By the time I finished my fries, it was about 7:00, so I decided to go lie down in my truck and catch a nap before my meeting at the Wonderland. I walked south through the parking lot toward my pickup, with the late evening sun on my left shoulder. I turned left at the pumphouse, and kept my head down, shielding my eyes from the suns glare. I walked up to the driver’s side door and reached for the handle.

In the time it took to lift my arm, a man in grey-work pants and black farmer boots stepped from behind the pumphouse and unleashed a whirling roundhouse aimed at my hand. I could feel the air rush by as a black leather slapjack missed my fingers by less than an inch. I jumped back, landed on my toes, and brought my fists up ready to defend myself.

“You Goddamn hippie son of bitch,” he said, puke-red spit dribbling from the side of his mouth.

The crazed desert rat cocked the slapjack and took another swipe. I weaved to my left, and the weapon glanced off my right bicep. I shifted my weight forward and brought an overhand left straight into his jaw. It was like hitting brick. The crusty old fuck didn't even flinch. That punch should have brought him to his knees. He looked like he liked it. His sadistic grin revealed rotten tobacco stained teeth. That's when I realized he was the psycho Highway Patrolman who'd arrested me.

My gut got that sinking feeling, and I backed away from the old dude. He was hard, a lot harder than me. He was older, bigger, stronger, meaner, and he had a weapon. My only hope was to defend myself, get in as many shots as possible, and hope somebody broke it up before this crazy old dude killed me.

He took a step toward me and stopped. With a quick flip of the wrist, he whipped his slapjack into a whirl. He raised it up over his head and brought it down full force, aiming for my neck.

I jumped back and said, "Jesus—you crazy old coot."

Spit sprayed from his mouth as he spoke, "I was forced to retire because of you. You Goddamn hippie son of a bitch." He spit a wad of chaw and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his cheap cotton t-shirt. "I was dragged before the disciplinary board like a common criminal. They threatened to fire me if I didn't retire. I've got a score to settle with you."

He had rye whisky eyes. When I looked deep enough into them, I saw a bitter old man who was afraid of not being able to hide behind a badge. He reminded me of the lushes who lived in the waterfront bars around L.A. Harbor. I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I almost felt sorry for him.

He took another windmill shot with the slapjack, and I didn't step back. I turned perpendicular to the old man, stepped forward, and let the arc of the old man's swing sail past my back. I had the proper distance, so I concentrated all my body's power on the point of impact, and thrust my right foot straight through his knee. It sounded like a broken baseball bat, wood splintering after the perfect pitch. That one put the old man down.

The slapjack had flown from his hand, so I walked over and picked it up, while the broken old man floundered in the dirt, clutching his leg. I was just about to beat him into eternity, when he rolled over and looked at me with tears pouring down his cheeks.

"You Goddamn hippie son of a bitch."

I dropped the slapjack and said, "Your time has come and gone old man. You're a relic. Go back to Oklahoma and make peace with your God. If I see you in California again—I'll kick your ass—you Goddamn Okie son of a bitch."

I hopped in my '41 Studebaker and pointed it toward the back exit. I pulled away, looked in the rearview mirror, and watched the psycho ex cop slither under a semi trailer and disappear out my life for good.

Southbound toward the Wonderland, I chugged along in second gear with the windows down. Hot wind buffeted about the cab, and the setting sun blared through the

passenger-side window. I looked out at the desiccated landscape and said, “I’ve had my fill of the Goddamn Mojave Desert.”

Two-miles south of the Interstate, on a flat spot in the desert, the Wonderland Ballroom stood alone. Concrete walls, cracked and crumbling, with a corrugated-steel roof, the joint looked more like a bunker than a ballroom. There were no windows, only a black door with a busted-up neon sign slung over it.

When I pulled around the back of the building, the evening sun flared and disappeared beyond the horizon. The temperature actually dropped a few degrees, and I savored a fleeting breeze. I parked along the backside of the building, crossed my arms over the steering wheel, rested my head on my forearms, and drifted into a full nod.

A sharp object jammed into my neck snapped me awake. My head hit the roof, and I twisted away from my attacker. I was sitting on the bench seat, with my feet against the driver’s side door, trying to bring my assailant into focus.

“Are you okay? She asked. “I’m sorry. Did I poke you with my fingernail?” I heard giggling in the background. “Me and my friends thought you were dead. We’ve been tapping you on the shoulder for the last ten minutes. I was going to check your pulse.”

One of the gigglers said, “He’s cute.” Standing at the window, a good-looking brunette with green eyes and big tits wearing a tight fitting western shirt said, “He’d be a lot cuter if he took a bath.” Her friends told her, “Come on Kristi.” She gave me the look. Then they all turned and walked away.

I combed my hair in the rear-view mirror, and then grabbed my fake California Drivers License out of the glove box. When I got out of the truck, I realized that the time had gotten away from me. The parking area behind the Wonderland, which had been empty when I pulled in, was a cluster of cars and pickup trucks. The night air had cooled considerably, and the sky was midnight black.

I peered into the desert for a couple of minutes, scoped out the parking lot, and then held my breath while I moved toward the front of the building. I rounded the back corner, passed a couple of longhaired dudes smoking a joint under a swamp cooler, dodged a drunken cowboy, and kept close to the wall. I stopped at the front of the building and nonchalantly peeked around the corner. The parking lot was packed, and at least thirty choppers lined the front wall. There wasn’t a cop car in sight. *There’s never a cop when you need one.*

Standing by the entrance, a gigantic black man wearing a purple Nehru jacket popped a sugar cube in his mouth and took a swig from a bottle of Thunderbird Wine. He looked at me with electric eyes and said, “Is that you—Little Johnny Cocheroo.”

I gave the brother a wide berth as I stepped around and reached for the door. When I walked through the entrance, a pretty tight country-rock band started playing an up tempo rendition of Folsom Prison Blues. The patrons showed their approval by filling the dance floor.

I kept a low profile and moved to my right, away from the dance floor. It was a big place, about the size of a small supermarket, with an impressive oval bar in the middle, a good-size dance floor on the left, scattered seating on the right, and some pool tables on the other side of the bar in the back. I found an out of the way place on the other side of the bar behind some tables. I was leaning against the wall, looking for a cocktail waitress, when I thought I heard someone say my name. I froze for a split second. I turned toward

the voice. I couldn't see anyone. A pale cowboy dressed in black came out of the shadows like a vampire, and I felt a ghost walk over my grave.

"Shit Agent Andrews—you scared the piss out of me."

"It's about time."

"What's with the Johnny Cash outfit?" I asked.

"Never mind my clothes. What kind of stunt are you trying to pull?"

"I'm not trying to pull any kind of a stunt. Lawson is supposed to be here, the money too." I checked around to make sure we weren't being watched. "I shouldn't be seen talking to you."

"You'd better start talking to me." He unwrapped a stick of Juicy Fruit gum and rolled it into his mouth. "This is your last chance Duff. Talk to me now, or suffer the consequences."

I turned away to look for a cocktail waitress. Andrews clamped his mitt around my shoulder and yanked me back around.

He said, "Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

I didn't care for his tone. He could see it in my eyes.

His eyes were judgmental, like he was my old man or something, and my life was his business. "First," he said, "You create an extremely volatile situation with no regard for the consequences. Then, like an irresponsible child, you let it get out of control. Do you have any idea where Lawson is? You were supposed to meet him here over three hours ago. If he thinks you ripped him off, he'll burn your brother. Then you. And what was your plan for Lance McCord?"

I couldn't hide my surprise.

"You can't hide anything from the FBI," he said. "Based on a tip from an anonymous source, we placed a wiretap on Lance McCord's private line. After you talked to me, you called the McCord Mine. The receptionist put you through under false pretenses. The agent monitoring the wiretap was alert, and brought it to my attention. When I listened to the tape, I recognized your voice. The story about the pictures must be fabricated. I don't believe you're trying to extort money from Lance McCord. I'm not sure why you brought him into this little fiasco. And everything points to you calling the Sheriff's Department. Four Squad Cars showed up shortly after nine and roused Lawson and his lowlife buddies. Guess what? No money. But you already knew that."

"Where's Lawson?"

He leaned close to my ear. "You think you're cute, but you don't stand a chance in this crowd. These guys will eat you up, spit you out, and never break a sweat." He stuck his gum under a table and said, "I was going to offer you one more chance, but you haven't earned it, and you don't deserve it." He pushed past me on his way to the door. He stopped and turned. "I'm throwing you to the wolves Duff."

"You might be the wolf," I replied. "Have you considered that?" I grabbed the gum out of his top pocket and helped myself to a stick. "Why don't you be a pal and tell me what the hell happened to Lawson. Without the lecture this time."

"Lawson and T-bone left with some tramp, just before you came in. Lance McCord is sitting alone over by the pool tables." The Agent pointed toward a nearly bald butterball of a man dressed like a singing cowboy. "Don't be fooled; he has friends. You'll have your hands full if you approach him with that story about the supposed photos."

“What about the Serpents? I see a lot of biker types but no Serpents.”

“You got lucky with the Serpents. Most of them left after they got roused. You’ll only have to deal with Lawson and T-bone. My guess is; they’re still here. Check the parking lot for a red ’61 Ford Falcon four-door.”

Andrews started walking away.

I called out, “Do me one last favor. Before you leave, wait about fifteen minutes, and then call the Sheriffs. Tell them there’s a fight, and it looks like somebody might get killed. Give them my description; it’ll probably be me.”

“I might stick around and watch,” Andrews said.

He looked like he liked the idea. I gave him my best cynical brush off and pushed past him toward the door.

I found Lawson snorting lines off the dashboard of a red ’61 Falcon. T-bone was sitting in the back seat making out with some local skank. They didn’t even know I was there until I cleared my throat. Lawson looked dope crazy. T-bone looked like a stray dog with a boner.

Standing at the driver’s side window, I said, “Where the hell have you guys been? I’ve been looking all over for you. The man with the money is inside.”

Lawson clamped his nose shut, using his thumb and index finger, and gagged down his poison. He shivered, like his central nervous system had been put on red alert, and his eyes frosted over. After a long minute, he turned toward the backseat and said, “Let’s go.”

The doors flew open. I sprung back and bounced off the truck behind me. Lawson caught me on the rebound, hooked my leg, and put me on the ground. He crouched over me with his fists clinched, ready to fight, egging me on with his predatory eyes. *Fuck you Lawson.* I sat on my ass in the gravel, for what seemed like forever, until he stood up, backed up, and lit up a smoke.

I pulled myself up and said, “Do you want your fucking money or what?”

T-bone shoved me in the back. I stumbled toward Lawson. I caught my balance, spun around, and brought up my fists. I let it go. T-bone thought it was funny.

“Fuck you guys,” I said. “I don’t need this shit. You want the money. You try finding it without me. Fuck you. And fuck my brother. He can rot in jail.”

“Fuck you?” Lawson pondered my response. “I like it.” He nodded his approval. “It looks like the kid’s got some balls after all.” He draped his arm over my shoulder, like we were old school chums. “Just remember, if I don’t get my money, I’ll cut your balls off.”

T-bone said, “And I’ll feed ‘em to my pet rat.”

“Fuck that. Let’s get your money.” I got in T-bone’s face. “Just don’t fuck this up.” I pointed at Lawson, “That goes for you too.” I looked around like I was casing the place. “I can’t go anywhere with you guys that the cops don’t show up. You two are a bust waiting to happen.”

I could tell by the look on their faces that they didn’t care for my attitude.

I said, “If you don’t like the way I’m handling this deal, that’s too fucking bad. There wouldn’t be any Goddamn money if it weren’t for me.” They didn’t get it, so I spelled it out. “I was there the day of the robbery. I saw Morgan almost get busted by the cops. When I went to help, I found the cash in the back of his truck. I had to think fast, and I didn’t have many options. I knew the cook at Tubby’s sold weed, so I figured he couldn’t

rat on me. I grabbed the backpack and ran into the diner.” They looked like they were buying it, so I took it to the next level. “The only problem, now he wants a cut.”

“Fuck him,” they said in unison.

“He’s been acting tough. All you need to do is slap him around a little. He’ll change his tune. Just don’t listen to any of his bullshit.”

Lawson and T-bone started for the door. I fell in. The big black guy in the Nehru jacket was still standing out front. He sang, “Excuse me...while I kiss the sky.”

Once we got inside, I took the lead and made a beeline for the pool tables, with the Serpents in tow. McCord was still in the same place, slumping in his chair.

I said, “He’s the little fat fucker over by the back wall near the exit, the one in the Roy Rogers outfit.”

Lawson and T-bone closed in on McCord, and I followed at a comfortable distance. McCord didn’t seem to notice the two bikers until T-bone slammed his fist on the table.

Lawson demanded, “I want my fucking money you little prick.”

“I didn’t bring any money,” McCord said. “I brought the Wrath of God.”

McCord leaned down and pulled a two-shot Derringer from his boot sleeve. He pointed it toward Lawson, then lifted his arm straight up and squeezed off a round. The band stopped. The bar came to a halt. For a second or two, the only sound was the blast echo from McCord’s stubby .45. The crowd blew apart. It was everyman for himself.

While McCord held the gun on Lawson, four bruisers, who looked like muscle for the Kansas City mob, converged on T-bone and started throwing cheap shots. One thug, who was wearing brass knuckles, punched T-bone at the base of the neck. Another guy hit T-bone behind the knee with a nightstick. McCord looked over at T-bone and smiled. Lawson did a quick squat, lifted the table, and flipped it onto McCord, who took his last shot. I saw T-bone go down, and the thugs converged on Lawson. Nobody seemed to notice me. I heard a siren. McCord headed for the back door. I followed McCord outside and sucker punched him. He hit the ground like a tub of lard.

“That one’s for my brother.”

I left McCord in the dirt. It looked good on him.

13

The Wonderland Ballroom was complete chaos. The cops were swarming the place, and it was like a Destruction Derby getting out of the parking lot. I made a short cut through the desert, punched it through a couple of whoop-de-dooos, and got clear of the crowd. I was Vegas bound.

After the rumble at the Wonderland, I was pretty jacked up, so I kept the gas pedal pegged until the lights of Barstow disappeared from my rearview mirror. As the night wore on, and the desert got lonelier, I felt like the white line on the highway was my only friend, and I was following it blindly into oblivion. When I stopped at the Stateline and got gas, the clock at the service station read 3:00 AM. It was still too early, so I went into the coffee shop across the street and spent two hours dropping nickels into a slot machine. Once I busted out, I sat down at the lunch counter and ordered blueberry pancakes with a strawberry shake.

I finished my breakfast, then found a payphone and called the lawyer. I told his answering service, "Tell Trace that I'll be at the Long Beach Pike tonight. If our mutual friends would like to take a ride, I'll be standing in front of the Cyclone Racer at ten o'clock. Tell them that I've got it under control. And we'll settle everything tonight."

Walking outside, I nearly went blind. Midsummer daybreak in Southern Nevada is like a thermonuclear blast. I drove north into a dusty-orange sunrise and got off on Tropicana Blvd. At the bottom of the off ramp, I asked some guy riding a Honda scooter where the Las Vegas Convention Center was.

I hung a left at the first light and fell in behind a brand new Fleetwood pulling a horse trailer painted like an American Flag. At the Convention Center, I followed the Cadillac cowboy past the security guard, like I was part of his entourage, and cruised into the semi-secure rodeo staging area.

Off to my right, I caught sight of an Indian Princess leading a magnificent black and tan horse into a huge open-sided frame tent. The tent was half filled with bales of hay, supplies, and a variety of horse tack. The girl secured her horse, tying the reins to a makeshift hitching post, and then started grooming her stallion. She looked easy to talk to, so I parked my truck, and moseyed on over.

"You have a beautiful horse," I said.

"Thank you," she replied. She looked at me with angel's eyes and smiled.

I fell in love with her smile. And her cocoa-brown eyes were so soft they looked like the chips in fresh baked cookies. Shimmering black hair flowed to just above her waist and moved in waves while she stroked her steed. I'd hoped that her genuine smile meant she was flirting, but I knew she was probably just being nice. She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen.

"My name's Duff Allison." I extended my hand.

She took my hand and said, "I'm Weeko Wihakayda."

"That's a beautiful name. Are you with the rodeo?"

She glanced down at her Ceremonial Costume, looked at me like I might be a little dense, and then went back to brushing her horse.

"I meant do you travel with the rodeo. I was trying to find an old friend. She was married to one of the riders. You wouldn't happen to know a girl by the name of Harper O'Neal?"

She stopped in mid stroke and turned. "Did you say Harper?"

"Yeah—do you know her?"

"I knew a girl named Harper, but her last name wasn't O'Neal. It was Reno, Mrs. Steve Reno."

"I'm pretty sure she got a divorce," I said. "She's blond, blues eyes, 5'7", early twenties, with a subtle Texas twang."

"That sounds like Harper. I did hear rumors of a divorce. O'Neal could be her maiden name." Her eyes got puppy-dog sad. "I haven't seen her in months, and I miss her."

"What about her husband? What did you say his name was?"

"His name is trouble," she said. "Stay away from Harper's ex-husband. Steve Reno is a bullheaded bull rider with a bad temper and a short fuse."

"I'm not afraid of any tough-guy cowboy types."

“You should always use caution around a wounded animal.” She looked at me with genuine concern. “That man is violent and unpredictable.”

“After what I’ve been through, some rodeo clown with a bad attitude isn’t going to scare me. You said his name was Reno. What’s his story? Why did Harper dump him?”

“He’s a bully, and a liar, and a cheat, and he treats his women worse than the bulls he rides.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Why did Harper marry him?”

A sigh of reluctant resignation was followed by a voice that reverberated universal injustice. “He’s one of the best looking men I’ve ever seen. And when he wants to—he can be as charming as any man ever was—but it’s a lie. Harper’s not the first woman, or the last, to find out about Steve Reno the hard way.”

“So where the hell can I find this Steve Reno character. I need to talk to this chump.”

Not too far behind me, I heard a voice call out. “You can find him right here partner.”

I turned around slow, with my mouth open, a little unsure of what I’d heard.

He was a couple of feet away when he said, “You lookin’ for me asshole?”

I said, “What?”

The guy stepped up and punched me in the mouth. It knocked me back, and I tripped over a bale of hay. Rolling with the punch, I was back on my feet in a flash. Blood filled my mouth and dripped along my chin. My rage gauge went redline, and I threw myself at the guy, throwing indiscriminant punches, like some kind of maniac. Instead of crumbling under my assault, he charged like a bull. As I was going over backwards, I realized he was about twenty pounds heavier, at least five years older, and a whole heck of lot stronger. He tackled me, ramming me into the ground, driving his shoulder into my gut for emphasis. I slipped out from under him, got to my feet, and backed away, struggling to catch my breath.

He jumped up and said, “Nobody calls Steve Reno a chump. Call me a chump again, and I’ll bust you up. Go ahead you fucking pussy. Call me a chump again. I dare you.”

Weeko cried out, “Stop it!”

Reno clutched Weeko by the bicep and shook her so hard she dropped the curry brush. He raised his free hand in anger, like he was going to backhand her. “Who the hell is this guy? One of my buddies overheard this little pussy asking about Harper.” Still clutching Weeko’s arm, he turned and pointed in my direction. “I better never find you with my old lady. If I do, I kill you both.”

Weeko yanked her arm free. Reno turned and his hand shot out, catching her just below the jaw. He clutched the soft tissue of her neck with his leathery hands. “Listen to me you little half-breed bitch.” He reached his free hand behind Weeko’s neck, gathered her hair in a bunch, and used the ponytail to pull the defenseless girl to her knees. “I’d better never hear you talking behind my back again.”

I spotted a three-tined pitchfork, leaning against a stack of hay. I grabbed the handle and felt a surge of power, like I was a Roman Gladiator holding a Trident.

Reno was about ten feet away with his back turned to me. I started charging toward him, recoiled my weapon, and twisted the handle so the tines lined up with his leg. After a few quick steps, I lunged forward and stuck the pitchfork into the meaty part of his calve. When I yanked it out, Reno squealed. He let go of Weeko, and I flipped the pitchfork end over end. He spun to attack, and I swung the hardwood handle like a

Louisville Slugger. The sweet spot caught him along the jaw and just below the base of the skull. The handle fractured and split in two. His knees got wobbly, and he started to go down against his will, still struggling forward, arms flailing like a punch-drunk boxer. Landing on his knees, he took one more hopeless swing, and toppled over face first.

Weeko crouched behind her horse, and Reno lay on the ground twitching. I was still holding the broken pitchfork when up walked detectives Sanchez and Zico from the San Bernardino Sheriffs Department. I let the farm tool slip out of my hand and fall behind a bale of hay.

Zico, who looked like he'd slept in his suit, stood over the comatose cowboy. The worn-out detective reeked of booze, and his face was flush with a pinkish-red hue. Zico poked Reno in the ribs with his boot, and Reno snapped out of his temporary coma with a moan.

Zico bent at the knees and stuck his badge in Reno's face. When Reno tried to sit up, Zico pushed him back down and said, "Stay down partner. Fight's over. We've got it handled. You stay down until the fog clears."

I asked, "What are you two doing here?"

Zico said, "Me and Sanchez were responding to a shooting at the Wonderland Ballroom last night when we spotted you scurrying across the desert. We followed the pickup on a hunch. We didn't even know it was you until you stopped at Stateline and got gas."

"You don't have any jurisdiction in Nevada."

"Shut the fuck up you little piss-ant. Turn around and put your hands behind your back. You're under arrest."

Weeko came out from behind her horse. "You can't arrest him. He was only defending me."

"He can still arrest me," I said. "But he'll have to explain why he's in Nevada, and why he's drunk. Then he'll have to go before the judge and explain why he's harassing me. That's what this is, police harassment."

Detective Sanchez, whose eyes had glazed over, was standing close to Weeko. He told me to shut up. Then he pulled his shield and held it out so the girl could see it clearly. "I'm Detective Sanchez. What's your name young lady?"

"Weeko."

He pointed at me and said, "Do you have any idea who this guy is? Do you realize he's implicated you in an armed robbery?"

Weeko's eyes darted about and finally settled on me. I got the feeling she wanted an explanation. I wasn't sure I had one.

"Did he tell you he's being investigated by the FBI?"

"Don't listen to this guy. Him and his partner tried to pin a robbery on me, and the judge threw the case out of court. If they had any evidence, I'd be in jail."

"Shut up," Sanchez said, "Or I'll put the cuffs on you."

I scoffed, but kept my mouth shut.

Sanchez pulled Weeko off to the side for a private conference. His tone was conciliatory, and I could barely hear what he had to say. "You need to tell me everything that happened here Weeko. If you hold anything back, you could be in some very serious trouble."

"I didn't do anything."

“I want to believe you,” he replied. “Telling me exactly what happened here will go a long way towards convincing me your not part of the gang.”

“I’m not part of any gang; I’m with the rodeo. I’ve never seen this guy before. He walked up to me a few minutes ago and said he was looking for an old friend.”

Weeko told him everything, exactly as it had happened. Sanchez nodded his head like he was a priest, and Weeko’s confession would be good for her soul. When Sanchez asked her about Harpers marriage to Steve Reno, Weeko declined to say.

Reno sat up. “You keep your mouth shut.” He tied a bandana around the puncture wound in his calve and stood up, balancing on one leg. He hopped twice and eased onto a bale of hay. “My marriage ain’t nobody’s Goddamn business.”

“Don’t worry about him,” Sanchez said. “If he gives you any trouble, I’ll take care of it personally. Right now, you need to tell me everything you know. You can’t hold anything back. You could be charged with accessory after the fact.”

Weeko hesitated. “Last January we were in Dallas for a week. The day before we opened, Steve shows up with Harper hanging on his arm and starts telling everyone she’s going to be his wife. By the end of the week, they were married. She looked so happy those first few weeks.” Weeko looked at Reno with a piercing female glare. “The honeymoon was over fast. He drinks, and he’s a mean drunk. And he cheats. Harper suspected it almost from the beginning.”

“That’s enough out of you woman.”

Sanchez told Zico, “If he says another word, put the cuffs on him.”

“The rest is a rumor,” she said. “But it’s a rumor no one is calling a lie. I heard Harper came home a day early from visiting her mom and caught him screwing some girl on the dinning room table. Legend has it, she grabbed a pistol out of the kitchen drawer and shot him in the butt.” Weeko giggled. “Word around the henhouse is that she was aiming for his little wiener, but the target was too small, and she missed.”

Sanchez walked over to Steve Reno. “Tell me everything you know about Harper O’Neal.”

“I don’t know anyone named O’Neal,” Reno said. “Harper’s maiden name was Bradley.”

“Her full name?”

“Harper Lee Bradley.”

“You met her in Dallas?”

“That’s right. Just like the girl told you.”

“What about her family, brothers—sisters?”

“No brothers or sisters. Her step dad’s some kind of big-shot insurance executive in Dallas.”

“What about her mother,” Sanchez asked.

“She’s a fulltime bitch.”

Sanchez gave him a knowing smile, like a man who had a mother-in-law. He asked Weeko, “You want to press charges?”

“No,” she said. “It’s too much trouble.”

The detective nodded his head in agreement then turned to his partner. “We’re done here. We’ve got all the information we need. Mr. and Mrs. Bradley are going to lead us to their daughter. She’ll lead us to the money. When she realizes how much time she’s facing, she’ll give us the kid on a silver platter.”

Detective Zico walked over and poked his finger in my face. “Where going to find this fucking Harper bitch. When we do, we’re going to turn the screws until she coughs you up. Then I’m going to flush your life down the toilet—you little turd.”

Detectives Sanchez and Zico split, Weeko untied her horse and tiptoed away. Steve Reno rubbed his swollen jaw while resting his gimp leg on a hay bale. As I walked away, he swore he’d find me and settle the score. I wished him good luck.

On my way out of Vegas, I pulled into a 7-Eleven and picked up supplies, mostly Hostess Cupcakes. I used the payphone to call my cousin Vince. Some chick picked up.

“Is Vince there?”

“Duff?”

“Yeah—who’s this?”

“It’s me.”

“Stay right there.”

14

I drove the 300 miles, from Vegas to Venice, in less than four hours. My radio didn’t work, so I played the drum solo from In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida on the steering wheel the whole way. When I got to my cousin’s place, nobody was home, so I sat on the curb and waited. The mid-day sun started to burn my neck, so I borrowed the Stingray bicycle parked on Vince’s back patio and cruised over to the boardwalk.

I spotted my cousin and Harper down by the ocean. They were playing catch with a Frisbee. Harper chased the plastic saucer through the shallow surf like she didn’t have a care in the world. When the disk landed beyond her reach, and got sucked into a wave, Vince dove in and saved it.

I dropped the bike and started running toward Harper, who was looking out to sea. I called out, and she twirled toward me. Harper’s sun washed hair swung wild in the ocean breeze and multicolored highlights shimmered against the sky. Harper looked like the quintessential bohemian beach bunny. Cocoa butter brown, with ultramarine eyes, she was wearing a light cotton peasant blouse and Levi cutoffs.

She gave me one of the best hugs I’d ever had. Harper held on like she meant it, and when she let go, I had to hold back a tear.

She said, “Don’t worry Duffy. Everything is going to be all right.”

“Nobody calls me Duffy.”

“I’ll call you Duffy if I want to young man.” Harper touched my cheek with her palm, and then brushed back my hair with her fingers. “We need to get you cleaned up.”

I was trying not to look at Harper’s cleavage when Vince came running up and slugged me in the arm, as hard as he could. While I recoiled from the shot, my cousin stood there grinning. Burnt black by the sun, with a mischievous smile and the devil’s green eyes, Vince Hamilton was the king of the beach bums. Dripping wet, he bent over and started to shake his curly blond locks like a dog.

Harper and I backed away from the spray. We looked at each other and started to laugh. Suddenly, something seemed out of place.

“You don’t know my cousin,” I said. “How’d you find Vince?”

“He found me.”

“Where?”

“At your apartment.”

“How’d you find it? Nobody but Vince knows our new address.”

“I knew you moved back to San Pedro. When I called the operator, she didn’t have a listing, but she gave me a number to call at the phone company’s administrative offices. They said a Morgan Allison had placed an order for new service, but hadn’t been there the day the installer showed up. She was nice enough to give me your new address. I was knocking on the door Thursday evening when Vince pulled up on his motorcycle.”

A lifeguard wearing an official looking uniform shirt drove by in his jeep. He stared at us, and it made me feel uneasy. *What if the cops followed me?*

“We need to get out of here,” I said. “We shouldn’t be standing out here in the open.”

Vince started laughing. “What are you talking about man? Did you smoke some grass again? I thought you swore off the Devils Weed.”

“I did—you smoke enough for both of us.” I asked Harper, “You didn’t tell him?”

“Tell me what?” Vince asked.

Harper said, “We had a little problem in Barstow.”

Some young punk smoking a filtered cigarette was eyeballing the Schwinn. I started running toward the bike. I turned and ran backwards. “You and Harper meet me back at your place. Take the long way. Watch out for cops, and make sure you aren’t followed.”

Vince shook his head, like he thought I was losing it. “Are you having an acid flashback or something? Shit man. You only tripped out once.”

I flipped him off and spun around, running toward the bike. After I hopped on the Stingray, I looked south. Harper had Vince by the arm, and she was leading him down the boardwalk. I went the wrong way on purpose, rode a mile out of my way, and doubled back.

I came the back way down the alley and stopped behind Vince’s duplex. I lifted the Stingray over a five-foot block wall, and then jumped over, landing on the back patio. When I tapped on the sliding-glass-door, Vince pulled back the bed-sheet curtain.

He slid open the glass door and yelled, “Watch out, behind you, it’s the cops.”

I spun around and Vince started laughing.

I shoved him out of the way. “You’re a real riot—you know that.” I stepped past him into the apartment. “You’re going to shit your pants when I tell you what happened.”

I grabbed a beer out of the fridge and went into the living room. Vince’s place was a standard issue crash pad. A couple of used sofas faced each other, a crusty hookah sat on a coffee table made out of egg crates, and black-light posters adorned every wall. I sunk into one of the sofas and powered down my frosty cold Budweiser. Vince sat on the other end of the sofa. Harper came out of the restroom and took a seat across from me.

I asked Harper, “Where’s the money?”

“Don’t worry; it’s safe.”

Vince asked, “What money?”

“This is going to blow your mind.”

I told Vince, and Harper, what happened the morning of the robbery. Then I told Vince how Harper and me watched Morgan run from the cops. And how she found the money in his truck, and how I left the money with Harper when I went to look for

Morgan. Then I told them how I got busted and spent almost two weeks in San Bernardino County, and how Morgan got busted by the Feds, and how the cops and the FBI were following me.

“No shit.”

“No shit,” I replied. “The local cops couldn’t hold me, but the FBI has Morgan. And they aren’t letting him go.” I asked Harper, “How the heck did you get away?”

Harper had that twinkle in her eye that all girls get when they think they’re smarter than you. She said, “A little while after you left me that day, I took the money over to your old trailer. I remembered seeing you hide a house key by the front door one time. You and Morgan left Barstow in such a big hurry, I assumed it was still there. It was, so I went inside and hid the money in a bedroom closet. When I walked out the door, two police cars came to a screeching stop in front of my trailer. Naturally, I stepped back inside. I peeked through a window and watched while the police searched my trailer. I don’t know what their problem was. They didn’t have to smash the trailer door like they did. And the way they roughed you up. That was completely uncalled for. After the other CHP officer showed up and took you away in handcuffs, I snuck out the back door. I used the neighbor’s stepladder to get over the fence.”

“How’d you get out of Barstow?”

“Before I left the trailer, I found an old safety razor in the bathroom and cut my Levi’s off so they were real racy short shorts. I took off my bra and opened my top so I was showing as much cleavage as I could muster. Then I ratted my hair.”

“Why?”

“I was trying to look like a prostitute. They use to come around Tubby’s truck stop and the police would shoo them away. They would always come back. I asked one of them why, and she told me—‘Because the drivers get lonely, and a lonely man can be a girl’s best friend’. When I went over the fence, there were a dozen great big trucks idling out on the street waiting for the police to open up the highway. I found a driver with his window rolled down. I told the man I was a working girl, and I desperately needed to get out of the Barstow area, away from all the police.”

Harper looked a little embarrassed. “I feel bad. I really led him on. He was sure he was going to have his way with me. The old guy got so jazzed; he jumped down out of the truck and loaded the backpack. When he lifted the heavy thing into the sleeper cargo hold, I thought he was going to throw out his back. After I got in the truck, he wanted me to have oral sex with him right then and there. Can you believe it?”

Vince and me looked at each other. We could believe it.

She said, “I reminded the driver that I couldn’t do anything with the police crawling all over the place, and I reassured him that I would take care of him later. When I told the old guy the police would hassle him if they found a girl like me in his truck, he let me hide in the sleeper. A few minutes after I crawled in the back, another driver came over the CB. He said the roadblock was breaking up, and the Highway Patrol was letting everyone leave. Once he started driving, everything went pretty well. He was a nice guy as long as he had his hands on the steering wheel. When he pulled into a shopping center parking lot in Pomona, I had to disappoint him.”

“What happened?”

“He wanted to collect his fare. At first, I told the man what a sweetheart he was for giving me a ride, and how I was going to show him a real good time, but first I needed to

get some condoms out of my backpack. I got down out of the truck, and he popped the latch on the cargo door. I pulled out the backpack and started acting flustered. He wanted to know what was wrong, and I told him ‘I just started’. He didn’t understand at first. So I told him it was ‘That time of the month’, and I needed to find a restroom quick. When I walked away, he called me a fuckin’ Lot Lizard. I didn’t think that was very nice.”

“I can’t believe you got away,” I said. “The San Bernardino Sheriffs are looking all over the place for you—and the FBI. What the hell happened to you; where the hell have you been?”

“After my narrow escape from the horny truck driver, I called the CHP from a payphone. I told the desk sergeant that a friend of mine had been arrested in Barstow for drunk driving, and he told me to call the San Bernardino County Jail. When I called the county jail and asked if you’d been admitted, they gave me the total run around. I waited a half hour and called back. It was more of the same. I tried a few more times, and I finally gave up. It was so frustrating. They wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“Yeah—cops working the jail can be real pricks.”

“It was starting to get late, so I took a taxi to the Greyhound Station. I caught the bus to Los Angeles. It was late when I got to L.A., so I found a discrete hotel near the bus depot and got some sleep. The next day, I took a cab to San Pedro. You weren’t home, so I took the local bus north on Coast Highway. I found a weekly rental in Manhattan Beach. My neighbor is a real sweetheart who lets me borrow his scooter anytime I want. I’ve been coming by your place every few days ”

“What did you do with the money?”

“It’s safe.”

“How much money?” Vince asked.

“Seventy pounds worth,” Harper said.

“Where is it?” I asked. “How do you know it’s safe?”

“I know it’s safe because I shipped it to my stepfather in Dallas.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Don’t worry. The police won’t be able to connect us.”

“Yes they will.”

“No they won’t,” she said, kind of snotty. “O’Neal isn’t my legal last name, and it isn’t my mother’s, or my stepfather’s either.”

“I know. It’s Bradley, Harper Lee Bradley.”

Harper looked shocked. Vince looked confused. I told Harper I’d talked to Dessie at the diner. And how that led me to Vegas. I told them about my run-in with Harper’s husband at the rodeo, and how the San Bernardino Detectives found out who she really is. And that they planned on contacting her parents in Dallas ASAP.

Vince said, “I heard a car cruise by out in the alley.”

“You’re stoned.”

“True. But I’m not a lightweight like you; I can handle my dope.” Vince got up and moved out of the living room and into the dinning area. He flipped the latch on the sliding-glass-door and slid it open. “I’m not shittin’ you man. I heard a car in the alley.”

“Please sit down Vince,” Harper said. “You’re starting to make Duffy nervous.”

“I’m not nervous. I’m scared shitless. You should be too. The cops are going to trace the money back to you.” My mind went blank for a second; I focused on one thought.

“You need to call your stepfather and tell him to lie for you.”

“He won’t do that.”

“Probably doesn’t matter,” I said as all the oxygen left my body. “The San Bernardino Sheriffs have probably already talked to your parents. I’ll bet the Dallas Police are at your mom and dad’s house right now. They’ve probably already found the money.”

“Don’t worry Duffy. The police won’t find the money.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s in a very safe place. My stepfather is an executive for a large insurance company in Dallas. His office is on the top floor of a twenty story high-rise building. They have their own mailroom. I shipped the package care of my stepfather, Steven Bradley. I put special instructions for it to be stored until Mr. Bradley calls for it. Under the declaration of contents, I wrote: Plaster Nativity Scene. It’s safe and sound in the basement of the Lone Star Insurance Company. And will be until Christmas.”

“I won’t be alive by Christmas.”

“Don’t be silly,” Harper said. “Now that I know you’re safe, we can settle this thing once and for all.”

“Nothing is going to be settled until I give the money to Lawson.”

“Who’s that?”

“Morgan didn’t pull the robbery alone. The other guys who were in on it want their money. They know I saw the robbery, and they’re sure I know where the money is. I didn’t tell them about you, because they’re animals, and I didn’t want them coming after you. I’ve been holding them off for the last few days, but these guys don’t have much patience. I’m supposed to meet them at ten o’clock tonight, in front of the roller coaster at the Long Beach Pike. If I don’t have the money, I’m going to get my ass kicked. Morgan wants me to give them the money. That’s the plan.”

Harper said, “I have another plan.”

15

My cousin snatched the hookah off the coffee table and stashed it in the closet by the front door. He spun toward the entry, leaned down, and peered through the peephole. Vince secured the deadbolt. “Duff! Come check this out. There’s some old dude standing out by the street. He looks like a Narc.”

When a car door slammed out in the alley, Vince backtracked across the living room, through the dining area, and stopped at the patio door. He slid open the glass panel and craned his neck, trying to see over the back wall. He glanced back at me and said, “Some Gomer wearing a cowboy hat just got out of a pickup truck. You gotta check this guy out.”

“I’ll be right with you,” I replied. I asked Harper, “What’s your plan?”

“Don’t worry Duffy. Everything is going to work out fine. We’ll talk about it after you bathe.”

Chaotic racket muffled an angry voice rumbling in from the alley.

Harper said, “You should go see if Vince needs any help. We’ll talk later.”

“Okay. We’ll talk about it later.” I started to chug the last of my beer and stopped. “Why’d you use the alias O’Neal? It’s not your real name. Is it Miss Bradley?”

“It’s not my legal name Duffy, but it is my real name. O’Neal is the name my father gave me. Bradley is my adopted name. I was going to use Bradley, but it made me think of my mother, and we’re not speaking right now. And I absolutely refuse to use my married name.”

“You’re still married?”

“Steve won’t sign the divorce papers. He’s so impossible. After all that’s happened, he honestly thinks we’re still going to get back together.”

“He’s not real smart. Is he?”

Vince leaned in the apartment. “We’ve got one pissed off peckerwood out here.”

“I hope this is him. Vince will kick his ass.” I drained my beer, belched, then got up and followed my cousin out onto the patio.

Harper’s old man was standing in the alley, on the other side of the brick wall. He had his right arm draped over the top block, and he slouched on it, like it was a crutch. His jaw was swollen, with a nice black and blue hue, and his eyes were a bloodshot cocktail of rage and pain. I imagined smoke coming out of his ears, like one of those cartoon bulls.

I can’t believe that shit-kicker followed me. What a dick.

Reno said, “I saw you with my fuckin’ old lady. Where is she?”

“First of all. Harper isn’t anyone’s fuckin’ old lady.”

“Who’s the Pencil Neck?” Vince asked.

“He’s Harper’s soon to be ex old man.”

“You want me to kick his ass?”

“I’ll let you know,” I said as I stepped to the wall and locked eyes with Reno. “She dumped you a long time ago Hopalong Cassidy. Why don’t you sign the divorce papers and get along little doggie. It’s over between you two.”

“Is that what that whore told you?”

“Watch your mouth!”

Vince stepped up behind me and stood tight against my left flank.

Reno brought his left hand above the fence. He was holding some paperwork. It was thick, and folded in thirds. “You can tell that bitch I’m never going to sign the divorce papers. Not now. Not ever.” He flicked his wrist, tossing the documents toward my face.

The papers glanced off my shoulder, and I cocked my arm, primed to throw a devastating right in the direction of Reno’s swollen jaw.

Reno’s bloodshot eyes boiled. He reached behind his back and brought up a nickel-plated Colt Revolver. Resting the gun’s butt on top of the wall, he pointed the barrel at my face.

I moved to my right and stepped back, away from Vince. My eyes were locked on the muzzle; the barrel was locked on me. I hesitated for a second, fixated on my own mortality. Adrenalin screamed through my body, and I challenged Reno with a glare.

Vince stepped to the wall, grabbed the .38, and yanked it out of Reno’s hand. It sounded like the time I set off a cherry bomb in the handball courts at school. When the bullet ricochet off the block wall next to me, fragmented concrete and dust exploded in my face, and I hit the deck.

I stood up, and my cousin tossed me the gun. Vince cleared the wall, like a gymnast going over a pommel horse, and then used the bed rail to vault into the truck bed. Vince unleashed an all out underhand right. Reno, who was almost to the driver's door, never saw it coming. Vince's knuckles caught Reno directly on the chin. The cowboy wobbled back a few feet, turned to jelly and melted.

Vince jumped out of the truck, landed on the far side, and stood over Reno. My cousin dropped out of sight, and I lifted myself up on the block wall. I couldn't see what was going on, but I heard Vince smack him a few times.

Vince stood up, pulling Reno up by the collar. My cousin tossed the punch-drunk cowboy over his shoulder and carried him with ease. He stopped at the back of the truck, dropped the tailgate with one hand, and then flopped Reno in the truck bed. Vince twisted toward me and did a double bicep pose, like a weightlifter.

Four inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than me, Vince was in great shape. He surfed seven days a week and pumped iron with the Muscle Beach gang. He was a few years older, and it was great to have him around when some of the older guys tried to mess with me. Vince loved to mix it up, especially with some dickhead lookin' to get his ass kicked.

Reno moaned, mumbled something about eight seconds, and then struggled to sit up. With his legs dangling off the tailgate, he sat on the end of the truck and rubbed his jaw. He was wiping a trickle of blood off his chin when a white '67 Plymouth came tearing down the alley. The driver slammed on the brakes, and the car came to a dramatic sideways stop.

Detective Sanchez exited the vehicle with his weapon drawn and barked, "Don't move or I'll shoot."

Behind me, I heard the sound of a winded water buffalo running down the concrete walk that ran along the side of Vince's duplex apartment. I spun around, and Detective Zico flopped to a stop in front of the patio door.

Zico hyperventilated as he huffed, "Don't...or...I'll...shoot."

I almost laughed, but he had a gun on me. And I could see myself going back to jail. "Where's the gun," Sanchez commanded. "Where's the Goddamn gun."

I pointed to the inside corner on the patio, next to a standing ashtray.

Zico gave me the stink eye and holstered his gun. He pulled a Popsicle stick out of the ashtray, stuck it in the barrel of Reno's .38, and picked up the gun. Then the asshole grabbed me by the shirt collar and yanked me off the wall. He said, "I've got you now pissant. You're under arrest for attempted murder."

"Are you still drunk? That asshole over there tried to kill me."

He slapped me. I almost grabbed the gun. He could sense it. Zico held the gun's handle near my face, egging me on. When I didn't take it, he snickered, like I was some kind of punk. He dropped the gun in his coat pocket and shoved me up against the wall. He gave me a rough pat down, like he was some kind of tough guy, and then locked the cuffs on me.

I turned toward Vince. He was spread-eagle against the wall, and the detective was patting him down. My cousin's eyes were defiant as the cop clamped on the handcuffs. Vince's smile showed contempt, and he spit on the ground next to Sanchez's feet.

Reno started balling like a child having a tantrum at the shopping mall. "That bitch can't leave me; nobody dumps Steve Reno."

Sanchez and Zico turned toward Reno. They glanced my way before checking with each other. Sanchez pointed toward the apartment, and Zico started for the door. He stopped.

“What the fuck?”

“No need to look detective.”

Standing just inside the back door, wearing a beachcomber straw hat, tropical shirt, Bermuda shorts, black socks and wingtips, Special Agent Andrews lifted a Polaroid Camera to his eye and snapped a shot.

“Who’s the hodad?” Vince asked.

“That’s Special Agent Andrews of the FBI.” I rolled my eyes at Andrews. “Snazzy outfit Agent Andrews. I hope it’s a disguise.”

Andrews stepped onto the patio and said, “You should be nice to me. I’m going to keep you and your hippie friend out of jail.”

Detective Zico started to bull his way past Andrews. “Get out of my way G-Man.”

“There’s no need to search Detective. The girl is gone.”

Sanchez called out, “I’ll radio in an APB.”

Andrews laughed. “What are you going to say? I’m looking for a beautiful blond on the beach in L.A.? You’d better call in the National Guard.”

“Nobody asked your opinion,” Zico said. He held one nostril closed with his index finger and blew out a bugger. “What the hell are you doin’ here anyways?”

“I’ve been following you and Detective Sanchez.”

Zico looked confused.

Andrews spelled it out. “I was at the Wonderland Ballroom last night. When things started to escalate, I called the local police. After I made the call, I left the bar and parked my car a few hundred yards north, just off the road. I spotted young Mr. Allison cutting across the desert in his ’41 Studebaker pickup. When I started to follow him with my lights out, you and Detective Sanchez pulled a u-turn right in front of me. From then on, I followed you following him.”

“I don’t like being followed,” Zico said.

Andrews replied, “You’re going to like this even less. I need you to release your prisoner.”

“Fuck you G-Man.”

Andrews stepped around Zico and moved to the back wall. He motioned for Detective Sanchez to come close. Sanchez stepped to the wall, and Andrews whispered in his ear.

Sanchez nodded his head a few times, thought about it, and then started to take the handcuffs off of Vince. He said, “Zico—cut him loose.”

“That’s fuckin’ bullshit. I’m gonna bust this punk.”

Detective Sanchez waved him off. “Remove the cuffs and meet me out front. We’re interfering with a Federal investigation. We’re extending Agent Andrews a professional courtesy and leaving immediately.”

Zico released my wrists and walked out front. Sanchez got in the Plymouth, shoved it into reverse and peeled out, going backwards down the alley on his way to pick up his partner.

Steve Reno stood up and said, “That fuckin’ Mexican took my gun.”

Vince shoved Reno, who fell back in the truck bed.

I asked Andrews, “What did you say to Sanchez?”

“I told him Zico was an idiot.”

“I could of told him that.”

“And I told him arresting you would be a huge mistake.”

“I could have told him that too. That didn’t make him change his mind.”

“No,” he said. “It didn’t. When I told him he blew the surveillance, and that arresting you would only create a report documenting his failure, he started to see things in a clearer light.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I saw everything that happened in Las Vegas,” Andrews said. “The detectives left first, parked on a side street and waited. You left right after them. I knew you would be heading south, either to Barstow, San Bernardino, or the Los Angeles area. I had plenty of time to catch up, so I kept surveillance on the cowboy. He was the wild card. I waited while he limped over to his trailer. He came out fuming with some documents in one hand and a pistol in the other. He got in his pickup and started for the highway. The cowboy must of spotted you at the convenience market, because he pulled over and waited while you used the phone. He pulled over right in front of the Detectives.”

“So what?”

“From there the detectives followed the cowboy, who was following you. They made their big mistake when they lost track of both of you only a few blocks from this apartment. They drove around in circles for a half an hour, and finally picked up the cowboy again, who was parked across the street from this residence. When your cowboy friend pulled around to alley, Sanchez dropped Zico off out front and followed the pickup. That’s when the shot went off. Zico should have stayed out front. If he had, they’d have you and the girl. He blew his responsibility, and she got away.”

“Harper’s gone?”

“So she was here,” he said.

“You didn’t know.”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“You’re sneaky.”

“I’m an FBI Agent.”

Vince said, “Same thing.”

Andrews blew off my cousin. He came over to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and looked into my eyes, like he liked me, but was getting tired of my bullshit. “I’m going to give you one last chance Duff. You need to cooperate with me now—before it’s too late. Everyone’s closing in on you, the next time we’ll get you, and the girl, and the money. That’s three strikes and you’re out. Your brother committed a crime, and your going to pay the penalty.”

“Loyalty is double-edged sword,” I said. “It cuts both ways. Sometimes it cuts deep.”

He shook my hand and said, “The next time we meet I’m going to arrest you. And I’ll be instrumental in sending you to prison for a very long time. I’m not happy about it, but I’m going to do it. It’s my job.”

“Can I borrow a pen?”

That pissed him off. “Didn’t you hear a word I said? You’d better start listening to me young man. You’d be smart to take my advice.”

“I don’t want advice; I just want a pen.”

He took a ballpoint pen out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me. "Keep it." He looked genuinely disappointed, liked he really expected me to turn on my brother. He got this disgusted look on his face and walked away.

Steve Reno stood up. "Where the fuck is my old lady."

Vince punched him in the solar plexus, and Reno's butt hit the tailgate. He teetered back and in agony, gasping for air.

I picked up the scattered divorce papers and put them in order. I jumped over the wall and stuck the pen and papers in Reno's face.

"Sign them," I said. "Or I'll have Vince break your arm."

16

Reno whimpered like a beat dog. Using the bedrail for support, he stood up and hobbled toward the front of the pickup. The cowboy crawled into the cab and pulled away, swerving as he drove down the alley. After he turned right and disappeared, Vince and me went back inside the apartment. When I flopped on the couch, I caught the faintest hint of Harper's soap.

"We need to find Harper," I said.

"She'll turn up."

"We'd better go look; she has the plan."

"Don't you have a plan?" Vince asked.

"I planned on getting my ass kicked."

"That's not much of a plan."

Vince stepped into the kitchen. I could hear him open the fridge. I walked in and stood by the sink. 'Last one' he said. He bit off the bottle cap, and we split the last brew. I went to use the head, and Vince told me to meet him out by the garage.

When I got out front, a sleek black '65 Buick Riviera was idling in the driveway. It had knockoff wire wheels, chrome twice pipes, and was dumped in the rear so the back bumper almost touched the ground. The front end was pointing up, like it was getting ready to takeoff. And written on the side-rear windows in red script were the words "Choosey Beggar".

"Nice Short," I said, sliding into the passenger seat. "Where'd you get it?"

"I met a foxy blonde divorcee from Pacoima with huge tits and an insatiable desire for yours truly. When I told her my ride was down, and I was going to be without wheels for a few days, she let me borrow the car."

"That was awfully nice of her."

"The girl can't help it; she's in love." Vince pushed in the import eight-track tape, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, and the God of Hellfire burned.

Rolling south on Sepulveda, Vince kept his head tilted back, arm straight out, and drove one handed, lowrider style. He hung a right at Manhattan and took the boulevard to the beach. We parked in a red zone by the pier and looked around for Harper. When a cop pulled up behind us, Vince pulled away low and slow, cruising south toward Hermosa.

Vince slipped a reefer out of the ashtray and torched it. He took a huge hit, like he was sucking on an asthma inhaler, and then handed the joint my way. I passed; Vince

continued. A few tokes later we stopped at a burger shack in Redondo Beach and ordered something to eat. The sandwich was good, but my stomach was restless, and I only took a couple of bites. The evening air was warm until a Pacific wind came up and blew a chill down my spine. I shivered in the salty breeze while my cousin shoved food in his mouth.

I said, "I'm getting a bad feeling about this deal at the Pike tonight."

"You said the chick had a plan."

"She might have a plan. Girls always have a plan. That doesn't mean it's realistic. I haven't heard the details. All I really know is Harper thinks she can swing some deal with the insurance company and get Morgan out of jail. The whole thing sounds sketchy. What am I supposed to tell Lawson? The guy's gonna go ape shit if I don't give him the money tonight."

"No sweat," Vince replied. "I can handle Lawson."

"I don't think so Vince. Lawson is on the edge. He could snap without warning. The fuckin' guy is completely shell-shocked. Did you know he got kicked out of the Marines for fighting? Can you imagine someone actually getting kicked out of the Marines for fighting? It must of been a pretty bad scene."

Vince slurped down his root beer. When the soda ran out, he stood up and tossed the cup over my head into an open trashcan. "I'm not worried about Lawson."

"What about T-bone?"

Vince looked the other way, like he didn't want to answer. "Fuck T-bone."

"My sentiments exactly." I nibbled on a French fry and tossed it back in the bag. "You know it's not just Lawson and T-bone. There's a pack of 'em. I don't know how many, maybe a hundred."

"That's bullshit." Vince scratched his nuts and sat back down. He looked at me with his streetwise eyes and said, "Lawson feeds that crap to chicks and dumb fucks like your brother. He's just trying to look like a big shot. There's not anywhere near that many members. There's like ten guys in the Serpents."

"That's not what the FBI says."

"Fuck the FBI. That Andrews dude is just trying to scare you. You can't trust him. He'll set you up, and then throw you under the buss when he's done."

"I don't know man. I'm starting to have some serious doubts about this whole thing. The shit's coming down, and all Morgan cares about are the fucking Serpents. Maybe I should talk to the FBI? Why should I go to jail for something those guys did?" I tossed a French fry at a scavenging seagull. "Morgan's a lot more concerned about Lawson getting his money, than he is about keeping me out of jail."

"Didn't you say Morgan was ready to plead guilty if the DA in San Bernardino would drop the case against you?"

I nodded my head and smirked, like yeah so what. "It's his fault I was in jail."

"It could be his fault; it could be yours. Either way, you gotta back up your brother. Even if he did do something stupid."

"Why should I care about him? He was going to toss me out in the street so he could bum around with his motorcycle buddies. Morgan doesn't give a shit about me. He talks about loyalty, but he doesn't know anything about it."

"I wasn't supposed to tell you this," Vince said. "But since you're being such a pussy, I'm going to fill you in on some need to know info. You know when your mom

got sick last year, Morgan turned down a commission in the Marines and took a hardship discharge instead.”

“The Marines offered my brother a commission?”

“It was right after he won the Silver Star.”

“My brother won the Silver Star? Why didn’t he tell me?”

“He didn’t want his little brother making a big deal out of it, so he told me to keep it under my hat.”

“What happened,” I asked. “How’d he win The Star?”

“He saved some Army Captain’s ass over in Vietnam. The guy got all weepy eyed about it and made sure your brother got a medal. Then the fucking Marines offered Morgan a commission. He was on his way to Officers Candidate School when he found out about your mom being sick.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” Vince replied. “Morgan was going to be a lifer, but he gave it up to come home and take care of you and your mom. Morgan always backed you. Why do you think he took that job out in Barstow? He didn’t do it for his health. It was the best bread he could make, so he took the lousy job at the mine to support your punk ass while you finished high school. He planned on helping you go to college, but that thing with the chick went down, and he got fired.”

“After Morgan got fired,” I said. “It was pretty much to hell with everything.”

“Getting fired from the mine was part of it. It was a lot of stuff. You know Vietnam was no day at the beach for Morgan. He saw some pretty hairy shit over there.”

“Going to Vietnam is no reason to rob an armored car.”

“Did I say it was? My point was—people do what they do for a lot of reasons. Sometimes the shit starts to pile up and life doesn’t seem like it’s worth the hassle. Your brother started running with the Serpents because he didn’t give a damn anymore.”

“Sometimes Vince, I think you smoke too much rope. What does getting shot in Vietnam have to do with robbing an armored car in the Mojave Desert?”

Vince pilfered one of my French fries and said, “Nam wasn’t the reason, but it was one of the reasons. Think about it man. Morgan gets his ass shot off over in Vietnam. Then he comes home and some dickhead war protester spits in his face at the airport and calls him a baby killer. That kind of crap made Morgan feel like he put it all on the line for nothing.”

“I guess. I mean I get what your saying, but I don’t know.”

“And the way your mom died,” Vince said. “The cancer ate her so fast. She looked okay the day he got home. Three weeks later she was gone. Morgan went dark after that.”

“Yeah—those first few months after mom died were the worst.”

“That was just the set up. Morgan is tough, and he got back up, but there was more shit to come. You guys had been in Barstow a few months, and Morgan was starting to feel a little bit better, when he meets the chick and falls in love, but it turns out she’s married, and the whole thing blows up in his face.”

“Morgan told you he was in love with Harper?”

“Not in so many words,” Vince said. “Morgan told me without actually saying it.”

“Told you what?”

“He told me he thought he’d met the one, and how she turned out to be just another whore. And how he hated her guts. Then he got droopy eyed and started to tear up. He

acted like he needed to take a piss and went to use the toilet. When he got back, he starting guzzling gin and calling all women sluts. That's when I knew he was in love."

"If he loves her, why is he being such an asshole?"

"It's because he's in love Clyde. A man has no natural defenses against a woman he cares about. They can cut your heart out, and all a guy can do is act tough, get pissed off, and become a drunken asshole."

"That sounds like my brother."

"He was broken hearted," Vince said.

"I didn't think Morgan had a heart."

"Shattered into a millions pieces." Vince lifted a foil packet of Sen Sen out of his t-shirt pocket and emptied the licorice candies into his mouth. "Don't ever tell your brother I told you this. But after he finished the bottle of gin, he started drooling on himself and telling me about the night she tore his guts out."

I leaned across the picnic table. "What happened?"

"It happened one night after she got off of work. They were talking out in the parking lot at the truck stop. Morgan tried to put a lip lock on her, and she blew him out of the water. After the chick told him she was married, your brother's nut sack shriveled up, and he just stood there staring at her. Neither of them said a word. Then a group of guys from the mine stumbled up and interrupted. The guys were pretty blitzed, and they wanted everyone to join the party. Morgan went with the guys, and left the chick standing out in the parking lot."

"That's it?"

"Morgan told me, the next night he was getting shit faced at the Wonderland after work, and some short-fat dude comes into the bar and tells him to stay away from the chick because she's his old lady. Morgan blew him off, but the dude just kept getting in his face, so your brother dropped him with a Waimea right to the chin."

"I can't believe my brother slugged his boss."

"Didn't know who the dude was until the next day. Morgan gets called into the office at work, and the little-fat guy was sitting behind the boss' desk. He tells Morgan that he's the new top dog. Then he fires him."

"The system does suck."

"Like I said cousin, Morgan was having a real bad run of rotten luck. And all that time Lawson was coming by every few weeks telling Morgan the world was turning to shit and he should join up with the Serpents and raise hell because nothing fucking mattered anymore."

I spun around on my seat and tossed my soda cup in the trashcan. *I could do the same thing with my brother.*

"To hell with Lawson," I said. "And the FBI too. Let's find Harper and get my brother out of jail."

We drove north along the coast, flipped a bitch at El Segundo, and parked down by the Manhattan Beach Pier. We scoured The Strand, searching desperately for a beautiful blonde named Harper. No luck. When the sun went down, we left the beach behind us.

We took Artesia to the southbound 405, transitioned to the Harbor Freeway, and hopped off in San Pedro. We stopped at my place and checked for signs of Harper. Nothing. I grabbed a quick shower. I stole a pair of clean socks from my brother. I went in my room and changed my shorts. In the dresser, I found the Saint Christopher Medal my mother had given to me on my twelfth birthday. I kissed it, clutched it in my palm, and then slipped the precious medal into my pocket.

We left my place around nine o'clock and took the Vincent Thomas over the channel towards Long Beach. About half way across the bridge, I gazed out the side window and took in the panoramic view. Right in the middle, on the southern tip of Terminal Island, stood the ominous Federal Correctional Facility. *I wonder if I'll end up there?*

As we came off the bridge, five or six guys wearing Serpents Colors blew past us going about eighty. Super-heated spent fuel blasted out of high-performance exhaust and rolled over us, momentarily wiping away all other sound. Riding flat out, swerving in and out of traffic, they pulled away at breakneck speed. By the time we crossed the railroad tracks into Long Beach, the Serpents had disappeared. We passed the Marine Terminal, and I checked off to my right. The bikers were parked in an open area along a chain-link fence under some high-output security lights. They'd grouped up with another bunch. I counted ten, maybe twelve. They all looked like dockworkers, only dirtier.

"Did you see that," I said. "There's like twenty of them."

Vince smiled and lit another joint. We crossed over the L.A. River. A few minutes later we pulled in the parking lot at the Nu Pike.

Right after I got out of the car, three old men rolled by on rat bikes. They looked like a pack of junkyard dogs. They were all Serpents. One of them glanced back. His eyes were burnout black. I don't think he liked me. I don't think he liked anyone.

"You know," I said. "You don't have to do this."

"Do what?"

"Get your ass kicked. That's what. I mean it Vince. This is going to get ugly. I don't have the cash, and I'm running out of stories. I lied last night at the Wonderland Ballroom. Lawson almost got shot, and T-bone got his butt kicked. They're going to be royally pissed off."

"No sweat. I brought a secret weapon." Vince pulled a plastic baggy full of machine rolled reefers out of his sweat sock. "Acapulco Gold baby. And if this isn't enough, I've got a kilo in the trunk. We'll turn this little shindig into a love-in."

"I don't think so Vince. I'm getting a real bad feeling in my gut. I'm afraid we're headed for a beat down."

"Don't sweat it Duff. I'll handle this thing tonight. Tomorrow—we'll find the chick and get this whole deal straightened out."

Vince strolled toward the park. I reluctantly followed. Just outside the entrance, there were twenty-five or thirty motorcycles, V-twin thumpers, hogs, bobbers, and choppers. The old dudes I'd just seen were parking their bikes. And at least five more Serpents were standing around bullshitting, passing around a gallon of cheap wine. I don't think they knew who we were, because they didn't pay us any attention. We steered clear and drifted into the amusement park.

The Pike was a dump. It had been a big deal back in WWII. In '68, the place was on its last leg. It was littered with trash, drunken sailors, carnival barkers, and rickety old rides. We took the long way around the Midway and stopped over by the carousel. The colorful ride whirled to the melody of a carnival organ, while a three hundred pound dirtbag wearing a Serpents jacket straddled a carved wooden horse and barked at the moon.

“Vince.”

“Yeah.”

“You told me there were only ten guys in the club. There’s a hell of lot more than ten guys in the Serpents. I’ve already seen at least thirty of them. And I didn’t recognize any of ‘em. So there’s at least seven or eight more.”

“Yeah.”

“So I’m not so sure we should hang around.”

“You worry too much cousin,” he said. “Everything is going to be cool. Let me talk to Lawson. Afterwards, we can take a ride on The Racer.”

I looked past the carousel toward the roller coaster. The Cyclone Racer was billed as the Greatest Ride on Earth. Over a hundred feet high, the dual-track coaster was a gigantic open-air structure built out of wooden beams and cross braces. The entrance was twenty feet wide and looked like the front of an old covered bridge. Hundreds of people were being herded up the ramp that led them inside and onto the loading platform.

I said, “I heard they were going to close it down.”

Vince said, “Bummer man.”

Off to my left, I noticed three burly Serpents stagger over and stand in front of the roller coaster’s exit. They looked drunk, and high, and mean as fuck. Two of them had some kind of beef. They kept shoving each other until one of them threw a punch. The third dude, the biggest one of the bunch, stepped in and pushed them apart. He lifted his right fist in a threatening manner, and the other two calmed down.

“All these guys do is fight. We should get out of here. I’ll call the lawyer and tell him we had a flat tire.”

Vince was checking out some girl getting off the carousel. We watched her walk away. She was heading in the direction of the parking lot. I started after her. After a few steps, when Vince didn’t follow, I turned around.

T-bone had Vince in a headlock. My cousin was struggling to break the hold. The crowd was starting to scatter. I ran to help. A Serpent stepped out of the chaos swinging. His fist smashed my left ear. My eardrum popped. I stumbled sideways and took a knee. I looked toward Vince. Serpents were swarming him. I tried to get up. Somebody punched me in the middle of my back. I flew forward as the wind rushed out of me. I did a belly flop on the concrete. I sucked wind. I looked up at Vince. T-bone released his chokehold and stepped back. A dozen Serpents rat packed Vince. He fought back. The Serpents were relentless. The punches came from every direction. Vince tried to get away. They pummeled him. He fell to his knees. Blood oozed from cuts above both eyes, and red drool ran out of his mouth and hung down off his chin. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his chin dropped. His arms were limp at his side. He was helpless. A couple of Serpents spit on him. Then they all back off a few feet. T-bone stepped forward. He pulled a miniature baseball bat out of his jacket. It was one of those two-foot pieces of hardwood they sell at the Dodger games. T-bone reared back his arm. He stepped into it,

bringing the bat forward, waist high and level, like a forehand in tennis. Vince's nose splattered. Blood flew everywhere. Vince went limp. I got sick. Things got blurry. I could hear Lawson. He was yelling.

"Spread out and attack."

I shook it off as best I could. When the hazed lifted, there were Serpents everywhere. They were going berserk, running up to strangers and punching them for no reason. Some guys would fight back and get rat packed. Most of 'em ran. Chicks were screaming. People were scattering in every direction. The fuckin' place was coming apart at the seams. When I tried to stand up, a leather-clad forearm hooked my throat and hauled me to my feet.

"I'm going to enjoy this," T-bone said. He closed his arm around my throat, cutting off my blood supply, and slowly crushing my larynx. He lifted me off the ground, holding me in lethal suspension, while I dangled like a condemned man at the end of a rope.

Lawson pulled a pig sticker out of his boot, and stuck the steely point into the soft tissue just below my eye. "Where's the money? Tell me right now. You've got ten seconds. When I'm done counting, I shove the blade of this Arkansas Toothpick back up behind your eyeball and pop it out."

"Do it," T-bone said, "Do it Lawson. Fuck this piece of shit. He's going to tell us. Let's have a little fun along the way."

I struggled for my life. T-bone tightened the sleeper hold and laughed. I started to black out. I was a goner. I heard someone say, "Bite off his fingers T-bone."

T-bone dropped me. My legs fell out from under me. I rolled around on the ground groveling for air. With my lungs still begging for oxygen, I got to my knees and crawled for daylight. I felt a boot in my back, just before my face hit the ground. T-bone bend down and grabbed my wrist. He took my left pinky finger and stuck it in his slimy mouth.

Lawson said, "I've got a better idea. Let's cut off his head." He pointed to the Cyclone Racer and walked directly toward the coaster's exit gate. Two Serpents followed, scanning the area, acting like Secret Service Agents.

T-bone pulled on one arm, and some Serpent who smelt like stale cigars yanked on the other. They dragged me toward the Cyclone Racer. I stumbled along gasping for air. When we started through the coaster's exit gate, I tried to jerk my arms free. T-bone clubbed me in the mouth with his elbow. I spit out blood, broken teeth, and what was left of my fighting spirit.

We moved uncontested through the exit corridor and stopped at the edge of the unloading platform. Up the track, there were no people waiting to get on the ride. All the customers had scattered. Across the track, behind a freestanding control station, one bewildered park employee watched the cars come in full, and go out empty. Lawson and his bodyguards stepped off the platform, moved across the tracks and surrounded the guy. We followed.

Lawson said, "Keep the coaster going." He stuck his knife in the park employee's face. "If you stop it, I'll cut off your nose."

A coaster train came around the last turn and stopped in front of us. The passengers exited, and the train pulled up to the loading area, where it stopped for a minute, and then pulled away empty.

Lawson stared at his wristwatch. Another train came around the last turn and stopped. Lawson was still looking at his watch. When it pulled away, Lawson took a couple of steps down the track and stopped in an open area. We followed. Lawson kept staring at his watch. Another coaster train came in and stopped.

Lawson said, “Three minutes between trains.” He pinched T-bone’s cheek. “After this train pulls out, put your head on the track.”

When the empty train pulled out, T-bone and his partner crammed my face on the track so my neck was on the rail. My ear was against the ground, and I was facing sideways, so I could see the coaster train come around the last turn. T-bone and the other guy held me down by standing on my hands and forearms with their motorcycle boots. The pain was outrageous, and I jerked around like I was having a fit. One of the other assholes sat on my legs and pinned me. Lawson knelt down and held his watch in front of my face. The second hand was reeling.

Lawson leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Can you hear the Cyclone rumble? Listen real close, and you can hear your last breath.”

“What about the money! If I’m dead, you’ll never find it.”

“You’ve got less than three minutes. If I don’t have the money by then, you’re dead.”

“I can get it tomorrow.”

“Not good enough.”

I could feel the coaster racing down the track, violent hairpin turns and sudden drops sent shock waves along the rail and tremors down my spine. I struggled to get my neck off the railing. The biker who was sitting on my legs slugged me in the back. It hurt like hell, but I was pumped full of adrenaline, and too afraid to give up. I arched my back and tried to kick my way out. I strained with all my might. They laughed at me. Exhausted, I laid my head on the railing. I could hear the coaster getting closer. I almost started to cry. I heard the voice of an angel.

“You let him go this instant—you horrible bullies.”

The bikers didn’t respond. *I guess Serpents can’t hear angels.*

18

Harper threw a cross-body block into T-bone, knocking him off balance. Without hesitation, she took a wild swing at the guy sitting on my legs and screamed, “Get off him.” She turned to Lawson and said, “I have the money. Let Duffy go. I’ll give it to you.”

The Serpents grouped together in a pack and shifted their attention to Harper. I rolled off the tracks. Harper’s face lost the flush of anger. Her eyes filled with fear. It was the worst feeling of my life. I couldn’t do a damn thing to help. I couldn’t breathe. I could barely move my arms. I wasn’t even sure I could stand up. It took all I had just to roll off the tracks and lay there watching, barely holding on to consciousness.

My head was pounding. I heard people laughing. A coaster train full of teenyboppers passed by. The passengers gawked at the grizzly bikers standing along the track. They didn’t seem to notice Harper, or me lying on the ground. When the coaster stopped, all

the kids bailed off the ride and split. Harper stood frozen with fear. The coaster train pulled up to the loading area, and the Serpents started to move. Harper backed away, stumbling over the tracks. Turning toward the disembarkation platform, she stepped up and started for the exit, with the bikers closing fast.

Before Harper could get more than a few feet, the Serpents surrounded her. She spun around slowly. T-bone reached out and grabbed her left hand. The scumbag biker twisted her arm into a wristlock.

“Let go of me,” she cried.

Applying severe torque to her delicate wrist, T-bone savored her pain. Harper cringed in protest, bending and turning to accommodate her untenable position. T-bone lifted her arm to the breaking point, leaned over, and swallowed her ring finger to the hilt. He clamped down with his front teeth and contorted his filthy mouth into a sadistic smile.

“You’re hurting me.”

Lawson said, “Let her go T-bone. I don’t go for that stuff with women. That’s crossing the line.”

T-bone licked her finger as it slid out of his mouth. He said, “Fuck you Lawson. You don’t tell me what to do. It’s my money. I’ll get this bitch to tell me where it is.” T-bone grabbed her butt with his free hand and squeezed. “Maybe I’ll have a little fun with her first. I’ll bet she’d like it.”

T-bone bent her arm at the elbow and forced it up behind her back. Jamming it upwards, applying pressure to the shoulder joint, he pushed until Harper fell forward onto the platform, landing prostrate on her knees. As Harper tried to get up, T-bone stuck his boot against her back and tried to push her flat. She flipped over, landing face up, flailing her arms and kicking at the air. T-bone got a hold of her forearm. Then the freak put his boot on her stomach. Pressing down with his boot, he pulled her arm taught, like he was trying to pull it out of the shoulder socket. Harper’s hand was balled up in a tight fist. T-bone pried it open and forced her finger in his mouth.

“Stop it. Please. Let us go. I’ll get you the money.”

T-bone sucked on Harper’s finger, like they were lovers, and then let it slide out of his disgusting mouth. Spit hung in the air, draped from the corner of his mouth to her finger.

“Where’s the cash bitch?”

“I can’t tell you. I’ll get it for you.”

“Fuck you cunt. Tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“You’ll tell me.”

T-bone stuck her ring finger in his mouth and clamped down on the first knuckle. He bit down until Harper jerked against the pain. With his boot buried in her stomach, Harper squirmed, trying to pull her arm free. T-bone thought it was funny. He slid his mouth along to the next joint and did the same thing. Tears began running down Harper’s face. He took her finger all the way to the knuckle and bit down until blood started to ooze. Harper started sobbing. Blood squirted out of her finger. T-bone’s head exploded.

A fraction of a second later, while I watched T-bone flail his arms and stumbled backwards off the platform, the violent blast of a well-aimed revolver washed over me. T-bone jerked around like a zombie having an epileptic fit and collapsed on the track. The gunshot echo gave way to the clackety-clack of the coaster train coming around the

last turn. The train smashed into T-bone, pushing his lifeless body down the track. As the coaster came to a stop, Detective Zico from the San Bernardino Sheriffs Department came staggering out of the shadows with his gun drawn. He wobbled while holding his service revolver on Lawson and the other Serpents.

Watching T-bone get the back of his head blown off gave me my second wind. I got to my feet and looked toward the park employee running the ride. When our eyes met, I yelled, "Stop the Cyclone."

I scrambled over to Harper, tore off my t-shirt, and wrapped her finger. I was able to get the bleeding under control, but Harper needed to see a doctor right away. She buried her head against my shoulder, and we rocked back and forth, while she struggled with the pain.

Detective Sanchez came from the direction of the exit gates, moving cautiously, with his gun drawn. Someone was following him, about ten feet back. The man got a little closer, and I could see it was Agent Andrews. He leaned against the handrail and watched. Sanchez moved over to the coaster train. The passengers were frozen in their seats. The detective swung his arm in a long horizontal arc, showing everyone his badge.

Sanchez said, "This is police business. Disembark the coaster. Exit the ride. Then leave the Pike immediately. Do it in the safest manner possible. Do it right now."

I watched the passengers scatter; then turned my attention toward the Serpents. Detective Zico was still pointing his gun at the bikers. He looked like he was about to fall over drunk. Zico was so hammered a six year old could have taken his gun away. I thought Lawson was going to make a move.

Andrews stepped up holding a Walther PPK pointed directly at Lawson's head. "You're under arrest J.T. Lawson." He lifted his FBI Credentials above his head and said, "FBI—get your hands in the air. You're all under arrest."

Harper lifted her head off my shoulder. She had an incredulous look on her face. "He's an FBI Agent."

Agent Andrews said, "That's right Miss Bradley, AKA Mrs. Reno, AKA Harper O'Neal. I'm Special Agent Andrews of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And you're under arrest. You're going to be indicted on federal racketeering charges. And you'll probably spend a great deal of time in prison."

"I saw him over by the carousel," Harper said. "He just stood there and watched while those hooligans beat up your cousin Vince. They could have killed him. And he didn't do a damn thing to stop it." She had a disgusted look on her face and contempt in her voice. "What kind of FBI Agent are you?" Harper barely looked at Zico. She did the same with Sanchez. "Are these men with the FBI?"

I said, "They're cops from San Berdo."

She said, "They're pathetic. They were standing with the FBI Agent. I begged them to help Vince. When I tried to go around them and break up the fight, they held me back. I couldn't believe it. They were laughing about it."

"Will you testify to that in court of law young lady?"

"Yes Sir I will."

I looked toward the exit. The Serpent's lawyer, Jefferson Trace Thibodaux, came strolling up. He was nibbling on a cotton candy cone, and dabbing the perspiration off his forehead with a handkerchief.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Andrews asked.

The portly southern barrister brushed past the FBI Agent and dropped his cotton candy cone into a trashcan. He put his nose in Detective Zico's face and sniffed. "I believe you're intoxicated sir."

"He's blitzed," I said. "And he shot T-bone. He didn't even give him a chance to surrender. Just blew the guys head off."

"Will you testify to that in court young man?"

"Yes sir."

Lawson let his hands drop. He scoffed at Zico. "The cops drunk out of his mind. He shot T-bone for no reason, just used him for target practice."

"Detective Zico," the lawyer said. "You're a disgrace. You're drunk on duty. And you've killed an innocent man. Charges will most definitely be filed against you—and your partner Detective Sanchez."

"Fuck you," Zico said, just before he blacked out. The rumped old cop toppled over, landing like a lump.

I said, "And I'll testify that Agent Andrews almost got me and my friend Harper killed."

The lawyer tore into Andrews. "I've never seen such gross incompetence Special Agent Andrews. There will be a board of inquiry. I hope you're prepared to take responsibility for this disaster."

"He's responsible," Harper said, pointing her good hand at the Agent. "That's right. He's the man responsible for all of this. He should be arrested."

"You've cast a dark cloud on the FBI," the lawyer said. "The riot will be in all the papers. And somebody is going to have to explain the dead body. I smell a congressional investigation here."

"Just what are you trying to pull?"

"This is a law enforcement disaster," the lawyer said. "A debacle of epic proportions."

Harper gave Andrews a nasty female glare. "I hope they bring you before a board of inquiry. You stood by and watched while Vince was beaten. And you almost got my best friend Duffy killed. You're a poor excuse for an FBI Agent Mr. Andrews."

"This is the biggest bunch of BS I've ever heard."

"It might be," I said. "That depends on how it shakes out. One thing for sure—this is a real mess. There'll surely be an investigation. You and Detective Sanchez will probably get off with a suspension and loss of pay." I looked at Sanchez, "It's going to be a career killer. You can count on that." I glanced down at T-bone, who was holding his gun like a teddy bear, and just starting to come out of his drunken stupor. "And Zico can kiss his pension goodbye. He'll be lucky to work security at Sears. Hell—he'll be lucky if he doesn't do time."

"You're full of crap," Andrews said.

"That's right. I'm full of crap, and Detective Zico is drunk. There's a dead body, and pretty soon the Long Beach Police will be all over this place. Somebody is going to have a lot of explaining to do. And it won't be me."

Sanchez said, "You're under arrest for the armored car robbery."

"Do you have any evidence," the Lawyer asked. "Or are you clutching at straws?"

"The money is here," he replied. "I know it is."

“There’s no money,” I said with a cool confident smile. “Without the money, all you have are theories.” I looked down at the track. “We’ve got a dead body.” I looked at Zico, “A drunken cop.” I looked into Special Agents Andrews, like I had him all figured out. “And an FBI investigation gone completely out of control. You don’t have a case. You have a train wreck.” I stood up and helped Harper to her feet. “I’m taking this young lady, and my cousin Vince, to the emergency room right now. It would be in everyone’s best interest if nobody tried to stop me.”

The big shot FBI Agent and the hard-nosed detectives from San Berdo looked like three limp dicks at a circle jerk.

“Play it my way,” I said. “And you’re all heroes. Any other way—you lose.”

With the coaster stopped, I could hear the wail of police sirens coming from both directions out on Ocean Blvd.

“Five minutes boys.”

“What’s the deal?” Zico asked.

“Let’s hear it,” Sanchez said.

“This should be interesting,” Andrews added.

“This will only take a minute,” I said to Harper. “You gonna be okay?”

Harper’s lips pursed and bucked up at the edges. She nodded yes, like a real trooper, and leaned against the railing.

I went over to the Serpents. “Give me all your drugs.” I got a couple of spindly joints, a hand full of Reds, and a dozen hits of acid. I kept a few caps of seconal for Vince and planted the rest on T-bone.

I stomped off the platform, across the tracks, and confronted the park employee running the Cyclone Racer. “You almost got me killed dickhead. Why didn’t you stop the train?”

He looked scared. I didn’t blame him, but I couldn’t let him off the hook.

“Do what I say. Tell the cops you didn’t see anything. Tell them you were too busy running the ride. If you go along, you’ll be portrayed as the brave young man who stayed at his station during the riot. If not, Harper and I will tell the L.A. Times what a pussy you were. And how you were shitting your pants while the filthy bikers almost killed me. My lawyer would be forced to sue The Pike, and you’d be fired for sure. On top of that, you’d be on the Serpents permanent shit list. You really don’t have any options.” I clutched his shirt collar and demanded, “You in?”

When the park employee nodded his head in agreement, I strutted back across the tracks and hopped up on the platform. I looked at the cops and pointed towards T-bone. “Leave that sack of shit on the tracks. When Long Beach P.D. shows up, flash your badges, and tell them you’re part of a joint task force investigating the armored car robbery out in San Bernardino. You were about to arrest Earl Tison, AKA T-bone, when he went crazy, and took a young lady hostage. He was obviously high on drugs, and when he threatened the girls life, Detective Zico had no choice but to shoot.”

“The local police will be easy to handle,” Agent Andrews said. “What about the press?”

“Not a problem. The press will ask about the girl who was taken hostage. Tell them she was transported to the hospital and released. Because she’s a potential witness, her name can’t be made available to the press. If anyone asks about the stolen money, tell

them you have every reason to believe it will be recovered within the next twenty-four hours.”

“What about them?” Andrews asked, pointing at Lawson and his crew.

Lawson said, “What if I decide I don’t want to play along.”

I stepped into a gunslinger’s stance and took a bead on Lawson. “Don’t mess with me Lawson, or I’ll burn you down.” I turned my back on the bikers. “These clowns are going to stay here until you say they can go. If anyone asks, they’re currently being questioned in connection with the shooting, and you have no reason to believe they were involved in the armored car robbery. After everything calms down around here, release the Serpents and go home.” I raised my voice. “That goes for everyone. Just stick to the story, do what you need to do, and then go home and get some sleep. This is going to work out just fine for everyone.”

Andrews asked, “What about the money?”

“If I get my brother back, you’ll get your money. We’ll do the exchange tomorrow, downtown at midnight. Bring Morgan, no handcuffs, in civilian clothes, with his release paperwork.” I barked out an order. “Lawson, Sanchez, Zico, that goes for you too. Tomorrow at midnight, 9th and Figueroa, in the Pantry Restaurant. Everybody gets what they want.” *Everybody except me.*

19

Every cop in Long Beach had converged on the Pike. Harper and me booked it for the exit, avoiding the police by zigzagging between rides along the Midway. We found Vince lying across the back seat of the Riviera.

I drove. The ride to the hospital was quiet. Harper and me held hands. Vince sucked on a joint.

Out of the blue, I turned to Harper and said, “I love you Harper.”

“I love you too Duffy,” she replied, squeezing my hand gently. “You’re the little brother I never had.”

I didn’t say anything after that. Neither did she. There wasn’t much else to say. I held her hand for a little while longer, so it didn’t look like my feelings were hurt. Then I let her slip from my grasp and drove with both hands on the wheel.

At Long Beach Memorial, Harper got three stitches. Vince refused treatment, set his own broken nose, and cleaned up in the Hospital restroom. When the nurse asked if I needed to see a doctor, I tried to convince her I was going to be okay. From the look on her face, I don’t think she believed me.

The three of us crashed at my place in San Pedro. Harper slept in Morgan’s room, Vince slept in mine, and I nodded out on two beanbag chairs in the living room. When I woke up, nobody else was awake, so I went down and picked up some donuts. After I got back, I sat in the living room eating a chocolate éclair, washing it down with a Yoohoo Soda, while reading the L.A. Times.

The papers main feature story was—Shootout at the Long Beach Pike. I guessed Zico was sleeping it off somewhere, because the cover photo showed Detective Sanchez

standing alone in front of the Cyclone Racer, with the L.A. coroners in the background carrying a gurney loaded with an overstuffed body bag. In a long narrow column next to the main feature, there was an article praising Law Enforcement Cooperation. The reporter gave kudos to the undisclosed Federal Agent who was instrumental in apprehending the suspected robber. The writer made certain the reading public knew the FBI Agent was a hero, emphasizing how the agent risked his life along with the brave detectives from San Bernardino.

After I finished my second éclair, Vince woke up and drifted into the living room. I handed him his favorite breakfast, a can of Dr. Pepper and a maple bar. He sat down on the aluminum lawn chair next to me, and started stuffing the doughnut in his mouth. He breathed a little funny, but he seemed in good spirits, and he had a healthy appetite. He drained the DP and ripped an ear-popping burp.

I heard the back-bedroom door open, and Harper shuffled in rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Wearing a pair of my brother's floppy wool socks, polka dot boxer shorts with the waistband knotted, and a military dress shirt tied loosely at the midriff, she looked fantastic.

"Good morning," I said. "How's your finger?"

Harper examined the bandages, wiggled her finger, then looked at me and smiled, "It's doing pretty good—considering where it's been. How are you two this morning?"

"It's three o'clock," I said, handing her a paper bag containing an old-fashioned buttermilk donut and a small carton of milk. "I didn't know what to get you. I hope this works."

"It's perfect." Harper sat on a beanbag chair, crossing her legs in a lady-like Lotus Position. She fumbled with the milk carton and said, "I can't believe I slept so long."

I jumped over Vince and opened the paper container for her.

"Thanks Duffy. You're a sweetheart." She patted her good hand on the beanbag chair next to her. "Sit down, and tell me your plan."

I plopped in the beanbag. Then reached over and broke off a piece of Harper's doughnut. "I got the idea from a TV show. This guy went around recovering stolen stuff, and the insurance company paid him a ten percent recovery fee. I know this is pushing my luck, but I want a reward for finding the money."

"I'll call my stepfather. I'm sure he can arrange everything. You know he's a very influential man in the insurance business." She kissed me on the cheek. "I think you've earned a ten-percent reward. The timing couldn't be better. The money will pay for your college education."

"It's not for me. I want Lawson to get the reward."

"Absolutely not."

"It's the only way Harper. We've gotta pay him off. If we give back the money, and Lawson doesn't get anything out of the deal, he's going to come after Morgan and me, maybe you too. I don't want to wake up some night with a Serpent wrapped around my neck."

"If it'll make you sleep better, I'll agree to it, but I think it's a shame. That money should be yours. You deserve it."

"All I want is a fresh start."

Harper lifted her milk carton and gave a toast. "Here's to fresh starts."

I went over and lifted the L.A. Times classifieds off the dining room card table, picked up the divorce papers, and handed the paperwork to Harper. When she saw Steve Reno's signature at the bottom of the last page, a teardrop squeezed from the corner of her eye. Without taking a breath, she sat perfectly still while the droplet zigzagged down her cheek and fell off her chin. Then she started crying and disappeared into Morgan's bedroom.

Vince and me laid around watching an old horror film marathon on Channel 9. Vince went out around seven and got three burger combos. We finished our meals and split Harper's. When Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein came on the TV, I took a nap. I woke up at 9:30. Around 10:00, I heard the backdoor open, and Harper came through the kitchen into the living room. She looked reborn, like an angel whose prayers had been answered.

"I've got good news," she said.

"Where did you go?"

"When I woke up, you two were snoring away, so I walked down to a payphone and called my stepfather in Dallas. Everything has been arranged." She handed me a scrap of paper with her step dad's name and phone number on it. "Give this to Lawson. All he has to do is call. Once they have the money, the responsible party will send him a cashier's check for the amount."

"How much is it?" I asked.

"According to my stepfather, who knew about the robbery, ten-percent should be between twenty-five and thirty thousand dollars."

"Didn't he ask how you knew about the money?"

"My stepfather Steven Bradley is a very shrewd man. He's knows better than to ask too many questions. He won't lie, but he's not above avoiding the truth. He didn't ask, so I didn't tell. All I said to Steve was—if someone had information leading to the recovery of the stolen money, would he or she be entitled to a reward. He said yes—up to ten percent." Harper relaxed on the beanbag with her arms folded behind her head. "I told Steve that I might know somebody, who might know somebody, who might know where the money is. He told me to have that person call him, and he would arrange everything."

We finished watching Blood of the Vampire, then the eleven o'clock news. After that, we split for downtown.

The Pantry Restaurant at 9th and Figueroa had been a Los Angeles staple since before I could remember. The world changed around it, but the Pantry stayed the same. The décor was Depression Era, and the menu was nailed to the wall. They made the best sourdough toast I'd ever had, and the hash browns made me want to cry. A midnight breakfast was a thing of beauty.

We grabbed a table in the back. Vince and me scarfed while Harper nibble on a piece of toast. Lawson approached and Vince didn't look too happy.

Lawson said, "You got a problem with the Serpents."

"I got a problem with the guy who broke my nose."

"He's the guy they shot," I said. "He's dead."

"Problem solved," Vince replied.

Lawson took a seat facing the door at an empty table next to us and waved off the waiter. Sanchez and Zico came in like they didn't want to be seen and took the chairs

opposite Lawson, sitting with their backs to the restaurant. Nobody said a word, so I asked the waiter for more coffee. I put some jam on another piece of toast and took a big bite. Agent Andrews came walking in with my brother, and I choked down my toast with a hot gulp of java. I jumped up and met Morgan in the middle of the restaurant. We hugged. It felt kind of strange. We'd never hugged. Then again, I'd never been so glad to see him. I broke the embrace and walked back to the table. My brother followed.

Lawson got up, wrapped his arms around Morgan and slapped him on the back. My brother kept his eyes on Harper.

"Why is she here?" Morgan asked. "I don't understand."

"That's because you're not too bright. Follow me."

I led the way into a back office. Everyone followed. Vince knew the night manager at the Pantry, and he agreed to let us use a small office in the back. I took the managers seat behind the desk. Vince sat behind me on a three-drawer file. Harper sat on the desk. Looking at Morgan, she looked pissed. Morgan didn't look like he knew what to do. I asked him to come around behind the desk. Sanchez and Zico sat in two chairs across from me, and Agent Andrews stood behind them. Lawson leaned against the wall.

"Sanchez and Zico," I said. "You first. You need to close your case. In order to close your case—you need two things. You need the perpetrator, and you need to recover the stolen cash." I looked around. "Everyone likes T-bone for robbery?"

The detectives nodded yes. Agent Andrews shrugged.

"Then all you need is the money—right?"

"That's it," Zico said. "The money makes us all friends."

I showed the detectives the slip of paper Harper had given me earlier. "Write down this name and number. Call this man first thing in the morning. He's a big shot executive in the insurance business. He'll handle the money exchange. Tell him you have an informant who knows where the money is, and that the informant will call him in a few hours. He'll make sure you get credit for the recovery. I'll take care of the rest. The money will be back were it belongs before noon tomorrow."

"I've got a better idea—you little pissant? How about I bust you right now."

"Don't be stupid Zico. You bust me, and you might as well call the L.A. Times. That's what I'll do. Then we'll all spend the next six months calling each other names in the newspaper. We can't prove you were drunk last night when you shot T-bone, and you can't prove any of us had anything to do with the Robbery. Why make waves. In the end, all you'll do is hurt Sanchez's career. Right now—he's a big hero with his face plastered on the front page of the L.A. Times."

Sanchez stood up. "Let's go."

20

Special Agent Andrews glared at Lawson.

"All right Captain Ahab—give it rest."

Andrews whipped his head around and focused his glaring eyes in my direction. His look told me to watch my smart mouth. I didn't care. He'd screwed up, and I was going to make him pay.

“Have a seat Andrews. It’s time we straightened a few things out.”

“Just who do you think you’re talking to young man?”

“I’m talking to a grown man who let his obsession get the best of him. You had a nice investigation going, and you blew it. You wanted Lawson so bad, you jumped in when you should of held back.”

“I’m in complete control of this investigation. I only came here tonight to watch you dig your own grave.”

“All due respect Mr. Andrews—that’s a lie, and not a very good one. You’re here because you made a mistake, just like my brother and me.”

“I don’t like were you’re going with this.”

“You have no idea where I’m going with this. What you don’t like is the fact that you screwed up. When you held up your ID and called FBI, you took responsibility for the bust.”

“I’ll downplay my involvement and deny I said anything.”

I chuckled. I didn’t mean too. It just came out. “A drunken cop, a dead biker, allegations of police abuse and FBI negligence, let’s face it Agent, you’re involved whether you like it or not. Do yourself a favor. Don’t make a big deal out this, you’ll just end up with egg on your face.”

His eyelids twitched. His brow narrowed, and his eyes drooped toward the floor. All of a sudden, he looked old and broken. I felt kind of bad.

I said, “You made the right call Agent Andrews. The money should have been there. With the bust going down, you had to step in and take control of the situation. Otherwise you’d of lost Lawson to the San Berdo Detectives. You were pretty sure of yourself until Sanchez started to arrest me and I laughed. That’s when you realized there was no money. I saw it in your face. It’s a sad fact, but you have no case Sir.”

“I’m going to put J.T. Lawson behind bars if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You need to let this one go Agent Andrews.”

“I’ll break the Serpents; watch me.”

“I can help you with that,” I said. “Actually—Lawson is going to help you.”

“Fuck that bullshit.”

“Have a seat Lawson. The Serpents are breaking up, and it’s your idea.”

“Fuck you.”

“Listen to me tough guy. Right now, according to the FBI, you’re the head of a well-organized interstate criminal enterprise. That means if a member of the Serpents spits on the sidewalk in Joplin Missouri, they can bust you in L.A. on a RICO Charge. Technically, all the Serpents need to do is become independent chapters, with their own president, treasurer, road captain, and sergeant-at-arms. You can claim that each club is a separate entity. All the other members can claim their own territories, and the drifters can be nomads. You change your bottom rocker to San Berdo, and you’re no longer part of a nationwide criminal enterprise.”

“That sounds like a lot of legal bullshit.”

“It is,” I said. “It just happens to be bullshit that works in your best interest. Think about it. All you have to do is say the Serpents are breaking up, and you’re no longer a target for the FBI.”

“What about my money?” Lawson asked.

“I was getting to that.” I got up and went around the table. I extended my hand to Agent Andrews. “We have a deal?”

He said, “That man attacked my son.”

“The Marines punished Lawson for that crime. And you’ve exacted your measure of blood. Last night you were part of an impromptu taskforce that shot and killed Lawson’s best road dog T-bone. You’ve forced the club to break up; what more do you want? Go back to Washington and tell your boss you smashed the Serpents.”

Agent Andrews thought about it for a second, and his face took on a new dignity, like a man who’d reconsidered the facts and adjusted them to justify his actions. He stood up proud. “I’ll shake your hand young man. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t approve of your involvement in this fiasco. You made the wrong choices Duff, but you did it for all the right reasons. I admire your loyalty to Morgan.” He shook my hand like we were friends. He started to leave and stopped. He handed me a business card. “If you need a reference, feel free.” He gave Lawson one last nasty look and took off.

“Fuck that prick,” Lawson said, taking a seat. He came out of his chair and half way across the desk. “Where’s my fucking money.”

“Fuck you Lawson.” I stood up and got in his face. “After that shit last night at the Pike, you’re Goddamn lucky I didn’t turn you in. I could of told the FBI anything. They wanted you so bad, they would of lapped it up. If I testified against you in court, you’d probably get the Electric Chair. And you should think your lucky stars that Harper hasn’t turned States Witness. You don’t have a lot of friends in the room Lawson.”

Lawson backed off and sat down.

I handed him the slip of paper with Mr. Bradley’s phone number. “Call this man around noon tomorrow. He’s expecting your call. He’s an insurance executive, and he doesn’t ask questions. Tell him you want a ten percent finders fee. After he agrees, tell him to go downstairs to the mailroom. The money is in a package addressed to him. It’s the package labeled Fragile Nativity Scene.”

“If I agree to this scam of yours, how much do I get?”

“It should be over twenty-five thousand dollars. And it’s clean.”

“And it’s way fuckin’ short.”

I said, “Everybody came up short on this deal. Get over it. You’ll take the twenty-five grand and like it.”

I laughed. Lawson smiled.

“Think about it Lawson. You ripped off the fuckin’ man and then sold him back the money. You get twenty-five G’s, and you can’t be arrested. Come on man. You go along, and everybody makes out. Morgan gets to go home. I get the cops off my butt. Harper gets the man she loves.”

Harper looked mortified. Morgan’s eyes twinkled.

I tried to change the subject. “One other thing Lawson. You make my brother a full patch member of the Serpents. I’m not sure why, but it seems to mean something to him. He was willing to go to prison over it. After you give him the Patch, he retires a member in good standing. He’s got another life to lead.”

“Fair enough,” Lawson said. He looked at me like he wouldn’t mind going out for a beer some time. “You did okay kid.” He shook hands with Morgan. “See you in the wind brother.” Then he was gone.

Harper pounced off the desk and grabbed an open chair. She plopped down in a huff, planted her suede cowboy boot against the edge of the desk, and pouted like a little girl.

“Sorry about the love comment,” I said. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” Harper said. She looked at Morgan. “And I’m not in love.”

“Don’t look at me,” Morgan said. “I didn’t say anything.”

“No—you didn’t say anything. You ran off with your friends and left me standing alone out in the parking lot at Tubby’s.”

“I don’t date married women. I’ve got no respect for a woman who can’t stay loyal to her husband.”

“You asshole.”

“Big brother, you’re way out of line. Harper is the most loyal friend either one of us has ever had. And she’s one of the finest women I’ve ever known.” I got out of my chair, stood chest to chest with Morgan, and looked up. “I won’t have you talking to her like that. Are we clear on that?”

“You don’t understand little brother. Things get complicated when there’s women involved.”

“Things aren’t complicated. You just have your head up your ass big brother.” I leaned against the edge of the desk. “You’re mad at Harper because your feelings are hurt. That’s not complicated. Your problem is—you don’t have any right to be hurt. Harper is a grown woman who married the wrong man. She made a mistake, just like a lot of other people around here. You think she led you on, but Harper didn’t lead you on. You led yourself on. If you’d let her explain the situation, then you’d understand. So do me a favor—stop being such a whistle dick. You owe this lady an apology. You know Harper’s the only reason you aren’t still in jail.”

She shot Morgan a sideways glance, scrunched her nose and stuck out her tongue. “It was Duffy who got you out jail. I just hid the money.”

Morgan flushed. Then he turned white. His knees buckled, so he steadied himself by holding onto a floor-standing coat rack. He started muttering, “I’m free...I’m free...I’m really free.” He looked at me with complete disbelief, like a space alien had taken over my body, and the person he was talking to wasn’t his little brother anymore. “How the hell did you do it Duff?”

“I hung tough until somebody made a mistake. Then I took advantage of it. How the hell did you pull off an armored car robbery?”

“I had inside information,” Morgan said.

“Like what?”

“You knew the McCord Mine paid their workers every Friday in cash.”

I nodded my head.

“Did you know that the armored car that delivered the payroll also made cash drops at several banks in the area, and it’s biggest deliveries were always on the last Friday of each month?”

“How do you know?”

“By accident,” Morgan said. “When I worked at the McCord Mine, I use to replace circuit breakers all the time. There was an electrical room in the payroll building, with an outside access door. That door was about five feet from the solid-steel door where the armored car used to deliver the money. While I was still working at the mine, I walked out of the electrical room after replacing a breaker, and the armored car was sitting there.

The guard was backing out of the rear door with a satchel of money in each hand. When he saw me, the guy nearly shit his pants. He told me it was like I came out of nowhere. I told him not to worry, that the door was always locked, and only authorized employees had a key. Not long afterward, I spotted the same guard at a dive bar in Barstow, and we ended up having a few drinks. He told me the whole routine. It was no big deal at the time. A few days after I got fired, I was half drunk, and I started joking with Lawson and T-bone about robbing the mine. I told them I was so pissed off when I got fired that I left without turning in my keys. Then I told them the story about the guard. I was only joking around. Lawson and T-bone really pushed the deal.”

“So how’d you do it,” I asked.

“The day of the robbery, the three of us came in through a back gate. We parked the bikes behind a dumpster on the other side of the accounting building, then ran around and hid in the electrical room. After the guard got out of the truck, we pounced on him. T-bone stuck a submachine gun in the dudes face, and he handed over the money. Lawson kept an eye out, while T-bone held the guard at gunpoint, and I stuffed all the money I could into my backpack. After that I ran for my bike. They were supposed to hold the guard for two minutes, so I could get a head start, but my bike wouldn’t start. By the time I got it going, T-bone and Lawson had already turned the guard loose, and the alarm was going off. We all took off in different directions. I was supposed to stash the money and the motorcycle in the pumphouse. But the pumphouse was locked, and you forgot to leave my car keys on the back tire.”

“Sorry about that,” I said.

“You more than made up for it. I’m sorry I got you involved.” He stepped over and stood next to Harper. With his head down and hands crossed at the waist, he stood like a repentant child. “I’m sorry I was such an asshole Harper.” He looked at the ground and shuffled his feet. “I guess I was wrong about you.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Harper asked. “You know if you plan on spending the rest of your life hanging around with those loser biker friends of yours, then you might as well go back to jail right now.”

“I’ve got new plans for the future,” he said. “I was hoping you might take a walk on the beach with me and discuss my new and improved outlook. I’ll let you do most of the talking this time around.”

“I might consider it,” Harper said, ignoring my brother. She looked at me with a prim smile. “And what are your plans for the future—Mr. Duffy James Allison. I hope you plan on going back to school.”

“I’m going to have to pass on college right now. I’m going to take my big brother’s advice and join the Marines.”

“I think that’s very noble of you Duffy, but aren’t you worried they’ll send you to Vietnam.”

Morgan said, “The Marine Corps will get him ready for Nam.”

“I hadn’t really thought about going to Vietnam. I was hoping the Marines would get me ready for the streets of America.”

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I hope you enjoyed Cyclone Rumble. If you have minute, please take the time to give my book a positive review. And please *Like it* on Facebook. Thank you—J.P. Voss