

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Stephen E. Willis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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Title: Steelhead

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✓ Marjorie J. Sandor

The thesis is the first third of a novel entitled Steelhead. The story takes place in and around a small southern Oregon town in the summer of 1967. The narrator, eighteen-year-old hot-rodding Emil Reese, discovers hippies swimming naked in the river near his house. The hippies, newly arrived from San Francisco, soon come to the attention of local gatekeepers calling themselves the Valley Betterment Association. When the Association learns that Emil has become “friendly” with the “hippie element,” they approach him with a deal to “go behind enemy lines” and spy on the spreaders of dope, disease, and destruction. In return, they will give him letters of recommendation to Army Special Forces. Emil accepts the deal, but when local authorities come down hard on the hippies things escalate out of control and Emil is forced to reevaluate his motives and loyalties.

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Steelhead

by
Stephen E. Willis

A THESIS

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Stephen E. Willis, Author

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STEELHEAD

Chapter One

I was trying to flush a covey of quail out of some berry briars and bull thistle along the river when I stopped to piss. Squinting downstream into the bright afternoon sun, I could just make out the moving speck of a car crossing the bridge on 199 and hear the pipes of a logging truck climbing Haze Hill. A horsefly buzzed and a grasshopper jumped in the coarse reed grass. I saw the flick of an ear, a brush rabbit in a shady hollow of briars. Out of nowhere the wind gusted up and sent a spray of piss across one boot and the leg of my pegged wranglers.

“Shit.” I turned to face upstream, and just then heard voices and laughter from up around the bend.

There were ways to get up to The Bedrock hole from across the river off the Dick-George road if you knew the way. Hardly anybody did. From this side it was tricky too, unless you knew the hidden trails through the woods and berry briars. I considered The Bedrock *my* hole.

My t-shirt was damp with sweat. I peeled it off, looped it through my belt, and walked upriver, weaving around the salmonberry thicket and the cut bank above the bend, and the boulder strewn pocket-water where the big cutthroat like to sit in the evening when the periwinkles hatch into long-winged bugs, and above that, past the stretch of slow, frog water, taking my time, still listening for the scurry of quail in the sage and bitterbrush. When I got to the hole I peeked over a pile of driftwood left by the spring run-off, and I saw them.

The river at The Bedrock drops through a chute and dumps into a deep, clear pool with a boulder the size of a small shed in the middle, and on the left looking upstream there's a sandy bank. Two long-haired, bearded men sat on the rock above the tail-out of the chute, and two women waded near the sand up to their knees, all of them buck naked.

I squinted and wiped a little sweat from my eyes, and looked again. One woman was plump with big, round tits and dark, curly hair. The other was thinner with one long braid halfway down her back. The men, at a distance, could have passed for old miners from the hills around Browntown, only scragglier looking. I'd

never seen men with hair like these old boys here, except maybe in a picture. One of them had it slicked back behind his ears. The other's stuck out big and curly all over his head. Both of them had long beards that covered their whole faces, and either one could have passed for a wet dog, but an ugly one.

I set the gun barrel across my shoulder, pointed away, skyward, an old habit learned young, the way my granddad taught me. *Always know where your barrel is pointed. The way they handle a gun in a movie, like it's just a stick they're holding, that ain't right. Don't ever let me see you do that. The people that make them pictures don't know shit about guns or how to use them.*

I climbed up over the driftwood. They should have seen me but they didn't, and the water rushing through the chute above the hole covered the sound of my approach, and I pulled up right beside them. The thin woman—no, a girl, younger, prettier—settled back in the water, a heart-shaped patch of hair glistening between her legs. The older one stood in the water splashing herself, talking and laughing with one of the men. I'd seen tits before, but these were heavy—dipping, bobbing, and weaving like sparring fighters. I could feel the shotgun's hammer pressed against my collar bone. My thumb stroked the smooth, warm metal.

“How do?” I said.

It startled them, the two men and the big-titted woman. The big-haired man fumbled around in a pile of clothes and came up with a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

“Hello,” he said.

We all looked at each other, all but the skinny girl who hadn't heard me yet above the sound of the river. She was still floating in the water with her eyes closed, her dark patch of hair shining wet in the sunlight.

I'd heard the name for them and I remembered it now. I grinned at the big-haired man, cocking my wrist around the Harrington Richardson and pointing at him with my trigger finger.

“Hippies, right?”

“People,” he said.

“But hippies though. You people are hippies. Ain't that right?”

“We’re people,” he said.

“Yeah, I know you’re people.”

“Wow,” the slicked-back hippie said.

The big-haired hippie coughed and adjusted his glasses.

“My name’s Emil Reese,” I said.

“I’m Joe,” he said, “and that’s Nicky,” pointing to the big-titted one, “and that’s Roger.” Roger raised two fingers.

“And who’s that floating?” I said.

“That’s Sara.”

Nicky touched Sara on the arm and she came up on her feet, surprised to see me.

“We have company,” Joe said.

“My name’s Emil. Emil Reese,” I said again for Sara’s benefit. She moved over to the cut bank where the front of her was hidden from view. Nicky pulled herself out of the water, sat down, and tucked her arms tightly around her big breasts. I wondered why the sudden modesty, but then, when I thought about it, it seemed right. They weren’t used to being naked around a regular man. In fact, if they’d swim naked with men that looked like these—long haired, scruffy and dirty even after a swim, then I must look damn good to them. I’d heard about hippies. They liked things natural and said what was on their minds. I thought it would speak well of me to come to the point directly. I turned back to Joe.

“Are these your women?” I said.

“Oh wow,” Roger said.

Nicky cinched her arms around her knees, smiled and looked away. I got another look at her nipples, which were fatter than I realized they got, and I felt myself warming toward her.

Joe cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said. “Yes they are.”

I considered that. You’d have to figure what that meant to a hippie. I’d heard they all did it to one another.

“Where’d you come from?” I said.

Joe motioned up the far bank. They must have found their way through the briar thickets along the Dick-George Road.

“I mean, where are you from?”

“The Haight,” Joe said.

I tried again. “I asked you where you were from.”

“L.A., originally,” Joe said, looking around at the others who nodded their heads. “But San Francisco before here.”

“San Francisco?” I knew San Francisco. “I’ve got an aunt and a cousin that lives in Stockton. That’s near San Francisco. We went there once when I was a kid and my aunt took us to the Fisherman’s Wharf. I got sick as a dog. That was when they figured out I was allergic to some kinds of fish.” I looked down into the deepest part of the hole. “Not these in here, though.” I could see the white of Sara’s behind. “The fish in here are damned good, if you can catch one.” I pointed to the big rock with the barrel of my shotgun. “Did you see the hole in that rock? You can swim through it if you can get down there and hold your breath that long.”

They shook their heads.

“I don’t imagine you did. It’s cold and deep right in there around that suck-hole.” They were interested in that, and watched where I pointed my gun.

“And over there, there’s big cutthroat.” I held the shotgun at arms length, sighting down the barrel. “Right in that seam there where the current changes along the bank. You can see how it does right there, and in the evening, bugs get caught in there and the cutthroat eat them. There’s some big ones in this hole.” I held the little Harrington Richardson so they could see about 18 inches from the breech to the edge of my left hand on the barrel. “And steelhead once in a while get holed up in here in the summer. They get about yea”—I marked off two feet—“to hell, as long as this gun. You didn’t happen to see any, did you? They’d have been right,” I pointed, “about there.”

Sara climbed out then, looking behind her into the water. She looked as pretty as could be. She could have been a cheerleader if she wanted. She could have

been Homecoming Queen. Hell, she could have been the Jubilee Princess as far as that's concerned.

"Sorry if I scared you," I said, cringing a little to show I meant it. "The cutthroat and steelhead won't bother you. Some people say the sucker fish will hook on your pecker, but that ain't true. I've tested it out myself." I cringed and grinned at both the girls. "Excuse my language."

While I was talking, Sara had picked up her little dress and slipped it on over her head, and it was the cutest thing. She didn't seem to have a pair of panties. She stood there looking down into the water. My heart sank a little, seeing all that flowered cloth where her pretty skin had been.

"I don't see one fucking fish down there," she said.

I thought I must have heard that wrong.

"Sit down, Sara," Roger said.

"He's doing a fucking head trip on us," she said. "Things were really mellow, and then..."

"Don't get uptight," Joe said.

"Oh, they're in there all right," I said. She wasn't so pretty when she talked like that, even with her straight, white teeth.

"Why do the squares always fuck with you, man," Sara said.

"Pardon?" I said.

"Why don't you sit down, Sara," Joe said again. He turned back to me, smiling through his beard. He said, "You must live nearby."

"Yeah, well, I do, back over the hill, back over there."

Joe nodded and scratched his beard. "We were wondering if there was an easier way to get here than the way we came."

"Well, from the Dick-George road where you must have come in at," I pointed the Harrington Richardson—"You know where Tycer Creek is? How about Althouse Creek? You know where the Sucker Creek bridge is at? No? Well, then you're best off to, let's see, from where you are—there ain't no way, really. You'd have to drive all the way around the Holland Loop and take Hay's Cutoff, and that

would put you about a mile in that direction.” I pointed behind me. “You could walk from there, but I’d have to show you the way.”

Sara lit a cigarette. I didn’t see what she was so upset about.

“Hardly anybody uses this hole but me,” I said. “I call it the Bedrock because of all this bedrock you’re sitting on. It’s fine with me if you want to swim here. I don’t mind.”

“Thanks,” Joe said.

“You’re welcome,” Good looking naked girls in my hole. Hell no I didn’t mind.

“I’d probably just come in the way you did if I was you. A word of advice, though. It don’t seem like it, but there’s a lot of people that lives around here.” I swept the other side of the river with the shotgun, crooking around to show them how the river ran down toward the fork, and upstream through the windy section, and then the hill where the Collisters and the Babbs lived across the river, and the Cox’s up behind us. “You’re not as alone as you might think.”

* * *

I left the hippies and was about a half mile upstream, still thinking about them, when a covey of quail broke cover and exploded into the air. I put a quick bead on one, but it darted sideways and was gone.

“Goddamn,” I said. They were right there in the sticky briars and I hadn’t gotten a shot off. I might just as well have stayed at the Bedrock and swam with the hippies. Or “the people,” as they liked to be called. That would have been something to tell.

I hunted a while longer, then gave up on birds and went back downstream, just curious to see if they were still around, but by the time I got back to the Bedrock, the hippies were gone.

I slogged through the duck marsh, slapping bog mosquitoes and kicking myself for missing the bird. I crossed the Kerby Ditch and hit the old rut along the woods where I stopped and squatted with my back against a stump. I preferred not to take a squirrel with a shotgun. It takes a lot of shot to kill a squirrel clean, and

then you have all that lead to get out. What you really need is a .22. One time a half-killed squirrel grabbed my boot and held on for dear life. They're stronger and tougher than people think.

I rubbed at the scar on my forehead. It was a habit I had. Then I sat still, watching the tree limbs for any movement that wasn't just the wind, but all the time my mind was on the naked hippie girls. I clicked my tongue. If you do that a certain way, a squirrel will talk to you. They're delicious in a stew.

I gave up on squirrels too and finished the climb, huffing and sweating up the hill to where the paved road started. I lived with my stepfather in a converted trailer on a west-facing slope with some small fir and manzanita cover and a big madrone. I could see the roof of my old tree house from where I came out of the woods.

On my left I could hear the muffled patter of my friend Eddie's drum set coming from his shed. We'd tacked cardboard up on the walls so the noise wouldn't bother Wilbur and Mrs. Burns. Wilbur's diesel logging truck was parked along the side of their house. I cut through their yard, stepping around all the junk Wilbur had collected—a rusty logging-truck differential, a couple of washing machines with hand wringers (you had to wonder what he planned to do with those), a World War II Jeep body, a tow kit and rear bumper off a Chevy Deluxe, a winch with teeth missing—so much stuff it became a blur unless you picked one spot and stayed with it for a while.

Wilbur was out back, leaned over his '40 Ford pickup. The grass was knee high around the tires and tromped down everywhere else. He'd been working on it for a year. I'd even seen him out there on weekends last winter in the snow. He'd rebuilt the whole engine—new crank, everything. Why anybody would bother to overhaul an old flat-head six was beyond me. He could have dropped a slant-six in it and had overhead cams and the whole shooting match. I told him that once. He said, "A person could," and that was the end of it. It was too bad, too. It wasn't as if the engine mounts would have been a big problem. Wilbur was handy with a welder.

"Come here for a second," he said.

I leaned my gun against a stack of old tires. I said, “You know Wilbur, you can get a rebuilt short-block—I seen them in the Sears catalogue for—”

“Hold this,” Wilbur said.

Around the Illinois Valley there was a right way to do things and a wrong way and you didn’t mess with that. People were stubborn and slow to change, which was just one more reason it was time for me to head out and see a little more of the world, maybe get a medal in Vietnam as a sharpshooter or get in Special Forces. After you got out, the government paid for your training in whatever you wanted—electronics, let’s say, or automotive.

I held the head gasket while Wilbur ringed the manifold with sealer, and then we laid it in nice and neat over the studs.

I knew what Wilbur was thinking: If ’40 Fords were supposed to have slant-sixes they’d have built them that way in Detroit, bla, bla, bla. You could argue that slant-sixes hadn’t been invented yet back then, but that wouldn’t faze Wilbur. Right was right and wrong was wrong and a slant six where a flat-head had been was wrong. You didn’t change it, you fixed it.

I turned three of the nuts to finger-tight, and Wilbur turned three, and then he torqued them down, concentrating on each one, getting it right just by feel. Wilbur definitely knew his flat-head six cylinders.

“There she be,” he said, wiping his hands on a rag from his pocket and getting a clean one for me from the cab.

“It’s going to be sweet,” I said.

“I don’t know about that, but it’ll run. That’s the main thing.”

What a waste. Wilbur would haul fire wood with it. I was about to tell him I’d seen hippies at the river, but changed my mind. That would be wasted on a guy like Wilbur, if he even knew what a hippie was. “You could primer it and paint it,” I said, picking up my gun, “and get you some nice chrome rims.”

Wilbur laughed at that as I cut through their front yard, such as it was. I could see Eddie’s mother through the screen door in her usual spot, ironing in front the TV. She was fat and liked to cook. You could see where Eddie got his tubbiness.

Their little house always smelled stale and stuffy even in the summer with the front door open, and in the winter I couldn't stand to be in it because it was so hot and humid. Maybe some of the humidity came from the steam from Eddie's mother's iron. All she seemed to do was cook and iron, cook and iron, and watch TV. Even Wilbur's work clothes were starched and ironed—you could see the crease in his work pants—and Eddie had worn starched white shirts to school until he was fifteen.

Eddie's practice shed was just a few feet from the trail through the woods that led to my place. We'd tromped it wide over the past five years. I could hear him good now, even with the muffling, in there banging hell out of his tubs, is what he called them.

I stopped outside the shed and kicked all the dried mud from the marsh off my boots before I pushed the door open. Eddie's shed was hot and smelled like sweat, but I closed the door behind me so Wilbur and Mrs. Burns wouldn't complain. We'd patched and covered and caulked every space between the old boards.

Eddie squinted at me through one half-closed eye. A drop of sweat clung to his chubby chin. His mouth formed a grin around "Reese," but I couldn't hear it above the explosion of drums and cymbals.

I knew he wouldn't stop until he was ready. I pulled the door shut, leaned my gun against the wall, dropped down and knocked off fifty push-ups, elbows tucked in tight against my ribs, trying to stay with his beat, but giving up on that idea after the first ten. When I was finished I lay belly-down on the thick layer of rugs that helped soften the sound. Eddie settled into a pattern of beats that almost made sense if you listened hard enough. He stayed on it for a while and then exploded with some wild, fast stuff where he hit all the drums, then went back to the simpler rhythms again, and then in a second, exploded again. He kept that up, playing all these things he had names for—paradiddle, flam, rim shot, fours, eights, messing with the time. He knew what it all meant. It amazed me the way he could get his feet and hands going so fast. There was no way I could do that.

One day not long after Eddie and his mother had moved down from Chehalis to live with Wilbur (on some kind of meet-a-wife-by-mail deal, is what I heard) Eddie had showed up at my house with two drum sticks he'd whittled out of a dowel with an old pocket knife that Wilbur had given him, and went all around our yard banging things to see what they sounded like. Earlier that day I'd heard him down the hill sounding like he was banging the crap out of every piece of junk that Wilbur had, and now he'd come up to test ours. I told him, "Don't be banging crap," but Eddie had a way of not hearing you when he was doing something. Like playing checkers, you'd say something and he'd act like he hadn't heard you. That's one of the reasons he got picked on at school when he came to Kerbyville Junior High back in the seventh grade. That and he was kind of tubby. "Don't bang stuff, goddamn it," I'd said again, but it didn't do any good so I went ahead and let him bang everything we had lying around, which was damned near as much as Wilbur had, really, only spread out over a bigger area. It was enough to keep him going for an hour. When he was done I looked at the sticks he'd carved. They weren't bad, but I said I'd be more than happy to steal a set of real ones from the music room at school. I was in the band room twice a week that winter anyway with the other 8th graders that couldn't sing while the ones that were in the chorus (all the girls and a few smart boys like Eddie) practiced for the Christmas show. The rest of us, the flunkies, got to sit in the music room and listen to joke records during music period while the teacher was directing the choir. It would have been easy for me to lift a set of sticks for him, but he said no.

We made him a pedal so he could hit a suitcase with his foot. Figuring out how to make a pedal is harder than you'd think and it took all day. Then he made what he called a snare drum by putting a tin pie pan between two chairs, setting some pennies in it, and putting a book over the top. When he hit the book with his homemade sticks, the pennies rattled around inside the pan and sounded like the wires on a marching drum. He used other pie tins and hub caps for cymbals. That's how he started out. Then Wilbur drove all the way over to Grants Pass, thirty miles, and bought him a real set

of sticks on the condition that he stop making drums out of everything in the house and move his set out to the shed.

He still had the homemade set over in the corner, but over the last six years he'd bought real drums and pedals and stands and cymbals piece-by-piece.

I lay there on my back in the shed, feeling the vibration of the drums through the floor. I'd worked all morning in the hay out at the Mayfield's, and what with hunting and seeing the naked hippie girls, I was worn out.

Eddie finished up with one loud bash of his sizzle cymbal, is what he called it. I'd drilled it and put the rivets in it for him. I popped up and opened the door to let in some air with the thing still ringing in my ears.

"I heard that," I said. "That was a ram-a-flam-a-stoke-a-diddle." I moved my hands around, imitating Eddie's moves, but with my fists clenched, pretending I was in the ring pounding some guy. "Look at that," I said, "if you weren't chickenshit, you could kick ass. You could box in the Smoker just like this." I had a fast rhythm going good until I tried crossing my left hand over my right like Eddie did sometimes, and got my wires crossed, and popped my knuckles together, hard.

"Owwww shit." I rung my hands and jumped up and down in pain. I'd done the same thing jumping rope one time. It hurt like hell.

"Reese," Eddie laughed, shaking his head, getting a kick out of that. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little reverse Allen wrench he carried and tuned his drums with it while I shook my hands. When I'd recovered somewhat, I went over to a pile of records beside one the band amplifiers. He had a lot of records nobody ever heard of. Jazz and what-not. There were record jackets all over the floor. I scooted one around with my toe.

"Don't mess with my records," he said. He could get huffy about his records. He used to never get huffy about anything until he started his band. Back then he was a squirrely little fat kid that talked too much and didn't know when people were picking on him.

"I seen hippies at the river," I said.

"Pardon?"

“Hippies. I seen them at the river.”

“Go on,” Eddie said.

“No bullshit,” I said. “Hippies.”

Eddie got off the set and wiped his head with a towel.

“Fuckin hippies with the long hair. Longer than”—I pointed to the album I’d been looking for—“longer and scragglier than those boys right there.”

“The hell,” Eddie said.

“Girls with them, too.” I paused for emphasis. “Naked.”

“You’re lying.”

“Ain’t.”

“How many?”

“Two girls. Or a woman and a girl.”

“Dang. Good looking?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Hippies?”

“Hippies. Prettier than hell.”

“Dang,” he said. He sat back down at his set. “I’d like to have seen that.”

“You won’t see a goddamned thing just sitting around here in this shed. You need to get out in the world more.”

He grinned at that and went back to tuning his drums, putting his ear down close to each one. He spent three or four hours a day in the shed, practicing. Music was all he knew about. Take cars. He couldn’t tell you what a carburetor was. He didn’t *own* a car. Once I asked him, “How are you going to get a girl without a car?” He went right out and got a girl, a tweeky little thing two years older with thick glasses and a Corvair. *She* drove *him* around until she went away to college. The *only* good thing about a Corvair is they’ve got four on the floor, but this one had an automatic. I could see why he’d grin, though. He was probably going to be a famous musician. It was me that wasn’t going anywhere.

I went to the door and picked up my gun.

Eddie said, “You want to watch the door at the dance?”

“What do I get?”

“The usual. Honor. Prestige. You can tell everybody you’re our manager.”

“I already do that. Why don’t you just beg me for a ride like you always do?”

“Reese,” he grinned, getting a kick out of that. “Help me haul equipment and make sure nobody sneaks in.”

The haul-equipment part was the main thing.

“You can have ten percent of the door,” Eddie said. “Is your car running?”

“Don’t joke about my car. That’s where I draw the line.”

“Is your car running?”

“I’m warning you.”

I stepped out the door.

“Reese,” he said to my back, “you were just kidding about the hippies, right?”

“Real hippies, son, I shit you not.”

Chapter 2

I took the trail up the slope, stopping to climb the rope that hung from my tree house in the big madrone—three times, only the last time using my feet—part of my training for the October Smoker.

In our house, there was a bag of jerky on top of the refrigerator. I grabbed a chunk and went out back to look at my car. A few days earlier I'd taken the front bumper off and it looked real mean. I went back inside and called my girlfriend. Actually, she was my *old* girlfriend. Treava Lee Riley.

"Hello, Treava? It's me. Emil."

"You don't have to tell me who you are, Emil. I've heard your voice before."

"I guess you have."

"So why'd you call? I'm in the middle of something."

"Wondering if you wanted to go somewhere."

"You mean park somewhere?"

"I mean, I'd take you out."

"You don't have any money to take anybody out. And I thought we were done with all that."

I didn't answer.

"Emil, look—"

"I'm going to enlist." It was true. I was just waiting until after the Smoker.

"I'm happy for you," she said.

Was that all she had to say? "I'll bet you'll miss me when I'm gone," I said.

"Look, Emil, I just think we shouldn't anymore. I'm sort of over it. Can't you get over it?"

"Hey, guess what?" I said.

There was a long pause. "What, Emil?"

"I seen hippies today at the river."

"Those people that wear their hair real long? Where'd *they* come from?"

"San Francisco. I talked to them."

“What did you talk about?”

“I might tell you, but not over the phone.”

“Emil, look.”

That again.

“It was sweet of you to call. It really was. But for the sake of what we had going for a while, let’s just drop it now.”

“How would dropping-it be for the sake-of-it?”

“Let it die a natural death instead of prolonging the suffering.”

“You don’t believe I talked to hippies, do you? You think I’m lying.”

“Emil, don’t make me sorrier for you than I already am.”

“Sorry for me? Hey, fuck you, Treava, and the horse you rode in on.”

I banged the phone down and went outside and kicked some dirt. I went back in and took one of Frank’s beers out of the ice box. I sat on the stoop and chugged the beer and tossed the bottle as far as I could into the woods.

“Fucking bitch.”

I went back in and dialed Treava’s number again. She answered, “Hello?”

I didn’t say anything. I could hear her breathing.

“Emil,” she said finally, “I’m going to hang up now.”

“Wait,” I said, “what are you doing tomorrow night?”

“Not riding the horse *you* rode in on.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Look, Emil. I’ve got another date.”

“Well why didn’t you say so in the first place? No big deal.”

I slammed the phone down again and went back outside with another one of Frank’s beers. Frank drove up.

“What did I tell you about drinking my beer without asking?” he said, before he was he was even out of the pickup.

Frank was my step dad, 6’2”, 275, and set chokers in the woods all day. Getting along with a guy like Frank is easy. He tells you what to do and you do it. There’s no shame in that when they’ve got three inches and a hundred pounds on

you. Frank had had big plans at one time. He'd saved up and bought a chain saw shop, but it had gone belly up. We didn't talk about that. Or a few other things. Now it looked like working in the woods was going to be about it for him.

"I'll replace the beer," I said.

"You'll replace shit."

"I will. I held the bottle out to him. Drink?"

Frank jerked it away and drained it onto the ground. He poked the empty bottle into my ribs.

"That was stupid," I said.

"Watch yourself, boy." He went in through the screen door.

That was the way Frank was right after work. Later, after he'd had a few himself, he'd be more generous. He'd want the company, then. For now, I thought I'd better stay out of the house. I'd work on my car while it was still light out.

It was a '57 Bel-Air two-door I bought for \$330 back before I had restitution to pay. The owner over in Rogue River sold it because he couldn't drive anymore. His granddaughter had let her baby puke on the seat, but other than that it was pretty cherry. Nobody had ever gotten on it so it was real carboned up. I'd overhauled everything down to the short block and installed high-compression heads to get more horse power, which meant I had to keep the air-to-fuel lean or it would compression fire. I got the dual quad manifold and the other four-barrel off a wrecked Impala. It coughed and sputtered and barely turned over at idle, but when you got on it, shit oh dear. I chewed Jerry Beard's 327 up so bad out on Rockydale Road one weekend that he had to go all over town making excuses for himself, how drunk he was, bla bla bla. I'd even beat him off the line, which I didn't expect to do.

I timed it and tuned it and got the carburetors adjusted and the linkage synced up. All the time my mind was running between Treava Lee and the naked hippie girls—Sara poking her arms into that little flowered dress, Treava spread-legged in the back of my car. Getting hung up on Treava Lee had taught me a lesson. I should have known how that would turn out when her old man started in telling her she could do better. That I wasn't going anywhere. Well, we'd see about that. I

was as good as gone already. I'd put my car in storage while I was in the Marines. Then when I got out, I'd be set. Hell, I could buy a GMC Supercharger. It would bolt right in.

It got dark. I flicked on the shop light that hung from a madrone limb and kept on working. When I was done, I started her up and stood back, admiring her in the yellow light. I'd tuned out some of the rough idle, but she still shook, like all she wanted to do in this world was kick asphalt. If I could make my restitution payments and keep getting work in the hay, I might get ahead enough to buy some chrome rims before I left for the Marines, although, fuck it, it was more about the go than the show. This wasn't no pussy-wagon.

I put the tools away and washed up. Frank was in his chair in front of the TV with a pint of Jim Beam and a bottle of beer.

"Heat up that chili. I thawed some venison steaks. You can wash the pot."

"All right," I said. I cut up the steak and an onion with my buck knife, sprinkled in some chili powder, and fried the whole shooting match in bacon grease.

Frank was watching a game show but you couldn't see the girls that held the cards, the reception was so snowy.

"Nothing good on until *Paladin*," Frank said.

"There were hippies at the river," I said.

"What?"

"Hippies. With the long hair. Two men and two women."

"Since when did we get hippie types around here? What were they doing?"

That surprised me. I thought I'd have to give him a full explanation of what a hippie was. "Swimming naked," I said.

"Naked? All of them together?"

"You bet. I went right over and talked to them. Took my time about it too. The one girl was hell of a good-looking."

"A hippie, good-looking?"

"You can't tell the women are hippies when they're naked."

"I guess you can't tell the men from the women when they're not."

“These you could have. They had beards. I guess those women must be hard up for company if they’ll settle for scruffy old boys like that. I think they might come back looking for me.”

“I’d be careful. They might be out of their minds on drugs, you can’t tell. And the women carry diseases.”

“I told them there were fish in the river and the one girl about had a conniption fit. ‘Fuck this and fuck that.’”

“So, good-looking, you say?”

“The men wasn’t.”

“Christ Jesus, I’m not talking about the men.”

“The one girl was damned good-looking. The other one was okay. Kind of chubby. You might of liked her.”

He laughed at that. “The hell, you say. I might have at that. You just stood there talking to them, naked?”

“I wasn’t naked.”

“I know, but when you come up on them, were they doing anything?”

“What do you mean?” I knew what he meant, but I thought I’d make him say it.

Frank twisted around to face me. “Those people have sex orgies,” he said. “You ought to know that.”

I walked in with my plate and chili bowl, and stood there looking narrow-eyed at him. “You know an awful lot about hippie types.” I set my food on a TV tray. “It makes me wonder.”

“Shit,” he said, “you ought to be a comedian. They’ve had hippies on the news, is how I know. Stop grinning with your mouth full.”

“Maybe I wasn’t the first to see them hippies after all,” I said. “Maybe you seen them yourself. Wasn’t you down to the river just the other day? Maybe—”

“Cut the bullshit,” Frank said.

I stood up. “Okay, that’s it, hippie lover.” I put my dukes up. “Wipe that grin off your face,” I said. “I mean it. Get up.”

“That’s your last beer,” Frank said. “I’m cutting you off. If you live to be twenty-five, I’ll be surprised.”

I stopped clowning and went into the kitchen for seconds.

Frank hollered in, “You still training for the Smoker, or did you forget about that? I hope you’re training. I hated seeing you get your ass kicked last year.”

“Go ahead,” I said. “Rub it in.”

“For your own good.”

Back in front of the TV, I said, “You ought to get in that Smoker yourself.”

“Too dangerous,” Frank said. “If I was to get in the ring with one of these yo-yos around here, I’d apt to get mad and kill somebody.”

There was some truth in that.

“Anyway,” he said, “I get all the exercise I want in the woods.”

“I hope my guy *does* get mad,” I said. “I’ll stay calm and take him out. George is working with me on some moves.”

“Don’t tell me, show me.”

I stood up. “See, there’s this one where you counter the jab by—”

“Not now,” Frank said. “In October when you step into the ring.”

We sat and watched the game-show girls wiggle their behinds across the snowy screen. We only got the one channel.

The phone rang. I reached for it.

“If it’s Treava, cut it short,” Frank said. “Paladin is coming on in five minutes.”

It wasn’t Treava.

“Emil, this is Ben Riley, Treava’s dad. How are you? Say, Treava tells me you ran into some hippies. Near the river it was, I believe she said. Whereabouts was that, exactly?”

This was a guy who wouldn’t give me the time of day when I was over at their place.

“Close to your place, were they?” he asked.

“No,” I said, lying. “They were way up by Sucker Creek.”

“Mmm... What were they doing, Emil. Just swimming, or what?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Did they...” he chuckled at this, “have clothes on?”

“You bet,” I said.

“Oh,” he said, sounding disappointed. “The reason I asked, I guess there’s a bunch over in Jackson county that they’ve caught swimming in their birthday suits. County Sheriff over there put them in jail.”

“That right?”

“They’re a funny bunch, the hippie types.”

He waited for my take on that. I didn’t say anything.

“Well, if you happen to see anything out of the ordinary, the Illinois Valley Betterment Association would appreciate a call. I’ll give you C.W. Wynn’s number, he’s the Membership Chairman. Do you have a pencil? It’s 7842.”

I wrote it down.

“We’d appreciate that,” he said.

“Say,” I said, before he could hang up. “Is Treava Lee around?”

“No, she’s not here right now.”

“All right,” I said. I rolled the scrap of paper into a tight ball.

“Take care of yourself, now,” he said, and hung up.

“Sure,” I said, flicking the wad of paper into the garbage and setting the receiver down. “And fuck you very much.”

“Who was that?” Frank said, when I sat back down.

“Treava’s dad.”

“What did you do now? You and her in some kind of trouble?”

“Me and her are busted up.”

“Oh,” Frank said. He paused, brushing some imaginary crumbs off his pants.

“Well then, what did Riley want?”

“Wanted to know about the hippies.”

Frank chortled, his great chest heaving. “Christ. Watch them now. Anything for a little excitement.”

“You bet,” I said.

I stabbed the last chunk of venison with the tip of my Buck knife. “Is this the three pointer we spotlighted over by Lester Babb’s?”

“I believe it is.”

“Well...” I chewed. “It’s goddamned good.”

Paladin came on. In this one, a young gunslinger said he shot a guy and claimed the reward, but Paladin actually shot the guy. “I suggest you take it easy, Young Blood,” Paladin said. “Sit down and have a drink on me.” Young Blood pulled on Mr. Paladin and got himself killed. Then Young Blood’s sister hired another gunslinger to kill Paladin, who ended up saving the sister from the gunslinger. After that the sister didn’t hate Paladin so much. Not at all, in fact. When the sister finally sidled up to Paladin for the love scene, Frank said, “Christ, let’s get on with it,” which Paladin did, by saddling up and riding away. “That’s the right idea,” Frank said. “Don’t let them get their hooks in you.”

After Paladin was over and I’d made a few more trips to the ice-box for beer and Frank had finished half the pint of Beam, which he refused to give me any of because, he said, I was too young, not to mention that he wanted it all himself, Frank leaned over and picked up the picture of my mother. I’d seen it earlier on his TV tray. I hoped he wasn’t going to get watery eyed looking at it like I knew he did once in a while. I hated seeing him get like that. It was a goddamned disgrace is what it was. I was feeling no pain by then, and I said, “Can I see that?”

For a while after she first left I kept it in my room. But after she died, I brought it out and left it on the mantle. I thought Frank might tell me to move it, but he didn’t. Then after a while I’d see it on his tray from time to time.

It was one of the last pictures taken of her. She wore a sweater tucked into a calf-length skirt and her hair was in bangs. I was eleven then. The Illinois Valley News had run an article about the accident. I had it squirreled away between the pages of a *Field and Stream* in my closet. When people died, they faded away in your memory after a while. That was a good thing and a bad thing, I guess. That was another thing Frank and I didn’t talk about.

“Go ahead and put it back on the mantle,” Frank said.

I took all the beer bottles off and put the picture back up in the middle of the mantle. I didn't want to look at Frank just then, not with him still thinking about my mother. I went into the kitchen and put my chili bowl and the chili pot and venison pan in the sink, and got another beer out of the refrigerator while the sink was filling with hot water. Frank was fussy about the sink being clean. It was part of the old, original trailer he'd started out with. We'd built on a carport at the north side and two bedrooms on the south side. I say we because even though I was only ten when we built on to the trailer, I could drive a pretty good nail. For Frank, the dishes and the sink were the main thing. They had to be clean. Pretty much everything else could go to hell, and did. But you washed your own bowl, plate, or spoon. Frank's bowl was still on his tray. I thought about offering to wash it, but didn't because that wasn't how it worked. Everybody pulled his own weight. No more, no less. I'd been chipping in for grub the last few months since I turned eighteen, though a lot of it was in the freezer already. The warden Dick Grey would like to have had a piece of both of us, but it hadn't happened but once, and that was only for fishing in a closed section of the Rogue. Frank had thought we were legal that time and it had burned his ass. He'd been hell to live with for two weeks after that. When he got moody and grumpy, the place felt even smaller than it was. And smaller still now that I was out of school. Maybe because I didn't *have* to live here anymore. That was another thing we didn't talk about. It wasn't that Frank did or said anything to make me feel unwanted. We got along fine, for the most part. He'd raised me and never complained about it. It wasn't him, it was me. I was grown. Things had changed. He still gave me a hard time once in a while, hollering about this and that when he got in the mood. For my own good, bla, bla, bla. If I ever got ahead, I'd take my money down to Peterson's Oil and pay to have the heater tank filled for the winter. But I didn't plan on being around for the cold weather, myself. After the Smoker in October I planned to enlist. In the meantime I had to pay my court ordered restitution every two weeks, and that kept me broke.

“Hey,” I hollered at Frank from the kitchen, “how do hippies make money, do you think?”

“They don’t believe in work,” Frank said. “Welfare, rich parents, shit, who knows?”

I finished washing the pots, chugged the rest of my beer, and tossed all the empties into sacks we kept beside the water heater for garbage. Out the little window above the sink there were bats chasing bugs around in the porch light. I wondered what Treava Lee was doing right now—whether she was over it like she claimed. Did she ever look out the window at night and think about me? I got another beer and went back in to sit with Frank. I was getting that bashed-in numb feeling around the bridge of my nose, the way you get after a fight—it hurts but it kind of feels good.

“I called Treava Lee today,” I said. “Tried to get us back together.”

“What’d she say?”

“Nope.”

Frank held the Jim Beam close to his chest, one big hand around the bottle, the other on the cap, like he was cradling a baby. “Well, when you honey them up, sometimes it just makes them madder.” He took a long pull off the bottle and swallowed hard. I guess he’d said a mouthful.

Chapter 3

Mornings I worked in the hay, stacking bails on a flat-bed truck and then unloading them in the barn. It was August and all the small ranchers were hiring. The jobs usually went from five in the morning until one or two in the afternoon to avoid the heat of the day. After work I liked to go to the river for a swim. Since I'd seen the hippies that first time, their numbers had multiplied. I'd seen maybe a dozen new ones, a few new faces each time, though never all at once. Joe and Nicki and Sara were still the main regulars. And Roger, though not as much, and a tall, skinny boy who I thought might be Sara's boyfriend, though I couldn't be sure.

In fact, except for Joe and Nicki, there was no rhyme or reason to who was with who. Most of the time, when they weren't hugging, they just ignored each other. Once the tall hippie boy with his hair in a pony tail picked a flower and waded over and put it in Sara's hair. I'd liked to have had the nerve to do that, pick a flower and put it in her hair. But then all he did was dip, swim under water, and come up at the edge of the tail-out where he spent a long time staring at the wings of a dead damselfly.

The hippies still liked to swim naked, which was fine with me. When I went in the river I kept my pants on. One time I was already there when they came down. I waved, and they waved back from the other side of the river, and then took their clothes and left them in piles right on the bedrock like it was the most natural thing in the world. I got out and sat still on the bank, watching them. I noticed that the one boy—the one who seemed to like Sara and damselfly wings—had pants patched with strips of tape. A couple of other times they were already there when I arrived. Usually they were quiet and seemed to be in their own little world. You had to figure that some of them were on narcotics, though they never took any while I was around that I could tell. It was a relaxing and peaceful sight to see them lounging naked like that, the killdeer pecking around them, not afraid at all, and them lying back in the sun with the shadows from the willow branches making patterns in the sand and rocks, and their titties and private parts hanging out, and not a care, it didn't seem, in the world.

I shot a good number of quail for our table during that two or three weeks, though it wasn't officially hunting season yet, and one thing I noticed about the hippies was what I took at first to be curiosity about my gun. My Harrington Richardson was a good old gun and I could understand why they'd be interested in it. One day as I sat on the rocks near Joe with the barrel resting between my knees, pointing skyward, I caught a hippie man staring at it.

"It's got some pits in the barrel, and could use a blue-ing," I said, running my hand along it. The hippies within ear-shot perked up, so I went on.

"It's a Harrington Richardson 1908 model, single barrel break-down, twenty gauge. I like it because it's light to carry and quick on the swing."

Joe was on my left, sitting with a hippie I didn't know. I waited for one of them to say, "Nice gun," or, "What you loaded with, seven shot?" But nobody said anything.

"It belonged to my granddad on my mother's side." I said. "I believe he sawed an inch off the barrel to widen the pattern. He was funny that way—did it with all his guns."

Not a word. The scar on my forehead started to itch. I rubbed at it with my finger.

"These pits right here in the barrel—a gunsmith said I ought to shoot low-base shells, but I don't. I've even shot magnums and it hasn't blown up yet."

Joe just nodded and twisted his beard, and I came to the conclusion that they weren't curious after all, but scared. They didn't *like* guns. I took to hiding it in the brush before I came up on them so as not to spook the new ones. After that they didn't pay much attention to me at all, which I didn't mind. I could sit and look at the girls. For a while that was enough to keep my mind occupied. But the funny thing was, as time went on, I'd start to forget they were naked and have to remind myself why I was there. It's hard to believe if you've never had the experience, but you can get so used to seeing naked girls lying in the sun and floating in the water that you forget they're naked. Kind of like when a trout won't rise because the bug hatch is too big. The mind can only take so much of a good thing, I guess.

There were several women and girls, but Sara was still the prettiest. I never forgot *she* was naked. I'd sit real still and make a point not to stare at her too long at one time. Sometimes I'd gaze off in a different direction all together, pretending I was just enjoying the sunshine. She didn't seem to notice one way or the other. From time to time, I'd talk to Joe. He was short, dark, and chubby, with the big hair that stuck out, and you could see by how tan he was that he liked nothing better than to sit in the sun with no clothes on. You had to wonder what he'd do with himself once the rains started.

Joe and Nicki were the friendliest with me, though Joe didn't talk at all unless you asked him a direct question. The way he liked to sit looked none too comfortable. You'd think he'd have been in pain, after a while. He sat with his back straight, or leaning against a rock, his heels cinched up against his thighs, his palms turned upwards, like he was trying to tan the palms of his hands. The other hippies played in the water, but I noticed that even the men never got rough with each other. Sometimes the hippies would hug each other for no reason. Men hugged women, women hugged men. Women hugged women, and even men hugged men from time to time. But never did I see a hippie man with his pecker hard, unless it happened underwater, and I wouldn't know about that.

I figured out right from the git-go that Joe was the leader of the hippies. Not so much from what he did or said, which was damn near nothing, but from the way the other hippies acted around him. Whenever a hippie wanted to talk to Joe, they'd swim across the current, or walk across the rocks to get close to him so they wouldn't have to holler. Joe himself never raised his voice. I copied that, keeping my voice low whenever I talked to Joe too, though he was hard to keep a conversation going with. I poked around at a few subjects. Guns were out, like I said. Any mention of the weather just got a nod out of him.

One day I asked him what he drove. Without even opening his eyes, he said, "I don't own a car."

"How do you get down here?" I said. You'd think a hippie leader would have some kind of wheels.

Nicki was right there too, sitting with her knees pulled up in the crook of her elbows which partly covered her breasts. She was the most modest of the hippies, I'd noticed. "I drive. I own a VW bus."

To me, the only thing more useless than a VW bug was a VW bus. A little tiny air-cooled engine in a big square wind-resistant body. Ugly too, with those little tires. Just to be polite, though, I said, "Lot of room in them things."

"And good gas mileage," Joe said.

"Well," I said, "I'm trying to get my car to eat *more* gas."

Joe nodded without opening his eyes.

"That way it'll go faster."

Nicki smiled and went back to reading. It looked like a book of sayings or poetry.

"What's that you're reading?"

She held it up so I could see the cover. "Gary Snyder," she said.

"Oh, yeah," I said. Whoever the fuck that was. I turned back to Joe. "See," I explained to him, "the reason a VW is gutless is that it doesn't use *enough* gasoline. It's cylinders are so small, it can't suck any gas into them or develop any torque."

"I understand," Joe said, "but torque isn't everything."

I wondered if he even knew what torque was. "Torque," I said, figuring he didn't, "is rotary power. Like when you tighten down on a bolt."

"Torque isn't everything," Joe said again.

"That's right," I said. "You have to have speed, rpms. Mix torque and rpms and you get your horse power."

"That kind of power is an illusion," Joe said. "You already have all the power you'll ever need."

"Horsepower?"

"Universal power," Joe said.

"You talking about a drive-shaft universal?"

“Each of us has to discover his own connection to the power of the universe.” “I’ll bet you used to be a school counselor or something like that,” I said. “Right?”

“Not exactly,” Joe said.

“Well, I can tell you we think different on that. See, when I push down on that gas pedal, I like to know my foot is connected to something big. Something that will seriously hump asphalt if I want it to.”

Nicki looked over and smiled.

“Excuse my language,” I said. She looked back at her book and I turned back to Joe. “I’ve got a 296 bored out to 310 and three-quarter-race cams. I installed the cams myself.”

“You’re quite a mechanic,” he said.

“Damn right. I’ve got dual quads right now, two four-barrels, but as soon as I get ahead, which probably won’t be until I come back from the Marines, I’m getting a blower. That’s a supercharger.”

“Mmmm,” Joe said.

“See, what that does, it compresses the fuel and air mixture before it even gets into the cylinders.”

“Mmmm.”

“You’ve probably seen cars with a chrome air scoop sticking out of the hood, right? Well that means the engine’s blown. I don’t mean they threw a rod. I mean blown. Supercharged. Unless some dip-shit installed a fake scoop just for show, which I’ve heard of guys doing.”

“Nothing under the hood,” Joe said. “A fake.”

“You got it,” I said. “All show and no go.”

Just then Sara waded out of the water on the other side of the river. She turned around and sat down, titties pointing skyward, and waved at Nicki who looked up from her book and waved back. Sara lay down on a flat rock on the other side just above the cut-bank. I felt myself stir and made a slight adjustment to the crotch of my pants.

“Real superchargers look bitchin’ though,” I said. “But only because you know what they can do. That’s part of it. Talk about eating gas. Shit. Your VW tank doesn’t hold enough gas when it’s full to put a Supercharged 310 twice through the quarter mile.”

“A slight exaggeration, perhaps,” Joe said.

“No way, son. I’m telling you. You ought to get you some nice wheels, Joe. You could do all right. This buddy-of-a-buddy of mine has a ’59 Corvette.” I flicked a dried bug skeleton across the rocks with my fingernail, about to tell him about how many girls this guy got—how he fought them off at every street corner in Grants Pass and Medford—see, *that* was what a show *and* go ride like a ‘Vette could do. I could just make out the line where Sara had worn a bikini at some time, but the skin was so dark there now that the difference was hardly noticeable. It was all light brown, even the fluffy hairs around her pussy. I decided it would be a waste telling Joe about this guy who had the blown ‘Vette. Joe had girls all around him already, naked, and he didn’t even look at them.

“Power is important to you,” Joe said. “Mechanical power.”

“Uh huh.” I was watching Sara’s butt muscles, the way they flexed as she got comfortable.

“Have you squared your ports?” Joe said.

“Mmmm,” I said. The curve of her ass went from round to deep-dish every time she moved, and glistened like chrome when the light hit it just right.

“Yes?” Joe said.

“What?” I pulled my eyes off her. Joe was looking at me. “What did you say?”

“Have you squared your intake ports?”

His eyes were dark, almost black. I’d never looked at him that close before. He seemed to be looking right through me. “No, was I supposed to?”

“It’s something to consider,” he said. “A square port is more efficient than a round port.”

“Come again?” I said.

“Capitalism,” Joe said. “They make them round in Detroit because it’s too expensive to make a square hole on the assembly line. Much cheaper and more profitable to drill.”

Joe knew something about cars after all. I tried to imagine him underneath a hood. Yeah. I could see it. It wasn’t easy, but I could see him with grease on his hands.

“And when you do get your blower, you’ll get more out of it with your ports squared.”

“Hey,” I said. “I didn’t know you knew about engines.”

Nicki looked over the top of her book. She was sitting just behind Joe where he couldn’t see her. She pointed toward him with the corner of her book and nodded her head at me. Joe had closed his eyes again and gone back to resting. Or maybe it was more like a trance.

My own head felt like it was spinning. “You mean, just square them up with a file?”

“Mmmm,” Joe said. “Better a die grinder.”

“Hey,” I said, “you ever race?”

Joe didn’t say anything. There was a long silence.

“You did, didn’t you,” I said.

“My head’s not into that anymore. I’m really out of that, man. Completely out of that whole scene.”

“Yeah, but where’d you race, Joe?”

“San Fernando.”

“Drag strip?”

He nodded.

“When? What were you driving?”

“Which time?”

“Whichever time.”

“Summer of ’58. It was a blown Olds.”

“Time?”

“157.61.”

“Hell’s fire, son. Wait a minute,” I said. “What’s your last name.”

“Rossignot.”

“Rossignot. Sure. Joe Rossignot. You broke the—” I snapped my fingers, hopped up and sat back down. “I seen you and your car in an old issue of *Car Craft*. I remember. A GMC 4-71 blown Olds powered dragster. The record was—” I snapped my fingers again, trying to remember.

“150.3”, Joe said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Damn. Joe Rossignot. You broke the 1961 quarter mile speed record for pump gas.”

I spent the next hour trying to get Joe to tell me about racing at the San Fernando drag strip and pumping him for secrets on how to hop up a V-8. If I asked him too much, I noticed he’d clam up. I had to let him rest with his eyes closed for a while and then ask. I found that *yes* and *no* answers were best, or questions he could answer in one word without a lot of explanation. “Should I switch from Holley to Carter four-barrels?”

“No.”

A while later,

“Should I go one to one, blower-to-engine speed with a 4-71 or should I gear the blower down?”

“Go proportional.”

* * *

After the hippies left I got my gun where I left it over by the pile of driftwood and shot six quail, one which I lost in the brush. I went home and plucked and cleaned the birds, wrapped them in wax paper and put them in the big freezer outside in the carport where we kept our venison and salmon and steelhead, and whatever else we could catch or shoot. Then I spent an hour looking for the 1961 issue of *Car Craft* with Joe in it, but couldn’t find it.

That evening Frank came home pretty drunk. “I just got back from the goddamndest meeting downtown,” he said, as soon as he walked in.

Frank wasn't one to go to meetings. "What was it about?" I said.

"They're bent out of shape about all the hippies that are moving in. They say there are a bunch of them living up in the hills above Althouse Creek, making shelters out of scrap from old miners' shacks. The Illinois Valley Betterment Association has the whole town stirred up."

"What were you doing there?" I said.

"They called. I went out of curiosity. But to hell with that noise. I've got better things to worry about than the goddamned hippies. I told them, 'Hell, Emil swims with the hippies down by our place. They're not hurtin nothin.'"

Chapter 4

The next morning I was working in the hay at the Mayfield's place with a tall, lanky kid named Tim McNaught. Walking behind the truck, we got to talking about the pay. It was pretty good, a buck-fifty an hour, and I was happy to get the work, though I wouldn't get to spend the money. My restitution payments were eating up almost everything I made.

I said, "I figure once I'm in the Marines, my money problems are over. You get paid while you're in, and you get paid to go to school when you get out. Plus, they've got a deal where you don't have to pay back money you owe."

"What? You sure about that?"

"Hell yeah I'm sure." It was what I'd heard, anyway. The Soldiers and Sailors Relief something-or-other.

"You're not worried about going to Vietnam?"

"Hell no. I'm signing up for Vietnam." You saw some real action. You came out a bad ass—medals, picture in the paper, women. I figured if I could do thirteen months in Vietnam, everything after that would seem easy. Plus, since I boxed and shot pretty good, I'd have a chance at Special Forces.

"I sign up for three years, I can get into airborne, son, Special Forces."

"Special Forces? Are you kidding, Reese? Do you know how hard that is to get in?" He shoved his thick glasses up onto his nose. "My uncle says you gotta have a real good record, letters from people about you, pass all these tests. It's practically impossible to get in."

I'd heard that too and it was probably true. McNaught was really pissing me off.

"Fuck it, then. If I don't make it, I'll be a regular Marine." It was good enough for my dad.

My dad—not Frank but my real dad—was killed in action in Korea in 1951 when I was two. Distinguished Service Cross. The Marines was the best branch of the military. Best training, best details. I wrote a term paper on the Marines in Korea for U.S. history and got an A, the only grade I ever got higher than a C. Thresher

had put red lines through some of the long descriptions about weapons—calibers and bullet trajectories—and written, *Irrelevant*. But he said the rest of it was pretty good.

When I was a little kid my mother told me the story of my dad. She got it from a buddy of his. My dad was killed protecting an outpost against the Communists in Korea on the MLR, the trench that they fought in. What happened, my dad and his platoon were going to relieve the regular ROKs who we were supposed to be helping fight the North Koreans and the Communist Chinese. But when they got halfway up this hill, the ROKs chickened out and the Commies made it to the top of the hill on the other side and started shooting down at my dad's platoon. Instead of retreating they dropped their packs and started shooting their way up the hill. But then after they'd won it back with only one casualty, my dad and three other guys went to get their fire team's gear. But by the time they got back down the hill, the ROKs had looted everything—sleeping bags, rations, spare ammo. My dad and his buddy tried to chase down the ROKs to get it back. That's when he stepped on a land mine. In the letter my mom got, it said he died instantly.

I had a small picture of him in my wallet—just a head shot taken in a dime-store booth—dress cap cocked a little to the side. I had another picture at home in my room in a frame next to my gun rack. I'd looked at it so often as a kid that I could see every detail in my mind. *Second Lieutenant Martin Reese*, it said on the back. *Dog Company, 2/5, on the MLR after a night patrol, July 1951*. He was sitting on a pile of sand bags. His helmet was pulled down and the shadow just covered his eyes. He looked calm, not afraid of anything, one elbow on his knee and the other hand holding an M-16. His pant legs were tucked into his boots and he wore a heavy-looking quilted vest, zipped up, with a hand grenade sticking out of the pocket. The vests they used were bullet proof. The helmets were steel. That was how they took fewer casualties than the ROKs.

My dad had a steel helmet for his head and a steel vest for his heart, but it still hadn't saved him. The mine wasn't even an enemy land mine. It was an unmarked ROK mine, is what they said.

“What about you?” I said to McNaught. “You going to enlist?”

“Not me.”

“I’m telling you, you enlist, everything is smooth sailing after that.”

“I’m not eligible for the service,” McNaught said, hoisting a bale with his knee. “My eyes are too bad.” He pushed his glasses up again and wiped the sweat from his brow. “If you’re going to enlist, what are you waiting for? Why don’t you just go sign up?”

I threw the last bail from the row onto the truck and grabbed the water jug from the rail hook while Jenks, the crew foreman, made the turn. “You gotta be eighteen-and-a-half for Special Forces or Airborne, any of that. After I fight in the Smoker this October, I’ll be eligible.” I took a swig from the jug. “Then I’m gone.”

“Oh yeah,” McNaught said. “I saw you get knocked down in last year’s Smoker.”

Why was it nobody remembered the three fights I’d won. Just the last one where I’d gotten buzzed? I’d whooped on that guy plenty of times in sparring practice. He won the fight with one lucky punch in the final round. Things would be different this year.

“Just a lucky punch, son,” I said. “You come watch me this year, you’re going to see some serious ass whooping.”

“Going to open a can of whoop ass this year, huh Reese?”

“You bet,” I said, but he’d rankled me. McNaught was a guy who’d agree with whatever you said, but you never knew what he was really thinking. It was only nine and already he was getting on my nerves. I slipped my fingers under a strip of baling wire, got under the bail with my knee and hoisted it up over my head to the top tier. “Hey,” I said, “how come you never box in the Smoker?”

“Can’t,” he said, pushing his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “Eyes.”

Eyes, sure. Eyes might keep you out of the military, but you could box without having perfect vision. That was an excuse. I always figured him for a chickenshit.

* * *

When I got home from work, the phone rang. It was Mrs. Mitchell down at the City Hall. She said that Curly Banks, our mayor, wanted to talk to me and could I come down right now. It was about my restitution.

“Shit,” I said when I hung up. I had the last week of July and the first week of August still to pay. I was almost three weeks late and hadn’t saved a dime of it yet. Now the mayor was going to lay it on the line.

I showered and dressed and drove down to take my medicine. The court had appointed Curly to handle the payments since it was city property I’d broken. Once before he’d called me down and said that if I didn’t make the payments, the court would send me up to McClaren and I’d have to work it off on a road crew, and there wouldn’t be anything he could do about it even if he wanted to, so there was no point in making excuses. Miss a payment and it was open season on Reese. I could be cruising gut, minding my own business, and I’d get pulled over by Terbrick, the city cop. *Well maybe if you didn’t drive up and down the street half the night, you could put some of that gas money toward your payment. Or, It’s Saturday afternoon, Reese, why aren’t you working? McClaren is full of guys that couldn’t pay their restitution. Or, You should have thought about that before you did something stupid...bla, bla, bla.*

Turd-prick, we called him.

I passed the *City of Cave Junction* sign. *This town is going to boom someday*, people said. Boom shmoom. The sign read *Population 375*, and it had been the same since I could read numbers. The only thing that increased was the number of dents in it. I’d made a few myself.

I cruised slowly past the Standard station, the Drug Store, Stout’s ’76, Hammer’s Market, Beal’s Butcher Shop, the Shell Station, Stones Auto Parts, the Texaco station, the Feed Store, Hamilton’s Hardware, Stan’s TV Repair, the Mobil Station, McCulloch Chain Saws, and the Illinois Valley Theatre. As I went by Giant Burger I pretended not to look over to see if Treava Lee was working. She was.

City Hall wasn't big, but it was the newest building in town and the only one besides Giant Burger with a tinted glass window. The tint was already bubbling and the sun bounced off the wrinkled glass in bright greens and blues. The night in April that I'd spun-out on the little patch of lawn out front I was drunker than I'd ever been. A buddy of mine, this guy Lonnie, had stolen a fifth of Southern Comfort from another buddy of ours and we'd finished the whole thing. A piece of gravel had somehow flown up from my tires and completely busted out one of City Hall's brand new windows.

I parked and got out and went in. Mrs. Mitchell looked up from her typewriter and motioned me into the office of Mayor Curly Banks.

I knew Curly. Everybody did. Before they built the City Hall a year ago he'd mayored out of his Real Estate office, but from the looks of the brochures lying around, he was now Real Estating out of the Mayor's office. The first thing I noticed when I walked in was his chair, upholstered in Mexican-style black tuck 'n roll—exactly what I wanted for my car. His desk was huge and, with the chair, took up half the room. There were pamphlets and papers lying everywhere, and a county map under glass on the desk. A haze of purple smoke hung in the air between us. Butts and half-smoked cigars stuck out of every ashtray in the room—by the door, on the desk, next to my chair, along the window ledge. Cruising town, you'd often see him standing there at the big window with his pencil mustache and big belly, smoking and figuring.

Curly motioned me into a chair. He aimed his unlit cigar at my chest. "Not breaking anymore windows, I hope."

"Not a chance," I said. "No sir. I give that up."

"I see that you still owe us \$550."

I looked down and gave him the hang-dog. "Yes, sir."

"I notice you've missed the last two payments," he said. "How do you plan to pay this back?"

"I'm joining the Marines, sir."

“Well, that’s good, Emil. Serve your country and broaden your experience. Our boys in Vietnam are doing a damn good job. Don’t let anybody tell you different.”

“No sir.”

That was the great thing about the military. You got instant respect. Even guys like Bill Ward and Doug “Monk” Douglas who enlisted and came to school in their Navy uniforms as soon as they turned sixteen. A couple of complete fuck-ups, but they’d gotten their pictures in the paper in full dress, along with the names of their parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles. You’d have thought they were coming home heroes instead of just leaving. Every Thursday in the Illinois Valley News one of our home-town enlisted men in Vietnam was featured with a picture and an article or letter home about the things he was doing over there. Sometimes there were details of a night patrol, or a fire fight, but most of the time it would be about the leave the soldier had taken—the fancy food he’d eaten, or the places he’d seen. One picture showed Ken Pickle and Tom McCrery at a bar with big shit-eating grins and two Vietnamese girls on their arms. Pretty ones, too.

“I’m going to enlist after the Smoker,” I said. “By then I’ll be old enough to get into Special Forces.”

If he was impressed, his face didn’t show it. He seemed to be studying me.

“I mean, with my boxing and everything,” I said.

Curly drummed on the table with his fingers, then leaned back in his chair.

“So, you boxed in the Smoker last year, and you’re doing it again?”

I nodded, wondering if he remembered me winning or trying to get up off the mat.

“I did a little boxing in the Navy during Basic,” he said. “I was with the occupying forces in Japan. Third division. I missed the war by a matter of days. I wish I’d come of age sooner.”

The Navy. Yeah. That figured. I could see Curly in those dumb-ass bellbottom pants. He was chatty today. That was something new.

“All right, then.” He looked at me dead on again for a second, sizing me up once and for all. “Do you know about the Illinois Valley Betterment Association?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “It’s a group of concerned people from the area who are interested in improving the valley,” Curly said.

Frank’s meeting last night. “Sure,” I said. Maybe this was about more than just my late payments.

Curly leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “I heard at the meeting that you’ve become friendly with some hippie types.”

How to answer that? Was this going to be a lecture? “Not really,” I said.

He sat up straight. “Well. I hope there hasn’t been some misunderstanding. That would be a disappointment.”

“I wouldn’t call them friends. Not by a long shot.”

“But you’ve talked to these hippies?”

“Talked to them, yeah.”

The mayor took a safety match from his shirt pocket, lit it with his thumbnail, fired his cigar, and tossed the match into an ashtray. “Emil, we’ve known these people to be in the area for several weeks now. We think there are about eight of them living in one residence on the Dick George Road. And there are more living in the Holland Duplexes, and still more out along Althouse Creek, some in makeshift dwellings, no doubt without proper sewage and so forth. We’re, well, curious to know more about them.”

The phone rang and Curly answered it. “Yes, he happens to be here with me now. Yes, I’ll get back in touch, Bud.”

He hung up. “That was Bud Randolph over to the Lion’s Club. I happened to speak to him earlier about you. He’s chairman of the Betterment Association.”

I nodded like I knew that, and like I gave a flying fuck. I wondered what this was all about.

Curly leaned way back in his chair now and folded his hands behind his head. “How much do you know about hippies?”

“Nothing, really. They wear their hair real long. That’s about it.”

Curly smiled on one side of his mouth and sucked air in between his tongue and his back teeth, about like you did to call a squirrel. “That hair is something else, isn’t it?”

“Long,” I said.

“You think you’d ever grow your hair out like that?” He was grinning at me now.

I grinned back. “No sir, I don’t think so. I don’t think the Marines would care for it much.”

“No, you can bet they wouldn’t. Employers either. Who would hire somebody who looked like that?”

I grinned again and shook my head.

“Emil, I think I can be frank with you,” Curly said, leaning forward. “From what I understand about the hippie movement, or whatever you want to call it, is that they don’t believe in work.” He lifted his palms. “It’s beyond me, I don’t really understand their thinking myself.” He set his elbows on the table. “But what I do know is that when they come into an area, more tend to follow. A lot of them are leaving California because it’s gotten so bad down there—dope, crime, diseases, what have you. They say that some of these hippie types get on this dope and blow their minds. And then they set up these *communes*, is what they call them, these places where they all live together, kind of like the communists, you might say.” His voice had gone lower in a confidential way. “With that comes sanitation problems. Then you’ve got runaway kids, under-aged getting involved with them. Narcotics have been a big issue in these places. And draft dodgers. It’s an attractive situation for the criminal element since there’s not a lot of way to identify who is actually living in these places, that is without—” Curly put one leg over the other and opened his arms—“without violating people’s rights, their privacy and so forth, which of course we wouldn’t want to do.”

I nodded. Drugs, runaways, criminals, sanitation, communes. I’d remembered those from *Communism* class in the 8th grade—women working in

fields with newborn babies on their backs. What the hell did Russia have to do with hippies? Whatever he wanted from me, it ought to be worth something.

He waved a hand in the air. "We have nothing against these particular people, you understand. For all we know, they could just be passing through, or planning to cut their hair and clean themselves up and get jobs." He stoked his chin. "Who knows? But if that was the case, we'd want to know that too. We don't want to seem unfriendly to new people in the valley, if they have the right intentions."

"I don't know them that well," I said. "Yet," I added.

He raised his eyebrows and tipped a chunk of cigar ash into a tray.

"Do you think you could *get* to know them?"

This time I rubbed *my* chin.

He said, "It was just a thought some of us had." He shuffled some papers on his desk. "By the way, that restitution—how much do you owe again?"

"Five hundred and fifty dollars."

"Mmmm. That's a lot of money. I'm wondering if that figure couldn't come down. There may be quite a bit of leeway there."

Pay dirt. There was no way to lose on a deal like this. I could tell them anything. How would they know the difference? "I can sure try," I said. "I'm bound to run into them, as long as it stays hot like this. What did you want me to find out?"

Curly nodded, seeming pleased with that. "Let's keep it general for now. We're wondering if they expect more of their type to show up. Since you're already friendly with them, you might be able to get us a general idea of what to expect." Curly cleared his throat. "And any of the other issues that we talked about—runaways, draft dodgers, drugs—we'd want to know about that too, of course."

"All right," I said.

"You may be asked to look at some photographs at some point. For identification purposes." The mayor stood up. "Come in next week and tell me how it's going. The Betterment Association meets on Thursday evening, so Thursday afternoon would be good. You don't even need to make an appointment. Just stop by or call anytime, if you have something for us."

He came around his desk and showed me to the door. "In the meantime of course, it's probably best if this stays just between a few of us." He handed me a card. It had Banks Realty on the front and he'd written some names and numbers on the back. "Just in case something big comes up."

"Sure thing," I said, slipping the card into my wallet. *And fuck you very much.* I liked the idea of getting my restitution stricken, but I wasn't going to rat on some damn hippies. The only hippies I really knew were Joe and Nicki and Sara, and I wasn't about to turn them over to Curly or Ben Riley or Bud Randolph. What had those guys ever done for me? No way was I spying on Joe Rossignol, even if he had blown his mind and become a hippie. I wasn't ratting on a guy who held a San Fernando speed record. But Curly thinking I would might hold the payments off until I went into the Marines. I wondered if he'd ever even heard of the Soldiers and Sailors Relief Act. Fuckers were going to shit bricks when the payments stopped and there wouldn't be a thing they could do about it. I reached for the door.

"And by the way, you mentioned Special Forces," he said. "How are you set for letters of recommendation?"

That stopped me. I turned. "What?"

"Well," he said, "it's a little like going behind enemy lines, isn't it? If this works out, I'm sure we could find people, some of them veterans themselves, who would be willing to write something about that and put it in a letter for you."

A cloud of smoke caught in the draft of the overhead fan and wafted upward. For a moment the air between us was smokeless and clear.

"Bud would, I know," he said, "and so would I. If this happened to work out, I mean. And then there are the county people. Deputy Sheriff Milcalf, for one, is very concerned about some of the things we talked about. And if he is, so is the District Attorney in Grants Pass." The mayor raised his eyebrows and lowered his forehead at me. "Letters from people like that in your back pocket would feel pretty good when you walked into that recruiting office, eh?"

It was quiet in the room. I could hear the ringing in my ears, something I only noticed when it was quiet, or at night, lying in bed, thinking about something.

Curly lifted his head and his little mustache curled into a smile. "And by the way," he said, putting his dukes up. "Good luck in that Smoker."

He threw the straight right, no set up with the jab. There was plenty of time to slip it, pivot and counterpunch, but I thought I'd best not.

"You bet," I said, as his knuckles grazed my chin. "Thank you, sir."

* * *

On the way home I drove past Giant Burger. I meant to keep going, but at the last second I pulled a hard right into the feed store lot and doubled back. My 296 fired a few times after the ignition was turned off due to the high-performance heads. Treava Lee would recognize the sound.

Janet Thayer was making a softy cone, the smallest size that cost a dime.

"Treava around?" I asked.

"She's in the back making hamburger patties. Did you want to order something?"

"Can you tell her I'm here?"

"I think she knows, but I'll tell her."

Mr. Flemming was behind the griddle just to the left of the counter where you ordered. He transferred a burger from the grill to a bun, doused a cup of water on the griddle and began scraping it with a spatula. When Janet squeezed by him on her way back, he looked up at me and frowned.

Janet was what you'd call gawky, but not bad looking. Just too tall. With her standing on the thick rubber floor covering behind the counter, we came eye to eye.

"She says she's busy."

A customer came to the outside window.

Mr. Flemming stepped out from behind the griddle. "Son, these girls don't have time now to visit. If you want to order, why don't you go ahead."

Janet was already at the outside window taking an order.

Outside I revved my 296, and got a look from the summer tourists standing at the window.

Chapter 5

I went home, dropped off my car, and headed for the trail to the river. I still had my long pants and boots on from work. You couldn't get to the river from where I lived in cut-off jeans. You'd get your legs scratched to hell. And once in a while you might cross a rattler.

It was just as well that Treava had been too busy to talk to me. I'd have told her about my deal with Curly—the letters of recommendation. It would be better if I kept my mouth shut on that deal. Still, I was pissed off that she'd avoided me. I'd promised myself I wasn't going to chase after her, but I had.

When I was through the woods, and marsh, and berry thicket I waded up through the slow frog water to the Bedrock. The hippies weren't there. That was okay. I needed time to think.

I took off my shirt and boots and dove in. The pressure and cold down deep eased the hay-soreness in my shoulders. I stayed down as long as I could, holding my breath and then came up and lay at the base of the chute, letting the cold water run over me.

It wouldn't be hard to string Curly and the BA along, keep them off my case until I went into the Marines. There was no way I could go wrong with a deal like that. The letters though. That was a different story. That had gotten me thinking. All the way home I'd actually felt them thick and bulging in my back pocket, just like Curly had said. Three or four letters from some of these hard-headed old bastards around here, saying what a good guy I was, describing how I'd helped the town and assisted law enforcement agents. That could go a long way with the Marine Corp. That really *could* get me into Special Forces.

I didn't want to get Joe into any kind of trouble. Or Nicki or Sara either. Still, there ought to be a way to make the deal work out.

They came down the trail on the Dick George side of the river—first Joe, then Sara, then a new hippie carrying a guitar. Joe had a machete he used to keep

the berry thickets down. He saw me and held up two fingers in a wave. I got out and met them on their side.

“I got to get me one of those machetes,” I said. “That’s smart thinking, for a city boy.” Joe smiled and nodded. I saw Sara start to take her clothes off. I didn’t want to stop her, but I did.

“Hey,” I said. “Listen up. Don’t tell anybody where you heard this, but the county’s talking about trying to catch you folks swimming down here naked.”

I had their attention.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s the word around Cave Junction. You do what you want. I just thought I should warn you.”

They all looked at me. Joe twisted his beard.

“I know for a fact,” I said. “There’s a group that wants to make trouble for you and they know you’re swimming along this stretch of the river.”

“Make trouble?” Joe said, still twisting his beard and nodding.

“Put you in jail,” I said. “Like they did to some hip... to some people over in Jackson County. Indecent exposure.”

“What a fucking drag,” Sara said. She was shaking her head, like either she thought I was lying, or I had something to do with it.

“Don’t ask me how they know,” I said, “but they do.”

“Well,” Joe said, “Thanks for telling us.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. The County Sheriff or the Warden Dick Grey, or somebody would eventually catch them. They were too hot a topic around town for it not to happen. Still, I kind of surprised myself, the way I came out with that.

The new hippie crossed the river with his guitar, leap-frogging over the bedrock to the other side where he set it down in a shady spot under some driftwood. Sara went in the river wearing cutoff jeans and a blouse that looked like somebody had sprayed it with every color paint, and once it got all wet and clung to her, it was almost like she was naked anyway. The new hippie was tall and thin with a fuzzy little beard, and there was something strange about him, weird, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. He kicked off his tennis shoes, and stepped out of his pants. He

looked funny, all right. Then suddenly it hit me. The old boy didn't have long hair. He'd gotten a buzz cut.

You could see he was a hippie, even without the hair, what with the beads around his neck, the leather sandals and the sloppy clothes. I realized that the only thing stranger looking than a hippie with the long hair was a hippie without the long hair. This boy *did* look naked. As he set his britches down on a rock, a bright ray of light hit me square in the eye—something on the seat of his pants seemed to be reflecting the sun. I shaded my face and saw that his pants were patched all over the crotch with silver tape. That's when I looked again and recognized him. He was the hippie who I thought might be Sara's boyfriend—the one who had put a blue flower in her hair.

I'd always thought the hippies didn't care about what they looked like. No show *and* no go was the way I saw them. Anyway, they didn't seem to care what other people thought. I could see advantages in that, or maybe that was what was wrong with them. You had to wonder why they'd leave where they were from and come to a place like Cave Junction. Most people I knew were looking for a way to leave. Everybody that stayed around Cave Junction ended up working in the mill or the woods. Myself, I might come back some day in a fancy car to visit Frank and old friends and hunt and fish. I'd be somebody important by then. But I couldn't do that if I didn't leave. I'd just be the same old Reese. That made me wonder about the hippies. They didn't care about making good. Or maybe they were here because they didn't fit in anywhere else. Maybe they were trying to get away from something themselves.

Whether this boy was different or not, I couldn't say. But he did seem especially fond of his britches and folded them neatly before he set them down on a rock. It was sad to see, because the damned things were striped and dirty, and with the tape in the seater, not worth the effort and fuss he made over them.

Then he turned and stood tall in his white jockey underpants, so straight and serious you'd have thought the little shelf of bedrock was a high cliff. He jumped into the air grabbing his knees, and cannonballed, plop, into my swimming hole. He

came up, cupped his hand, and sent a spray of water toward Sara. She ducked the spray and came back up.

Joe had stripped down to his cutoff pants and was sitting in the sun in his usual place, cross-legged with his eyes closed. You had to wonder how a guy who'd built and raced dragsters at San Fernando could be happy sitting around like that. Maybe he *had* blown his mind. But he never talked crazy or anything like that. He didn't talk much at all, except when I asked him stuff about cars. His mind sure wasn't blown on that subject.

I thought now might be a good time to ask a few questions. I jumped back into the water myself.

"How do?" I said to Sara and Underpants when I surfaced near them. "Say, how many people live out your way now?" At least I could find that much out for Curly and them.

Sara threw her hair back. "Do you mean how many hippies?"

"Yeah," I said. "How many people."

"Heads," she said.

I'd heard them describe each other as heads before. "Yeah," I said. "How many heads are living out your way?"

She laughed at that, though I wasn't sure what was so funny.

"There are going to be a lot of people moving in, man," she said. "A lot of heads. It's going to be really fine."

I'd never been in the water with her before.

"What's your name again?" she said.

She didn't even remember my name. Still, this was the most she'd said to me since the first day I saw her over a month ago.

"Emil Reese," I said. I still wasn't used to the way the hippies said just their first name when they met each other for the first time.

"Oh yeah," Sara said. "So Emil, what do you do for fun around here, I mean besides shoot guns?"

"Not much," I guess. "I box some."

“You box.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you violent or something?”

“Not that I know of,” I said.

“All contact sports are a form of violence,” Underpants said. He was dog-paddling against the current just downstream from us. “Channeled violence, to be sure, but violence.”

Sara tilted her head back and laughed at that too. “Geoff dropped out of college, but college hasn’t dropped out of him yet.”

Geoff cupped his hand and sent another spray of water in her direction.

“So you fight and shoot guns,” she said. “But you have no violent tendencies.”

I knew she was giving me a hard time, but I let it pass. “I fish too,” I said. “But not seriously in the summer. I like to fish in the fall, when the steelhead are running.”

“The ones that get about as long as the barrel of your gun?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. She remembered.

“Weren’t there some in here that were going to bite our toes off?”

I grinned and looked away. I’d drifted into water over my head. I side-stroked over closer to her. “Sometimes a fish from the spring run will stay holed up for the summer until the rains start. Not too many, though. Anyway, you’d have scared them off by now. They’re skittish.”

She cocked her head a little, then lay back in the water and floated. “You were really fucking with our minds that day—pointing your gun. Talking about the huge fish in here.”

“I didn’t mean nothin’ by it. I never said they’d bite you. You come up with that idea yourself.”

She looked down the river, then back at me. “Fishing is pretty cool, I guess.”

Underpants was floating on his side, upstream of us now, holding onto a rock. “I never could see the fun in torturing fish,” he said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Sara said, swimming toward him against the current.

“What’s there to know?” Underpants said. “You put bait on a hook and line and the fish tries to eat it and the hook pierces its throat and then it gets dragged out of the water. How would you like to be dragged into the water with a hook in your mouth and held there until you suffocated?”

“I think fishing’s cool,” she said. “It’s a way to get food.” She drifted back to me. “What else do you do?”

“I work,” I said.

“Groovy,” she said.

Geoff laughed at that. I didn’t see what was so funny. Unless it was me. Maybe that was it. Maybe he was laughing at me.

“There’s a dance tomorrow night,” I said. “I’ll be going to that.” She stood up in the water near the bank and was trying to get her hair to go into a band she’d been wearing on her wrist. She lifted it up and fed it through. It hung in one long, wet ponytail halfway down her back. The first time I saw her it was in a braid. “Live band,” I said. “The Bwannas. The leader is a buddy of mine. What happened to your braid?”

“Did you say Bwannas?” Underpants asked.

“My braid? It was a hassle,” Sara said. “What kind of music do they play?”

“All kinds of music. The Kingsmen. The Ventures. My buddy Eddie can play “Wipeout.” He’s better than the guy in The Surfaris.”

“Did you say, The Bwannas?” Underpants asked again.

“The Surfaris?” Sara said. “That shit was popular when I was a little kid.”

“They’re going to learn some new stuff pretty soon, I think. They’re good though.”

“Ever heard of The Doors?” she asked.

“Sure, I heard of them.” I hadn’t but Eddie would know who they were. Why would anybody name a band, The Doors?

“How about, “The Jefferson Airplane?”

“You bet,” I said. “You ever heard of The Kerby Ditch?” I could bullshit if she wanted to bullshit.

“The Airplane lived right down the street from us in The Haight,” she said. “There are so many good musicians in The City, man. They used to jam all the time at Golden Gate.”

My aunt had made sure we visited the Golden Gate Bridge on that trip to San Francisco from Stockton. I imagined a hippie lying back against one of those steel girders playing a guitar.

“Did you say, The Bwannas?” Underpants said. “That’s right out of Tarzan, man. Do you know what that means?”

“It means ‘great white hunter’,” I said. “Good name.”

“Perfect,” Sara said. “Far fucking out.” She swam over to the big rock and sat on the underwater ledge with her back to it. The rock would be warm against her cool, wet blouse.

“Good name?” Underpants said. He was leaning against a rock near the chute now. “It’s racist. It’s what the so-called ‘savages’ were made to call the white men in jungle movies from the nineteen fifties.”

“Far out,” Sara said, doubling over, laughing.

I swam over to the shallows where I could stand up. Two steps and a short, hard right was all it would take. I imagined popping Underpants in the mouth. No need to set it up with the jab. Two hard pops. Then another to the nose. It would bleed. The blood would drip into the current and flow downstream. I could see it all in my mind.

“You’re new,” I said, wading over to him. “What did you say your name was? Jeff? Say, what happened to your hair? You used to have real long hair.” Underpants looked unhappy with that, and he didn’t answer me. He was looking at something under the surface of the water. I couldn’t see what. It was getting on into late afternoon. I saw a little swirl along the downstream side of the big rock. Hardly a dimple. Big cutthroat. I hadn’t been fishing in this hole since the hippies showed up.

“How you like my hole,” I said. “Water’s nice, ain’t it?”

He held up his palm and I saw what he’d been looking at—a damselfly. Their tails and bodies were a bitchin’ color: Metallic Green. That was the color I wanted for my car, if they made it. After I got back from Vietnam, that’s what I’d do. See if I could find that color paint. I’d never seen a car that color.

“That’s a damselfly,” I said, loud enough for Sara to hear. “Bitchin’ color, huh?”

“I don’t see how you can consider it your hole. Rivers aren’t even a place. They’re a force, if anything. ‘Who shall be master of the world? Who will say: Thus shall you run, you great and small Streams!’”

“Ain’t talking about owning anything. I just mean, it’s my hole. It’s where I’ve always swam.”

“Yes, but what I’m saying is that a river....”

I could hear his voice and see his mouth move, not looking at me, standing in my hole, talking some college-boy shit with his little half beard. He held the damselfly up in his palm.

“And this,” he said, “is a River Jewelwing. *Calapteryx aequabilis*.”

The thing flapped its wings a few times to dry them, then flew from his hand into the air, heading straight for me. I snatched at it with my hand and caught it, feeling its hard body crunch. I opened my palm. It was maimed and couldn’t fly away. It lay there stuck to my hand, twitching around on itself.

He frowned and glared at me. “Why’d you do that?” he said.

“Watch this,” I said. I flicked the crippled thing into the eddy formed by the big rock. It twitched in the water as it came around into the main current and floated down stream. I pointed to it.

“Watch now. Five, four, three, two, one.”

Slam.

The cutthroat came completely out of the water. He wasn’t about to miss a meal that size. He came up—sixteen inches, straight up like a torpedo, holding the bug in his mouth, fanning the water with his tail.

“Wow,” Sara said.

Underpants stared at me.

I said to him, “What’s your problem?”

The frown on his face relaxed. He looked surprised.

“It’s my hole,” I said. “I just asked you how you like the water, that’s all.”

“Peace, people,” Joe said. Joe had been sitting cross-legged with his eyes closed, as usual, but now he opened them and looked at Underpants.

“Certainly, peace, for sure,” Underpants said. “But you can’t own—”

He wasn’t going to shut up. I couldn’t go undercover *and* break this guy’s nose. I’d have to choose one or the other.

“—a watershed. That’s a perfect example of—”

I waded out and stepped over onto the patch of gravel and sand along the bank. Underpants was in just above the tail-out, where the hole started to get shallow again, right across from the sandy spot of bank. If he stood up, he’d only be thigh deep in the water.

“—how our society—”

“If you wanna fight,” I said, “get the fuck out.”

He shut his mouth. He looked at Joe, then at the water, then at Joe again.

“Why are you looking at him?” I said. “I’m the one who’s talking to you.” I liked the way my voice sounded. Calm. Cold, now. His eyes were wide, like a startled brush rabbit. He didn’t really want to fight. And he’d shut up. He’d shut the fuck up.

“Peace, people,” Joe said.

A hot gust of wind rippled across the surface of the water. I looked at each of them, but nobody looked back. Sara’s eyes were closed and she was leaning against the rock. I waited for Geoff’s mouth to move again, but it didn’t. The numbness, the cold, that had taken over my body started to leave. I could feel the cool heat of the sun drying my wet pant leg. I sat down in the sand. My ears rung and the scar on my forehead itched. I rubbed it. I looked up at the sky. Two pigeons,

the kind with the yellow feet, flew by close enough to see their red eyes. High above a hawk flapped its wings, then went into a glide.

Joe spoke in a soft voice. “Feel the vibe we’ve created. It’s in the air. It’s tangible. That’s tension, man, just hovering there. Tension about territory.”

Fuckin-A.

“It was a beautiful day,” Joe went on, “a beautiful place, and look what we did, man.” Joe stood up and walked to the edge of the bedrock and held his palms up. “This is a lesson. We need to be quiet and feel the tension we’ve created.”

We all stayed still and felt the tension.

Joe didn’t say anything more. Where Sara sat, there was an eddy where the water passed the rock and it bubbled around the top of her little colored shirt, her nipples poking through the wet fabric. Everything was quiet and still.

“Wow,” Sara said, finally. “That was a trip. I just got this far out hit. It’s like, he”—she furrowed her brow at me—“is like the Indians. It’s like, they were here first and then white people came and didn’t understand where the Indians were coming from and fucked everything up.”

Geoff said, “Sorry man.” He was looking at Joe. “I don’t see myself as an invader or an oppressor or something. I *relate* to the Indians, man. I just want to live somewhere in peace. I want to get into the whole *living* thing, you know?”

Joe said, “That’s cool, man. But sometimes you just have to know when to be quiet and listen and feel the vibe that’s going down and not be so in your head. That’s why you left college. So you could get out of your head and get into something real.”

“Really, man,” Sara said. She’d slid down so that just her head and neck were above the water. She closed her eyes.

“Look at it this way,” Joe said. “Emil could have told his friends about us, but he didn’t.”

I felt a twinge of guilt. It surprised me and I had to look away from him. Some killdeer were pecking at the rocks just upstream. They were just pecking around. I looked up but couldn’t see the hawk anymore.

“If he had,” Joe said, “there would be people down here hassling us by now. He’s always thought of this as his hole, and he had it to himself. Now we’re here, and so far, he’s welcomed us. We should try to dig where Emil is coming from.”

A few minutes ago I’d have thought that was a sweet deal. Getting in good with the hippies. Wasn’t it? It was just hard to figure out anything to do with a hippie. They had a whole different way of talking to each other that I didn’t always get. You were supposed to feel good when you backed a guy down from a fight. But I felt like a dumb ass, and I wasn’t sure why. *We should try to dig where Emil is coming from.* What kind of shit was that? Maybe it was exactly what I wanted to hear. My head throbbed. I itched my scar again. Joe was a hell of a nice guy, it seemed like. Too bad he was a hippie.

“I was just trying to be upfront,” Underpants said.

“That’s cool,” Joe said. “But even *upfront* can do a *number*, if you can dig that.”

“It’s like we talked about,” Sara said. “This isn’t college debate team, man. This isn’t a game. This is about living and trying to stay mellow.” They were both looking at Underpants, who was looking down, squinting at a sliver of sun as it shimmered off the water.

“Sorry,” Underpants said. He got out of the river then, going tippy-toe across the pebbles in the shallows—I guess his feet were pretty tender. He sat down on the bedrock a little ways upstream, holding his legs under him with his forehead on his knees.

Sara eased herself into the water, came across the current, and got out on the little patch of sand where I was sitting, her wet shirt clinging to her skin. “Look that way,” she said. She got up close to the side of my head. “Where’d you get that scar?”

Eddie had done it. “That buddy of mine—the one who plays the drums—he accidentally hit me with a stick when we were kids.”

“A drum stick?”

“No. A big stick. A tree limb. It scraped a patch of skin off.”

“Mmmm...”

“He was trying to hit this other guy with the stick, but he hit me by accident.”

“Mmmm...”

“See, this guy was pounding me. He had me on the ground.”

“Pounding you?”

“Yeah. See, him and these other guys were going to pound Eddie but then I jumped on this one guy, and then this other guy—”

“And then Eddie hit you with the stick? Eddie, your friend the drummer?”

“Yeah, he was trying to hit this other guy.”

It was hard to explain. Fred Bruno, Ivan Cross and Bill Ward—they were going to pound Eddie because he was chubby and talked too much. They said he was a commie. Bruno was 16 and still in the 8th grade.

“The stick scraped all the skin off.”

“It’s very strange, but cool,” Sara said. “It shines. When the sun hits it just right, it looks like you’ve got a steel plate in your head.”

I’d heard that before. “Naw, ain’t got a plate. It just healed up slick like that.”

Mostly people didn’t talk about a scar like that and they usually pretended it wasn’t there. But this girl just walked up to you and asked what that thing was on your head. Something about her made it all right. She touched it with her fingers. The part above the hair line didn’t grow hair. It was more obvious in the summer. The rest of my face got tan, but the scar stayed bright and shiny-slick.

“It’s very far out, the way it reflects the sun.”

I rubbed it with my palm.

“Why do you always rub it?”

“It’s just a habit, I guess. Sometimes it itches.”

“Itches?”

“Yeah, like when I eat certain kinds of food.”

“Really?” She seemed surprised. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Like bananas.”

“Bananas?”

“Yeah. If I eat a banana, why, a couple of bites into it, my scar starts tingling and itching. Fish too, sometimes salmon and steelhead.”

She reared her head back at that and laughed, one high coyote yelp. Then she reached out and touched it, rubbing it with the tips of her fingers. It felt good. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

After awhile he stood up and walked over to where Underpants was and put her arms around her knees. Their shoulders were touching. It looked like they were talking, though they both had their heads down and I couldn’t hear anything but the water and the ringing in my left ear. It was always louder just after I’d gotten ticked off.

I looked upstream. Joe had put his sandals on and wandered on up the river, and now he was almost to the next pool, looking up at the sky and at trees along the edges, and down into the water, his hands clasped behind his back.

Sara stood up. “Well fuck it,” I heard her say. “I’m hot.” She took a long step across the current onto a clump of river grass that grew from a crack in the bedrock, and looked down into the white water at the base of the chute. If she was going to dive from there, she’d have to take one more step. I wondered if she knew how slick that rock was. The ones that were just a little wet and exposed to the sun got a layer of slime on them.

“Hey,” I yelled, popping up. “Don’t step right there if that’s what you’re planning on doing.”

“Why not?” she said, not smart-assed, but listening.

I jumped in the water. The current was fast but I found the snag I knew was in there about waist deep and braced my foot against it. I let the river push me over until I was braced against my right arm. She was standing an arm’s length away, her feet together, planted on the patch of river grass growing from the rock. I stretched and reached the rock she’d have to step on to make the dive. The current rushed under my chest and belly. It felt good and I grinned up at her, getting water in my

eyes and up my nose. She cocked her eyebrows at me. She smiled. I had to turn away to reach the rock, so I did, though I'd rather have looked up at her for a while. With the water rushing loud in my right ear, I wiped the slick stuff off the rock. I reached up toward her and rubbed my fingers together, showing her the slippery stuff.

She said, "It looks like snot."

She had a way with words, all right. I reached for the rock again and scrubbed it with water until it was clean and rough. Without a word she stepped, the ball of her foot landing solid right where I'd cleaned it. I thought I could smell the skin of her leg, she was so close, standing over me. And then she jumped, twisting around and catching my eye just as she hit the water.

I let myself go, let the current slide me like an otter head first over the chute and into the bubbly white, letting the force of the river take me down and then spit me out deep in the middle of the hole. I saw her for a second under water, passed her, and went deep and made it through the tunnel in the rock—wiggled through in the cold water down there and came up on the other side, gasping for air.

"Hey," Sara said. "I saw some fish down there."

"You bet," I said.

We were in the deepest section of the hole, near the big rock, both treading water.

"How do you catch them?"

That surprised me. "You fish for them," I said.

"I tried one day over in that creek, but I didn't catch anything."

The picture of a hippie girl fishing struck me funny.

"What's funny," she said.

"Nothing. You talking about over at Althouse, or Sucker?"

"Sucker, I guess. Where the concrete bridge is."

"Yeah, that's Sucker. There are only a few fish in there and they're old and smart. Big too. What were you using?"

"You mean for bait?"

“Yeah.”

“Cheese.”

“Cheese?”

“My brother and I fished in a lake once with cheese balls.”

“For catfish, maybe. Or crappies. Not for these fish around here.”

“Where do you get bait?” she said.

“That’s easy,” I said. I swam underwater and to where the gravel bottom started to rise. I came up in the shallow fast water on my hands and felt around along the gravel bar until I had a handful of periwinkles.

She swam over to where she could stand up and see. I held out my hand.

“Those things?” She took a close look. “They look like tubes made out of rocks.”

“That’s what they are.” I tossed the shells back in the water, all but the two biggest ones. I held one out to her. “Here.”

She took it in her hand.

“Rip it open,” I said. I ripped mine open until the black head and legs were showing. “Go ahead,” I said. “They don’t bite.”

She peeled hers down too. I pinched mine by its black head and pulled it out—a fat, orange one, wiggling its legs around. “They make their own shell so the fish can’t get to them. Go ahead and pull yours out.”

She pinched it by the head. She looked at me. “Will it die?”

Would it die? Hell yeah it would die. A fish would eat it, more than likely. I thought about how to answer that. She didn’t want to kill the damned thing, I guess.

“No,” I said. “It’ll make itself another shell. Go ahead and pull it out.”

She eased it out real slow. Bright orange and even fatter than the other one.

“I didn’t see any of these,” she said.

“They’re up there. Sucker Creek’s got them, but the bottom might have been different where you were.”

“It was mostly sticks and leaves.”

“So you look for a shell made out of sticks and leaves,” I said.

"Ah," she said. Our eyes met.

"Tell you what," I said. My voice was steady but all at once my heart was pounding and my legs felt cold and rubbery, like they did sometimes before a fight. "I'll bring my rod down next time and show you the whole deal." She didn't look away. "Or you say when and I'll meet you up on Sucker and I'll show you how to catch a big one. There's some good holes if you hike up a ways from the bridge."

"That would be far out," she said. "I want to learn how to get my own food."

"You might have to kill you a few periwinkles," I said, grinning.

She shrugged. "If there's a reason," she said.

She set her periwinkle gently in the water. It floated in the current for a few feet and then sunk out of sight. I tossed mine in after it.

"Do you need a license?" she said.

"Yeah." I laughed at that. "You need a license."

"But if you were just showing me, I wouldn't need one, right?"

"You'd need one if you were holding the rod," I said.

"So maybe I'll get a license," she said.

"No, because then I'll get arrested and you'll go free," I said. "That wouldn't be fair."

"You don't have a license either?"

"Hell no."

She laughed at that.

"Don't worry," I said. I had my legs back now. I planted my feet in the gravel. "I know Warden Dick Grey's every move before he makes it. I'm an experienced hard-core outlaw when it comes to fishing and hunting."

"Yeah?"

"You bet," I said. "Our freezer's full of steelhead, salmon, venison. We even got some bear left, I believe."

"Bear?"

“You bet. In those hills up behind Sucker Creek there’s all kinds of game. Ever had squirrel stew? You could get you a small-game gun. Savage makes a nice little over and under—.22 on top and .410 on the bottom. You could—”

“No, that’s okay. I just want to learn to fish. None of the hippies are any good at it.”

“You mean, the *people*?”

She smiled at that.

“Sure, I’ll show you,” I said. “It’s easy if you’ve got somebody to teach you the little tricks.”

“That would be far out,” she said.

We got out and sat in the sand near where they’d come in. Up on the bedrock across the river Underpants was bent over his guitar, concentrating, going at it hard. What I could hear sounded pretty good.

“As far as food is concerned,” I said, “as soon as the rains start, you’ll have steelhead in the river.”

“Steelhead,” she said.

“You bet,” I said.

We sat quiet for a long while then, Geoff playing across the river. Joe had turned around up at the far bend and was walking back downstream. A breeze came up and shook the leaves and the willows and the tall brown grass that grew above the water line. I don’t know how long we sat there. I know the shadows we made on the water got longer. It was still plenty hot and the sun gradually dried our clothes. I think if I’d been given a choice in it, I’d have been glad to sit right there like we were, with the sun at our backs, for the rest of my life.

* * *

People were coming down the hippie trail. I heard them before I saw them. I turned around, hoping it wasn’t anybody local. It wasn’t. It was Nicki with another girl hippie and two hippie men. Sara waved at Nicki as they came out onto the bedrock and walked to the sand where we were sitting.

“Oh God,” she said to me. “I know those people. Far out.” She jumped up and went over to them and they hugged her. Geoff stopped playing his guitar and Joe hurried across the current. I stayed sitting in the sand and watched them all hug: “Far out” this and “Far out” that, like old hippie friends who hadn’t seen each other for a long time. The big hippie was what I’d call big—big neck, big hands, big sandaled feet. He wore baggy shorts and one of those Hawaiian shirts, and he had long blond hair as pretty as a girl’s that he kept pushing out of his face.

The other hippie had on cutoff jeans with motorcycle boots, a funny combination I thought. But then I was getting used to the hippies’ odd stylings when it came to clothes. On his waist in a black leather sheath was a Buck knife, the size with the seven inch blade. I’d never seen a hippie carry a knife or a gun before. But that right there was a damned good knife. I knew. I had one just like it that I always took deer hunting.

Underpants put his taped pants back on and came across on the rocks. They didn’t know him, I guess. Joe introduced him.

“Dana’s at the house fixing food, man,” the hippie with the knife said. “She can’t wait to see you.” He was loud and talkative for a hippie. “We drove the Hog, man. Wow. Groovy place.”

He came down to the sandy spot. “This is where you guys swim,” he said. “Wow, man. Nicki was telling us about it. Yeah. Far out.” He looked down at me, sitting in the sand. “Hey man, how you doing?” He held his hand out for the special hippie handshake where you clasp each other’s thumb. He was around 35 and hard-boned under his thin beard. I grabbed his thumb and we held on.

“Laurel, man,” he said.

“Emil. Emil Reese,” I said.

They all came down to the sandy spot then. I got introduced to the big hippie whose name turned out to be Hippie Jim. Hippie Jim looked to be in his early twenties. Then everybody got introduced to Tina. “This is Tina, man,” Laurel said. “She was bumming change at a rest stop north of Redding. She was on her way to The City but she decided she’d check out the Oregon hippies first, man.” Tina had

on a long, loose dress, beads and work boots without laces. Her hair was dark and curly and came down around the sides of her face.

“Hey Sara,” Laurel said, “so, is this your old man?”

“Emil is a local cat,” Sara said.

“Oh, I dig,” Laurel said, looking at me closer now.

“But he’s cool,” Sara said.

“Yeah?” Laurel said.

“Emil’s a good head,” Joe said. “He’s into cars.”

“Cars,” Laurel said. “Oh shit. Did I tell you we drove the Hog? Three quarters of oil from SF. Half a tank of gas getting up that windy mountain road between here and Crescent City. Comfortable though, man. Hippie Jim drove non-stop from The City to Ashland, right Jim?”

Jim pushed his hair back and smiled. He was looking upstream. Tina had taken her boots off and was stroking the deep water near the chute with her toe.

“Fucker’s crazy, man,” Laurel said. “Dana and I are crashed in the back seat. Every two hours or so I wake up, ‘Are you still awake, Hippie Jim?’ He’s like, ‘Yeah.’ I look over the seat at the speedometer; we’re doing ninety-five over the mountains, man. I’m saying to myself, ‘We’re probably going to die, man. Well... fuck it then, I’m going back to sleep.’”

I saw a flash of white from upstream. Tina had stepped out onto the Bedrock stripped down to nothing but her panties. Her breasts were small, the skin completely white, like they’d never seen the sun.

We all looked at her—I know I did, and it seemed like Laurel, Joe, and Hippie Jim did. Anyway, it got quiet, and then Tina dove in head first.

“Man, that’s jail bait,” Joe said.

“I know, but what the hell?” Laurel said. “Dana was worried about her. She needed some place to crash. She was all by herself.”

“The Man is uptight around here,” Joe said. “We can’t go to town to buy food without getting stared at and hassled. They’re just waiting for us to do something that they can bust us for.”

Sara said, "Hey, it's no bullshit. The Man is heavy here."

Nicki said, "Some locals saw Joe on the road last night and threatened to beat him up if we didn't go back to California."

"We have to rise above that," Joe said.

"What was they driving?" I said.

They all looked at me.

"A Pontiac," Joe said.

"Big cheater slicks and burning oil?"

"Yes," Joe said.

"Some you might rise above," I said, "but your best bet there would be to run. Those boys are hefty but not too quick on their feet."

"Hey man," Laurel said to Joe, "living in the sticks was supposed to be mellow. What happened?"

"Nothing, man. I'm just explaining how it is. She can crash for a couple of nights, but that's it."

"Fine with me," Laurel said. "I didn't realize it was going to be a big deal. It's Dana, man, she's like a mother hen. It's her hormones or something. Hey Sara, Dana can't wait to see you."

Tina came out of the water and put her clothes back on and Joe gave Nicki a set of car keys.

"We'll help Dana with dinner," Nicki said.

Nicki, Sara, and Tina left. Geoff took his guitar and went with them.

"We'll come in a little bit with the Hog," Laurel said.

We followed Joe across the Bedrock so we could watch the setting sun. We all sat in the sand on my side of the river. Me and Joe and Laurel and Hippie Jim.

"Wait until you see the Hog," Laurel said. "It isn't what it used to be, man. *I love a luxury automobile*. Remember when the old man used to say that?"

Joe nodded and smiled.

"I remember when he was dying, man," Laurel said. "Still giving everybody a hard time. Still fucking with your head. Remember? Hippie this and hippie that?"

Joe smiled and nodded.

“I miss that old fucker, man,” Laurel said again.

“Say,” I said. “Are you guys brothers?”

“Yeah man,” Laurel said. He slapped another hippie hand shake on Joe and put his arm around his shoulder. “It’s been, what, over a year?”

“About that,” Joe said. “How was Mexico?”

“Mexico was a bitch, man. I mean, in every possible way. Right Jim?”

“A bitch in heat,” Hippie Jim said.

Laurel touched the front pocket of his shirt. He looked at Joe, over at me, and back at Joe. His eyes lifted into a question.

“We haven’t been,” Joe said.

“I dig,” Laurel said. “He hasn’t been initiated yet. That must be a hassle.”

“It hasn’t been a problem,” Joe said.

“But it’s your swimming hole,” Laurel said.

“No, man. It’s *his* swimming hole.”

Laurel looked like he was thinking about that. “I dig,” he said. He turned to me. “Emil, man, you’re cool, right?”

Sara had said I was cool. Joe had said I was cool. “What do you mean?” I said.

Joe gave Laurel a long, hard look.

“Well, he is or he isn’t,” Laurel said. “What the fuck?”

“Mmmm,” Joe said. “It may be more complicated than that.”

Complicated? I wasn’t sure what they were talking about.

“What’s complicated?” Laurel said. “Does he turn on or not?”

Joe didn’t say anything.

“Fuck it,” Laurel said. He pulled a rolled cigarette out of his pocket.

“That’s marijuana, huh?” I said.

For a second he froze, just looking at it, like he wasn’t sure himself. The sun had reached the tree line on Eight Dollar Mountain to the west. The shadow of a

bird flickered across Laurel's face. "Oh shit," he said, lowering his head, laughing to himself.

Hippie Jim was grinning too.

"A virgin," Laurel said.

A virgin. I didn't care for that, but I kept my mouth shut.

Laurel took a lighter from his pocket and lit the cigarette. He took a long inhale and handed it toward Joe. Joe flagged it away.

"What? Are you serious?" Laurel said, trying to talk and hold his breath at the same time. Some of the smoke came out of his mouth.

"I've been on a different trip, man."

Laurel let his breath out. "All that Buddhist shit, right?"

"Not just that."

"Wow." Laurel nodded his head up and down, up and down. "Wow. Okay. My little brother, not smoking weed. I'm going to have to get used to that idea. That's a stretch." He turned the cigarette, looking at it from every angle. "And I even brought you some windowpane, man." He looked up at Joe with a question on his face. "No?"

"No," Joe said.

Laurel shook his head. "Fucking far out." He put the cigarette to his lips and inhaled again. He handed it to Hippie Jim, who was standing, stretching his back.

Hippie Jim took the cigarette between his fingers and inhaled. He coughed a little smoke back out. The smoke had been drifting across the river but suddenly the breeze changed and it came my way. It was a strong, sweet smell. I recognized it. I'd smelled it here before. I'd thought it was something growing—a flower or bush—something new. Hippie Jim licked his finger and dabbed it on the paper. He inhaled again. He leaned over Laurel and held the cigarette out to me, the smoking end sheltered in his huge palm.

"Nope, I said, thanks. I appreciate it, though. But see, I'm in training right now, and everything like that."

Hippie Jim passed it back to Laurel.

“Emil is a boxer,” Joe said.

“A pug,” Laurel said, nodding again. “I dig.”

“That girl,” Joe said. “Tina.”

“I heard you the first time, Joe. Nicki and Dana and Sara will watch her like old mother hens. We’ll give her a ride back to the freeway in a couple of days.”

“Good,” Joe said. “Because I’m serious man.”

“I hear you Joe,” Laurel said.

“The vibe around here is very intense, man. We can’t give The Man any reason to fuck with us.”

“I dig,” Laurel said.

“We’re going to get out of the rental,” Joe said.

“Where you’re at now?”

“I’m buying some land from an old woman we met. I’m going over there tomorrow night, as a matter of fact, to close the deal. She lives across the field behind us. The property is up the hill on the creek. It’s beautiful, man. We’re going to build a pole frame. There’s scrap lumber everywhere. The building supply in town is pretty cool. Some of the people have bought from them. And that cat you just met with the guitar? He knows horticulture.”

“Horticulture” Laurel said. “Mmmm. That’s far out.”

“We’ll grow most of our own food. We can raise some chickens. Do our own thing.”

“That’s cool,” Laurel said. “That’s what you always talked about.”

“If it doesn’t get all fucked up,” Joe said.

“We gave her a fucking ride,” Laurel said, “that’s all.”

“I’m hip.” Joe said.

“Man, I didn’t realize she was *that* young until she took her fucking clothes off. Did you Jim?”

“Nuh uh,” Jim said.

“In The City, it was a whole different thing, man,” Joe said.

“Okay, Joe.”

Laurel tamped the smoking end of the cigarette down with the wetted tip of his finger and put it back in his pocket. "Save a taste for later," he said to himself, then louder back at Hippie Jim, "Right little hippie boy?"

Hippie Jim and Laurel met palms in another hippie hand shake..

Hippie Jim sat down. We all sat and watched the sun dipping behind the trees on Eight Dollar.

"She sure does have some cute little titties on her, though, doesn't she," Laurel said, after a time.

Joe closed his eyes.

"Come on little brother. I'm just fucking with you, man."

"Don't fuck with me," Joe said.

"Don't *you* fuck with *me*. I came a thousand fucking miles to see you, man."

"We're trying to do something here," Joe said.

"Hey, you're a guru to *these* people. You're still *my* little brother."

"I'm not a guru," Joe said.

"Jim," Laurel said, "is Joe a guru or not?"

Hippie Jim didn't answer, he just grinned, his big chest heaving a few times. He took both hands and raked his hair back out of his face, his cheeks fat and rosy as a baby's in the setting sun.

Chapter 6

The hippies left to go eat with their women and their friends and I headed home. It was Friday night, but I had nothing much to do. I didn't want to get drunk because I had to train in the morning. Frank was at the Sportsman. I did the rest of my push ups. I climbed the rope three times, the last time pulling myself up through the opening in the floor of my tree house.

As a kid I'd spent a lot of time up here. It had been my headquarters, a way to get away from Frank and out of the trailer for a while. Sometimes I'd slept up here even in the winter. I had a big wad of irrigation plastic in the corner and when it rained, I'd throw it over the roof to stop the leaks.

I lifted two of the roof boards up and lay back, using the plastic as a pillow. I looked up at the sky until it got dark. You had to wonder what Curly and the Betterment Association had in mind for the hippies. The three D's, Curly had said: Dope, Disease, and Destruction? Joe, Nicki, Sara. They weren't hurting anything or anybody as far as I could see. The sky was clear and full of stars. The moon was almost full.

I went back over what had happened at the river, especially the part when I was with Sara. I imagined her lying beside me right now, looking up at the stars. There was room for both of us up here.

I shifted my weight. The old support beams squeaked. I could build a place like this in the woods. Not that I would. But I could.

I wasn't thinking too straight. I needed to figure this out. I started again, going back over what had happened.

Laurel and Hippie Jim had come down with the young girl. She'd bummed a ride. A runaway. Joe didn't want her there. I had a chance now. A chance to get into Special Forces. To be somebody. They'd give me the letters. I'd show them to the recruiter. I was sure to get in.

I saw a shooting star. I tried to follow it with my eyes, but it got lost in a cluster of other stars.

* * *

That night I had a dream about Sara. In the dream we were walking through the woods. She was wearing that little flowered dress of hers. We were on a slope, overlooking Sucker Creek, a spot I recognized. The pine needles were damp and the sky was overcast. The creek was higher than in summer, maybe just after the first hard rains. For a while we were coyotes, nuzzling each other and slinking around on the hill. Then we were people again, holding hands and crossing the creek. The water was thick and slow, like syrup. The rocks above the water line were white. We stopped to pick up periwinkles to use for bait. I wondered how we were going to fish, until I felt in my pocket for the hook and hand line, which I remembered putting there, and I dreamed that part quick to get caught up so I knew without looking that the hook was an Eagle Claw #4, short shank, and the line was six pound test monofilament. She walked like a goddess in her sandals, except her feet were big and her toes were long and curled under, like bird claws.

“You’re rich, ain’t you.”

“Uh huh,” she said. I loved the casual way she said that, though it was hard to know what a hippie might mean by it, especially in a dream.

We flowed into a still-feeling, like maybe a fish feels when it’s got a good hold, and above its head, bugs are beginning to hatch and float by, and the fish slowly rises toward a bug caught in a current seam, and takes the wiggling thing into its mouth. And then just like that, I come along side her and popped the snap on her bathing suit top, which was a dress before, and popped it with one squeeze of my finger, something that should be harder to do than it is, if you ever looked at the clasps on those things, and felt the weight of her come free and my feet shifted in the current and I lost my balance, like the sudden weight of her coming forward like that had made the whole world shift for a second. Except when I caught my balance and looked, they weren’t Sara’s tits at all, but Treava’s tits, which are all right, except if I’m going to dream, I wanted Sara’s tits. The tits of a goddess.

Then the scene righted itself, and it was definitely Sara and Sara's tits again, and I showed her how to clean the fish we'd caught, a big planter and a native cutthroat. I showed her the red under the cut's gills, which looks like blood, and I told her how the planter must have worked its way up from the river and learned to take care of itself in the wild. There are a few that do that, and that's how it got so big. She said that I was like the cutthroat, and she was like the planter, which was just like something a hippie would say, but I must have thought of it myself, being as I was dreaming it.

She cleaned the planter and I cleaned the native, and she scraped the artery out along the back-bone with her thumb like I showed her, and rinsed away the blue-black clots of blood under her thumb-nail in the warm fall current of Sucker Creek.

But I woke at first light with my pecker so hard it hurt. Sara had dissolved into a coyote and run away.

I threw the sheet back and whacked off, trying to imagine the dream as it should have ended. But just as she was guiding me into her, I remembered the white of Tina's little titties.

I used my underwear to clean up the mess and went in to take a shower. I let the cold water run over my head until my face cooled, went cold, numb.

The cops were probably looking for Tina somewhere right now.

* * *

I went back to bed and slept until almost eleven. I got up and fished around through the mess in my room for my jock strap and gym shorts which I found under a chair. My hand wraps were draped over the door where I'd left them to dry the last time I'd trained.

I tossed my bag gloves and wraps in my car and drove over to the school. It wasn't even noon yet and it was already hot. There were a few cars parked beside the school near the door to the basement. I parked and walked over to the Hamburger Haven just off the school grounds. I went in and got a Squirt but decided to pass on food until after training practice.

The Haven was dead during the summer. Giant Burger got the tourists because they were down on main street. But then in the winter, Giant Burger had to close. The Haven was the opposite. It was slow in the summer but jumping during the school year. It looked like a little house, and inside there was a pool table, three pin ball machines, four booths, and a row of stools at the counter. You could get a hot dog, hamburger, French fries, Coke, Seven Up, Root Beer, or Squirt. Bill and Barbara, the old people that owned it, were real nice and lived across the street. In the mornings on a school day the place would be so full of smoke that you couldn't see when you first walked in. If a guy said, "The Haven at noon," it meant he wanted to duke it out. Bill and Barbara let you settle your own problems as long as you did it outside in the parking lot or out back. I'd kicked ass there twice and had my ass kicked there twice. But ordinarily you could go to the Haven and relax without anybody bothering you. You could skip class and stay there all day if you wanted, play pool or pinball or just sit in a booth. Bill and Barbara didn't mind. They were real nice that way.

I sat down in a booth near the pay phone. I fished around in my wallet for Curly's card with the list of numbers written on the back and set it on the table. I stared at it while I finished the Squirt: Sheriff Milcalf, County office, 4857. Bud Randolph, Chairman, IVBA, home, 5376. Curly Banks, Mayor. Home, 9841.

I tried to think and figure but what I mostly got was a mixed up picture show. Some of the pictures were real, like Joe sitting at the Bedrock in the sun, and some were made up, like Sara and me hoofing it up Sucker to fish. I saw the runaway girl dive in the water with her baby fat belly and her little white titties. Then I saw John Wayne saving the little Vietnamese boy from the Viet Cong, and that colored fella medic patching up the little village girl's foot that had been blown off by one of Charlie's mines in *The Green Berets*. After that I saw my dad with his M-16 charging up the hill at Outpost Yoke on the MLR.

I slipped Curly's card back in my wallet. I walked outside into the bright sunshine and crossed the asphalt lot to the door of the school basement.

As soon as I walked in the smell of head gear and gloves and sweat got my blood pumping. There were already three guys in the little basement gym. George had brought his record player from home and Charlie Pride was singing “Angel Wings.” The round buzzer went off.

We had two 150 pound heavy bags, one speed bag, and some head gear and gloves, a couple of mats from the wrestling room upstairs, and a real ring that belonged to the city for the yearly event. At the end of practice, after we were all tired out and our arms were like putty from doing interval drills on the bags, George would pair us all up to spar. The idea was to get some ring practice without getting hurt so bad you couldn’t box in the real fight. “*Just move around,*” George would say. Or, “*sixty percent now, fellas, don’t go crazy.*” You’d start out easy, but thirty seconds into the first round guys would be hitting as hard as they could, trying to take the other guy out. It seemed like nobody could help themselves.

If I could have concentrated in school like I did in a fight, I could have gotten all A’s. It’s hard not to let your mind wander when somebody is just standing there talking or you’re supposed to read. I’d find myself getting interested in what they said and it would remind me of something else and I’d just let myself think about that other thing for a second, and when I realized it had been longer, the teacher would be on to something else, and I wouldn’t know what they were talking about. But boxing, I could concentrate, and it felt good. If your mind wandered you’d get reminded quick. George said boxing might knock some sense into me, but maybe not, because I had a harder head than most.

A lot of guys fought in the Illinois Valley Smoker, young and old. Some guys even fought off old grudges. Last year the feed store owner put the newspaper editor in the hospital—lack of blood to the brain, they said—and the owner of the theatre broke one of the barber’s ribs.

Even just sparring there were plenty of bloody noses and split lips and shiners and guys throwing up in the puke bucket. But most guys didn’t train that hard. A week before the fights the gym would be crowded with guys taking turns on the bag and standing around shooting the shit the rest of the time. But where were

they now, eight weeks before the fight? George was down here on Wednesdays and Saturdays. At first I'd trained just so I could win my matches and make up for the embarrassment of last year. But now I enjoyed the training and sparring. Sometimes in the ring it would feel like I'd climbed out of my body but I could still tell it what to do. And then afterward I could breath deeper, and it would be hard to sleep because I'd be fidgety and wide awake.

I finished five three minute rounds on the jump rope with thirty second rest intervals in between. I did a little paradiddle with my feet, something Eddie had shown me, only he did it with his sticks instead of a rope. Right left right right, left right left left. And then if you left a beat out somewhere it would change the rhythm of it. Put the accent in a different place, is what Eddie said. I liked the feel of it with the rope. It helped me concentrate and made the rounds go quicker.

I worked up a dripping sweat, did my paradiddle, and listened to Charlie Pride. George said you couldn't learn to box from rock and roll because it had the wrong rhythm. It was flat footed. He liked Charlie Pride, but he said if you wanted to learn to float in the ring, to stay on the balls of your feet, Bob Wills country swing was your best deal. He always played Bob Wills during bag drills.

"Okay, fifty push-ups," George said. "Elbows in."

If you did your push-ups elbows-in you'd punch that way and you wouldn't telegraph, George said. The other guy wouldn't be as quick to see your punch coming.

"All right," George said. "Four rounds shadow box. Set the buzzer, Jimmy. Let's go. Loosen those shoulders and tuck your head in, Reese. Move around. Double-jab, spear to the body. One-two, step right, throw the hook. Left hook, Reese. Bob and weave. Don't step straight back, Reese, work the angles. I keep telling you that. Always end with the jab, Reese. Work the angles, Reese. Elbows in, Reese."

George had been a pro back in the olden days. He was only about 5'6", and you could see he'd had some muscle to him in his day, but now he was fifty and there was more belly on him than chest. He had a big mole on the side of his upper

lip and he talked with an Okie accent. Once in a while he'd get in the ring with one of us. You'd think, fuck it, I ought to be able to whoop on this little old guy, but at the same time you knew you couldn't. I remember staring at that damn mole and then here it would come, out of nowhere. It didn't matter how good your defense was. You could have your hands up, be throwing your punches straight, right in the alley, have the reach on him, it didn't matter. We were like Swiss cheese to George. He could see every hole, like you didn't have any defense at all. He could knock the crap out of me in about fifteen seconds. Then I'd try to get him to tell me his secret and it would be the same old shit, *You let me open you up*, he'd say. He'd say, *Yeah, but stay in the alley when you're punching*. He'd say, *Okay, but don't swim with the jab. You got no defense when you do that. You wanna swim, do it at the river*.

"Okay," George yelled. "Line drill." Line drill, you work on your foot work, doing these different steps while you hop along a line drawn with a strip of tape. Then George put on Bob Wills and we worked on some combinations on the bags. "Circle the bag, Reese. Joey, hold the bag for him. Two minute rounds and switch off. Let's go. Elbows in, Reese. Elbows in. Move your head, Reese. You're a sitting duck."

Speed drills were next, while George coached each of us separately with the focus mitts.

When he kept making us do upper body stuff—a lot of pushups to tire us out—I knew we were going to spar today. I rewrapped my hands tight, especially around the thumbs which I tended to jam up, and slipped on my head gear.

My usual sparring partners hadn't shown up so George put me with Bo. Bo was one of the guys who came to Cave Junction in the summer to work as a smoke jumper. They always left when the rains started. While they were here they lived at the Forest Service base. Once in a while somebody from Cave Junction would get on as a jumper, but it was hard to do. You had to pass physical and mental tests, and there was a lot of competition from guys who had had jump experience in the military. Bo was quiet and kept to himself. He'd been to Vietnam—Marines, Airborne, they said. That was the great thing about being a Marine. After that, you

were a bad-ass. Bo was like Paladin. He didn't have to take crap off of anybody. He didn't even have to smile at people or say hello if he didn't want to.

George said anybody who said they weren't nervous stepping into the ring was either lying or no kind of real fighter. I tried to keep that in mind as I re-wrapped my hands and put on ring gloves. To tell the truth, I didn't really want to fight Bo, not even sparring. He was an inch taller than me and had a good inch of reach on me, and if that wasn't bad enough, you had to be fearless to jump out of a plane. I wouldn't be able to get him to react to my jab. He wouldn't start flinching and blinking after a few head shots like the guys I usually sparred with. For a second I felt the fear, but I let it pass through me and tried to ignore it. Part of the sport was dealing with the weak legs. Once the first shots were thrown, you'd just get concentrating on that.

I climbed under the ropes. Across the ring Bo looked big.

George set the timing bell. "All right fellas. Just move around. Don't go crazy. Set the round-buzzer, Jimmy. Two minutes. All right, FIGHT."

We touched gloves. I circled to the right to stay away from his right hand. I'd seen him hit the bag, and I didn't want to take a shot with that right hand early in the round if I could stay away from it. I threw a jab right away just to correct his thinking if he thought I was afraid of him. I was, but if he knew that, I'd be in trouble. I needed to put a little fear in him too. Then got a double jab in, half expecting a barrage of counter punches to come at me, but they didn't. He wasn't toying with me—behind the head gear he looked serious. He was just waiting for a chance to really open me up. I faked another jab, bent my legs and landed a solid spear to the body. But I was inside, I should have stayed inside and followed up. I didn't and he caught me getting out.

Bam bam bam.

"Good combination, Bo," I heard George's voice the way things sound in there, kind of far away. "Watch the power, though."

He hadn't exactly buzzed me, but I felt my legs crumple for a second, then I was back, circling him and staying out of range until I could get my balance back.

“Move your head, Reese. He can’t hit a moving target. Don’t wade in like that.”

“Bo, when he gets inside like that, angle out. Don’t step straight back. Look for openings and counterpunch. You’ve got the reach.”

“Reese, don’t be such a bull. It’s not going to work with this guy. He’s bigger than you. Counterpunch, Reese. Move your head. When you get inside like that, make it work for you. Seize the opportunity. Don’t be a one-punch wonder. Use the uppercut.”

All my nervousness was gone. I’d taken his best shots. A nice combination. I was going to get my ass kicked, no question about it, so fuck it. I’d put some fear in him too. I circled him and threw more jabs and got in a couple of one-two combinations, and just missed with a left hook. But nothing real solid. I kept moving my head like George said, bobbing and weaving. Bo kept his head down and countered everything I threw and just kept coming at me.

Bell.

I leaned against the ropes in my corner. I was too tired to try to figure out what George was telling Bo. I thought about what I’d been doing. George came over to my corner.

“When he sets you up with the jab, he drops his right. Remember that thing I showed you.” I nodded that I did. “You’ll have to be quick, but you can do it.”

Bell.

“All right, fellas. Work on moves. Watch the power. Seventy percent. Don’t go crazy.”

I saw the jab coming and I made my move. I let him land it against my right glove. I countered with a right. But not to the head, to the glove as he brought it back. I stepped right and threw the left hook.

I had his left buried under my glove so he had nothing there and his right at that angle was useless. I got my legs and whole body into the hook. I could feel the cartilage in his nose collapse against my knuckles even through the glove.

“That’s it, Reese,” George said. “That’s the way to do it.”

Now Bo was mad, coming at me, sniffing blood. I wasn't some local punk he could ignore. Fuck no, son. I was kicking a Marine's ass. I pranced around, happy as hell now, thinking maybe I could do that again.

"Don't get cocky, Reese. Stay focused."

I was fighting a guy who'd made Special Forces, Airborne. The Marines needed guys like me.

Bam. Bam, bam.

The floor came up and hit me hard in the face.

"Go to your corner." George's voice. I tried to push the floor away. The round buzzer went off.

A hand came close to my face.

"Sniff."

I sniffed. The sharp, piercing smell.

George kneeling. Bo in his corner. I was on the floor.

"Okay?" George said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Come here, Bo," George said.

I sat up.

"Don't get up yet," George said. "Give yourself a minute."

Bo came into focus standing over me, gloves pressed together, the muscles in his arms flinching and glistening with sweat. A trickle of blood hung from his nose. He sniffed, bringing the back of his left glove across his nose.

"Beautiful combination, Bo," George said. "Be sure you get full extension with that jab. Use your reach. Elbows in. Don't do this." George threw a jab, dropping his right two inches.

He turned to me. "Reese. That move worked for you. You're quick enough to pull that off. That's a tough move."

George turned my gloves over and started unlacing them. He went back over it, Bo right there listening.

“Bury his jab, step right, hook. He’s got nothing. See how that works. That was beautiful. He’s a big guy, and you buzzed him. But then you didn’t follow it right up. You see what I mean?”

My head was clearing. My left eye and lip were numb.

“Now listen,” George said. He squeezed the back of my neck. “You listening?”

I nodded.

“When you get in a good shot like that, don’t stand there and take a picture of it. When your guy’s hurt, stay in there and take him out. Use that killer instinct. You can stand around and congratulate yourself later.” He held my gloves while I pulled them off. He shoved them against my chest. “Get in, plant your feet, throw the hook, follow with the uppercut. When you’re done, angle out. Always end with the jab. Got it?”

I nodded.

“The other thing,” he said, “your footwork looks good, but when you’re out of your range like that, all you’re doing is tiring yourself out for nothing. Understand?”

“Forget about the show and stick with the go,” I said.

George laughed at that and slapped me on the back. “You looked great right up to the time he put you on the mat. Now you fellas go in and get towels and cleanser and clean this blood up. Don’t forget to disinfect the head gear and the gloves. Jimmy,” he said to one of the younger guys, “lead PT. Hundred and fifty sit-ups. No medicine ball today. Finish up and let’s get out of here.”

I was still sitting on the floor. Bo was standing there, his gear on, arms at his sides, like he wanted another piece of me. He wiped his nose again and looked at the smear on his glove. I might have been a Viet Cong he’d wounded in the jungle. But then he pulled his glove off, reached his hand down, and pulled me up before turning to step out of the ring. Well, at least he hadn’t left me for dead. Still, I wished he hadn’t heard George explain the bury-the-glove strategy. It might not work on him next time.

Chapter 7

When we finished PT, I left the gym and went back to the Haven. Edwin and Richard Yardborough were there. They were cousins. Edwin was twenty-two or thereabouts. Richard was a year older than me. They lived right down the street from the Haven with the rest of the Yardborough clan. They left their Christmas tree in the window with the lights on until mid August, and you could see it sitting there when you came around the corner to get gas at Stout's '76, dry and brown with most of the needles fallen off. Their picket fence was busted down and the tricycles and wagon in their ratty yard were upside-down and rusty. Edwin and Richard's faces were pockmarked and their skin was too white. They were both over six-two and between them there was about six hundred pounds squeezed into the booth closest to the pay phone when I walked in. They were both drinking Coke.

"How's it going, Fucker," Richard said by way of hello. "What happened to your face? Get your ass kicked?"

"Uh huh," I said.

I wasn't going to make the call with them right there. I walked through to the bathroom, washed my face and came back out. Bill was behind the counter. I said, "I'll be right back for some hash browns."

I left and walked across the school grounds to another pay phone. I pulled out the list of special numbers that Curly had given me.

I put in a dime and dialed the last one.

Curly answered.

"Hello, this is Emil Reese."

There was a short pause. "Yes?"

"I think I've got something."

"Something?"

"A runaway. A girl."

There was a long pause, like he might have forgotten about the whole deal, but then he said, "Excellent, Emil. Fine. Good. You could make an identification from a picture?"

“Sure. Yeah.”

“Emil, I’m going to try to reach Deputy Milcalf through the county office. If he’s off today, I’ll call him at home. Do you know where the child is right now?”

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. “The hippies didn’t have anything to do with it, though.”

“No?”

“She was hitchhiking and some people picked her up.”

“Hippies?”

“Yeah, but not the hippies where she is now.”

“Not important,” Curly said.

“What will happen?” I said.

“I’m sure Hal, Sheriff Milcalf, will contact the county juvenile authorities. The girl will be picked up. Sheriff Milcalf can explain more. Let me see if I can catch him. Good work, Emil. I’ll call you right back.”

I said I’d be at the Hamburger Haven and we hung up.

I figured if they got the girl home, that ought to be worth a couple of lousy letters. I was helping everybody. The girl. The parents. I was even helping the hippies. Joe didn’t want her around. I felt sick to my stomach. I needed to eat something. I walked back to the Haven. The Yardboroughs were still there.

I told Bill that somebody might call me on his regular phone. I’d only talk for a second. He said it was all right.

Bill gave you a lot of potatoes and they were usually damn good, but when they came I couldn’t finish them.

“Not done enough for you?” Bill said. “I can put them back on the griddle.”

“It ain’t that,” I said. I had him change a buck for Pinball and went over by the door to play Big Guns, figuring it might calm me down. The machine had a sloppy coin slot so I wedged a nickel between the slot and the frame, a little trick to cut some of the loose-doo.

“Hey hippie,” Richard said.

“Fuck off,” I said, wondering if Frank had run his mouth at the Sportsman about me swimming with the hippies.

“Touchy,” Edwin said.

“Sure is,” Richard said. “There’s a boy who don’t like being called hippie.”

“We got nothing against hippies,” Richard said.

“Except for the stink,” Edwin said.

I backhanded off the left flipper for a long Center Cannon shot. The stink. There was plenty I could have said about that. I’d sat next to Richard one time on the wrestling bus when we went to Wolf Creek. But “stink” wasn’t a subject I wanted to get into right now. The Yardboroughs were moody and there was a lot of Yardborough sitting in that booth. Anyway, I was racking up points and if I kept this up I’d for sure get a free re-play. I could tell they didn’t know anything about me and the hippies. They were just shooting their mouths off. I was up to eight million. The good thing about Big Guns was it hardly ever gypped you out of points for a target hit.

“You’d like to join up with the hippies, wouldn’t you Reese?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You would?”

“I would.” There. That would shut them up. They’d have to think about that. I was up to twenty-five million.

“Does that mean you’re a hippie yourself?” Edwin said.

Fifty-two million.

“Does that make you a hippie?” Richard said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Full blown.”

That shut them up again. Admitting to it wasn’t playing fair and they needed time to think of a comeback.

“You’ve come a long way since you was a little squirt,” Edwin said. “I was here when Ben Scott picked you up by the seat of the pants and throwed you out the...”

Another Mini-ball stuck. I slammed it.

Tilt. Game Over.

“Goddamn fuckin hell.” I’d only been that close twice before.

I turned around. The Yardboroughs were grinning. “Fucking bullshit,” I said.

“It’s just a game, Reese,” Richard said.

Edwin snickered.

The phone rang and Bill picked it up. I took it at the end of the counter. It was the county office: Could I come down right away?

* * *

I drove down the hill, crossed main street and took the dirt road past the Laundromat to the little county building. Milcalf’s cruiser was out front. So was Curly’s ’64 Mercury Marquis. I went in. Milcalf was behind his desk. Curly was sitting in front of it in a metal chair with green upholstery.

“There he is,” Curly said, giving me a big grin. He reached his hand out to shake, something he hadn’t done at his office. Milcalf nodded.

“Sit down,” Milcalf said. “We heard you drive up. You need to get a real muffler for that rig of yours.”

The shit never let up. Normally I’d have cringed and grinned and made up some excuse. Today I didn’t.

Curly chuckled, filling the silence. Then he leaned forward, taking a closer look at me. “Boxing?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well, you might have a pretty good shiner come tomorrow.”

“All right,” Milcalf said. “Pull up a chair.”

I dragged one over from beside a row of file cabinets.

Milcalf handed me a three-ring notebook with pictures of kids in plastic folders. Most of the pictures were posed shots but some were taken while the kid was doing something, like blowing out candles on a birthday cake. Others were torn, like there’d been another person in the picture but they’d been ripped out of it. At the top of the page Milcalf had opened to it said, “Missing since Monday, July 29, 1967.” A little over a week ago.

She was on the third row down. I recognized her right away. Kind of chubby in the cheeks, cute with curly dark hair. It was hard to figure her age. I recognized the thin nose and the way she smiled on the side of her mouth. Her shoulders were hunched forward but she looked happy in the picture. I pretended to scan the other pictures. I said, "What's going to happen if you catch her?"

"We'll bring her in and turn her over to the juvenile authorities in Grants Pass," Milcalf said, "and they'll see that she gets home. They'll help the parents arrange for supervision until she can get straightened out."

"A lot of times they're hooked on narcotics by the time they're caught," Curly said. "Isn't that right Hal?"

"If she's been with hippie types," Milcalf said, "you can pretty much figure she'll need drug rehabilitation and probably a psychological evaluation, and counseling of some sort. The main thing from our end is we get the child out of there and get her back to her parents as soon as possible.

I turned back a page in the book, still pretending to scan the pictures. "What happened was, she just got out to the hippies," I said. "The hippies where she's staying didn't really have anything to do with it."

Curly cleared his throat. "Emil tells me, Hal, that, ah, these particular hippies haven't been involved with this kid. She's just staying out there."

Milcalf tilted his head, raising his eyebrows at Curly. He folded his arms and sat back, but didn't say anything.

"This is a concern, I believe, that Emil has, Hal. And of course, there's also the issue, I would think, of them suspecting Emil informed on them."

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Milcalf said. He looked at me, his arms still folded. "The main thing is, if there's a child out there, we need to take care of that. There's problems and issues with this hippie business that we hope to solve sometime not too far in the future, I would hope, but we're not going to do it all here today." He lowered his chair legs to the floor and put his hands on his desk. "Now," he said, looking at the desk and then at me. "Do we have a runaway here that we can I.D. or don't we?"

I turned back to the page marked July 29 and pretended to study the pictures again.

“That’s her,” I said, pointing to her picture.

Milcalf reached for the book. “Second row down, third from left?”

“Yeah.”

He pulled the picture out of the sleeve, held it up and looked at it. He opened a file drawer beside his desk, rifled through it and pulled out a file folder. He handed the picture to Curly to look at and read from the open file. “Turned 14 in June, from Bremerton, Washington.”

“She could pass for older,” I said.

“Mmmm,” Hal said. He took the picture back from Curly. “You’re sure about this I.D.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s her for sure.”

“All right,” Milcalf said. “Good. Now the next question is, *where* is she? If she’s out with the bunch that are squatting along Althouse Creek, we’ll be lucky to get her.”

“Lose them out there, do you?” Curly said.

“It can happen. We drive up, they’re out the back and into the woods.”

“She might be staying in a regular house,” I said. “A rental.”

“Holland Duplexes?”

“No. Somewhere on Dick George Road.”

“Five-twenty,” Milcalf said.

“Is that the five-twenty house you were telling me about?” Curly said.

Milcalf sucked air between his teeth. “I know the place. Five twenty Dick George. There’s a half dozen or more shacked up in there.” He turned back to me.

“That where she was?”

“No, but I believe that’s where she’ll stay. The hippie women there will take care of her.”

“Take care of her, huh?” Milcalf said.

“Well that’s good, if she’s there,” Curly said. “It’ll be easier to pick her up there, won’t it Hal?”

“No question. Well,” he said, closing the book, “good work.” He held out his hand and we shook.

“Good Job, Emil,” Curly said.

* * *

By the time I got home I had my appetite back. I put the skillet on as soon as I walked in and got out six quail I’d wrapped in wax paper and put in the refrigerator earlier in the week. Frank was in the living room reading the Illinois Valley News. It came out every Thursday but Frank never got around to it until Saturday. I hardly ever read it myself.

“I’m going to fry up some birds,” I said, scooping a spoonful of bacon grease out of the halved milk carton we kept on the stove. “You want any?”

“Yeah, okay.” He broke out laughing. “Get a load of this.”

“What?” I said.

“Jesus Christ. What a bunch of hooley.” He adjusted the folds of the paper and read:

Hippie Can’t Hold It

Geoff Philips, of Anaheim California, was arrested Friday by County Sheriff Hal Milcalf on charges of disorderly conduct. The defendant, a hippie, was found guilty in Josephine County court Wednesday after a witness told the court that she had seen the defendant urinating on the Holland Loop Road five miles east of Cave Junction. The Court appointed defense tried to show prejudice against hippies. Defense Attorney Fred Robertson asked Mrs. Beulah Woods if it wasn’t true that she just didn’t like hippies. The witness replied that he wouldn’t either if he had them living across the street from himself. Prosecutor Burrows pointed out that the defendant was easily recognized. His pants were patched across the seat with two strips of wide tape, and noted for the court that they were equipped with a zipper to confirm the zipping motions—

Frank crumpled the paper into his thigh and broke out laughing. I dropped the birds one by one into the sizzling grease. He'd shit if he knew I was just with this guy, not to mention all the rest of it. Frank unwrinkled the paper and continued.

...noted for the court that they were equipped with a zipper to confirm the zipping motions witnessed by the complainant.

"Christ almighty," Frank said.

The defense made a motion to throw the case out, stating that urinating on the highway did not make a person abusive, violent, riotous, or in fact, disorderly. Judge Cushing denied the motion.

The mention of Cushing sobered Frank. He stopped laughing. He hated Cushing, not because I'd had to go before him four times on my own—three MIP's and the vandalism conviction. That was my problem and well deserved, Frank said. He said Cushing could have nailed me worse than he did, what with the car involved in breaking the window—could have sent me to McClaren instead of putting me on probation with restitution. No, the reason Frank hated Cushing was because he'd fined Frank and me for fishing out of season over on the Rogue. The warden Dick Grey had caught us on an illegal stretch of the river. We'd only been there a few minutes. We even had licenses that year which neither of us ever bought again. We figured they lost money on that deal in the long run. The thing that bothered Frank was that he thought we were legal. We hardly ever fished the Rogue and the regulations were hard to figure out the way they read with creeks we'd never heard of. Frank said the hell of it was that if we'd been poaching, we'd never have gotten caught, and he was right. We got caught because we thought we were innocent.

Frank could match wits with any game warden alive as long as he knew what he was doing was illegal. He said the river should have been posted right there and the reason it wasn't was to trick innocent people and then fine them.

We'd stood up together, father and step-son. Frank had a copy of the regulations which he read out of to Cushing, but the judge cut him off and gave us the full fine: fifty bucks each. What made it more humiliating was that Cushing had grown up in the Illinois Valley and Frank knew him from when they were kids. To

have to take a tongue lashing and a fine from a guy you'd gone to school with—a kid who'd been the teacher's pet and afraid of guys like Frank—was too much. Now when Frank killed a deer out of season it was for more than just the meat. It was his personal revenge on Dick Grey and on Judge Seymour Cushing.

The birds were getting dark and crispy. I turned them over with a fork and got two plates from the dish rack. I hadn't told Frank anything about the deal I had with Curly and I wasn't planning on it even though I knew it would impress him. The problem was, you couldn't trust Frank not to blab at *The Sportsman* if he got in the mood. He had little enough to brag about, and I didn't want to become it at the moment.

"I know that guy," I said. I couldn't resist bragging myself.

Frank looked up from the paper.

"He was at the river yesterday, shooting his mouth off."

"This guy?" Frank tapped the paper. "What was he sounding off about?"

"Some know-it-all college-boy crap," I said, opening a can of pork 'n beans and dumping half of it onto my plate, cold. "He pissed me off. I told him to shut the fuck up."

Frank nodded. He understood that.

I went into the living room and set my plate on a TV tray. "Grubs on the stove," I said.

Frank looked over at me then. "Christ," he said, looking at my face, "what happened to you? You look like you got your ass kicked."

"I got a few licks in myself," I said.

"Mmm," Frank said.

"What's the rest of it say," I said.

Frank read:

The defendant was visiting people at the Holland Duplex and stopped to urinate as he was leaving. When asked why he hadn't gone inside, he said he didn't have to go then, and thought it would be no big deal if he went on the road, as he thought no one was around. On sentencing, County Judge Cushing told the

defendant: "Once again we are faced with a hippie in this court—at least you look like a hippie. Your hair is long, you have a beard, and your clothing is different, to say the least. We are pressured from all sides to be careful not to deprive your type of any rights, because we will be guarding our own rights in doing so. We have bent over backwards to be fair, but in a case like this, we have reached the limit. You have gone too far and we won't put up with it. I wish there was some place you could go and live the way you want to. But while you are among us, it would behoove you to live as the majority do. You are found guilty and sentenced to thirty days in the county jail and a hundred dollar fine."

Frank whistled at that.

The defendant had already served five of the thirty days while awaiting trial. The defense asked that the remaining jail time be suspended. Judge Cushing agreed, with the added stipulation that the defendant receive a free haircut from the jail barber. Also, that the defendant leave the area and return to wherever he came from immediately upon release. The defendant agreed.

So that was it. No wonder Underpants had been a little sensitive about his hair. His buzz cut had only been a week old and he'd just gotten out of jail.

"That's that goddamned Cushing for you," Frank said. "The hippies will come to curse the day they ever heard of that sonofabitch. You'd think that kind of deal right there," he poked the newspaper with his finger, "would clear the hippies out in a hurry." He threw the newspaper on the floor and went in the kitchen to get his grub. "I guess that guy didn't leave yet, if you seen him at the river. Christ, a hundred bucks and 30 days, just for taking a piss."

The birds were fried up crispy good. You just had to watch out for buckshot, was all. When I was done eating I put my plate in the sink. I went into my room, tossed my gear bag in the corner, and lay down on my bed. They were just going to pick the girl up. That was all. Milcalf would get a search warrant and him and the county juvenile cop would go out and pick her up. The girl would get home okay. I'd get my letters of recommendation to Special Forces.

I was set. *Emil Reese worked undercover for... Emil Reese helped find...
Emil Reese squealed on...*

The hippies would just have left her on the highway again.

So why didn't I feel good about it?

Chapter 8

Eddie knew everything there was to know about music. Every kind of music. Jazz. Even classical music. Normally we only got one radio station out of Medford that cracked and buzzed and played mostly country music. The Kalmiopsis to the west and the Siskiyou to the south boxed us in pretty good. But not long after Eddie and his mother moved down from Chehalis to live with Wilbur we'd strung a hundred yards of copper wire from the top of his roof to a tree and grounded it to a cold water pipe outside his window for an antenna. Eddie could pick up a station he liked from Chico, and at night, even further. Any money Eddie earned doing odd jobs and holding dances he spent on drums and records.

The first year after Eddie moved in, me and Wilbur and Eddie would have checker contests. Wilbur called it *checkees*. Eddie started calling it checkees too in the happy, whiny, baby voice he used to have back then until I told him he ought to knock it off.

We were all even on wins for the first few weeks. Then one afternoon Eddie won three games in a row and he was champ. And a while later five in a row, and then Eddie got on a winning streak and just kept winning, and after a while there wasn't any tournament anymore, just Eddie straddling the stone wall beating the socks off of either me or Wilbur, whoever's turn it was, so Wilbur and I said the hell with it and quit forever right there. Wilbur took out his pocket knife to whittle and I practiced throwing my buck knife it into a rotten stump along side their house, both of us acting like we weren't bothered that Eddie had all of a sudden out-classed us. Eddie sat on the wall studying the checkers all alone, rosy-cheeked and talking to himself.

People gave him a hard time about things like that until he took up the drums and started his band. There was nothing much to do around Cave Junction so everybody went to the dances that Eddie's band held. They'd play at the Armory or the VFW Hall, or the old Ice Plant or the Selma Grange. Eddie became a local star.

At 6:30 I drove down to give Eddie a ride to the Grange. John Inbody, the band's guitar player, and his girlfriend Peggi were standing with Eddie by Inbody's

car. Inbody had a '55 Chevy two-door, and although it wouldn't have done any good to tell Inbody this, it was exactly what I mean by a "pussy wagon." Inside he had one of those sheep-skin seat covers, and he'd hung Peggi's ring from the rearview mirror. The whole car smelled like aftershave. The worst part was, he had it raked in front, like he was packing something serious under the hood. He'd even put *Norris Cam* decals on the rear window. You knew as soon as he punched it that all he had was a six and a stock two-barrel. The thing wouldn't lay patch in second gear. But Inbody ignored that, always washing it and polishing it any time there was a hose within reach, like he didn't understand himself that his car was bullshit. If he wasn't going to actually *run* it, he should have kept it stock. I'll admit, though, that strictly as a pussy wagon, it seemed to work for him. He was tall and smooth-skinned and I'd never seen him without a girl. Peggi was hanging on his arm when they left for the dance with John's big amplifier.

"Hey, what happened to your eye?" Eddie said. We were loading his drums into my car.

"Big smokejumper."

"Damn."

"I got some licks in," I said. "An x-Marine, son."

We loaded the last cymbal stands in the trunk and headed for the Selma Grange.

"Well," Eddie said, when we were going through Kerbyville. "That's it. Band's breaking up. Peggi wants Inbody to quit and he's going to."

"Quit?"

"She's pregnant and they're getting married."

"Yeow," I said. Frank always said you were *done* if that happened. "That poor sonofabitch. He's done," I said. "That's it."

"Inbody likes the idea," Eddie said. "He figures it'll keep him out of Vietnam."

I remembered Inbody getting real embarrassed one time in U.S. History because he didn't know where Vietnam was. Thresher had flunked him the year

before and he was already 19. Thresher said, *You'll probably be going there soon. Aren't you even a little curious?*

"That's crazy," I said. "Me, I do my thirteen months in Vietnam—after that, everything else will be easy. I can cruise. The military pays college."

Eddie didn't say anything. He had one more year of high school and he was looking into some music college that would give him a scholarship when he graduated next year. We both knew I wasn't going to college. Except for my report on the Korean War, I hadn't done a school assignment since the sixth grade.

"Matter of fact, fuck college," I said. "I get trained in electronics right there while I'm in. Sweet deal, son, I'm telling you."

Eddie looked out the window.

"By the way," I said. "Don't sweat Inbody. I know a guitar player for your band."

That got his attention.

"Who do you know that I don't know?" he said.

Out the window along the flat, the base-boards of houses were rotting where flood water had reached them last winter. I thought about telling Eddie about the deal I'd done with the Mayor to see what he thought, but I figured he'd just rib me— "hippie hunter" or some shit.

"Let me work on it," I said, slowing down as we neared the end of Sauer's Flat. "That's what managers are for."

"Manager? Reese, you are so full of shit. You make me laugh. 'Let me work on it,'" he said, mimicking me.

"Let me work on it," I repeated.

That cracked him up all the way to the Selma cut-off. I turned on the radio and waited for it to warm up. Merle Haggard was on: *I'll turn 21 in prison doing life without parole/ No one could steer me right but mama tried, mama tried, mama—*

Eddie hated country music.

"Turn that shit off," he said.

“No way,” I said. This is *real* music, here.” I sang along ... *her pleading I denied, now there's no one for me to blame 'cause mama tried...*

* * *

They'd decided that Peggi would take the money at the door. My job was to back her up, make sure everybody paid. Most people didn't mind paying fifty cents so all I had to do was stand there.

A guy in Treava's class tried to sneak by. I said, “Hey,” and fixed him with a stare. He shrugged and took out his wallet. This other guy Lonnie tried to talk his way in. “Come on Reese, we did probation school together,” like he thought that ought to carry some weight. We'd had to go Thursday nights to this *school* at the courthouse all the way in at Grants Pass. I shrugged at Lonnie without taking my thumbs out of my jeans.

He turned to Peggi. “I got no money.”

“You should have come here before you bought beer,” she said.

“Cough up,” I said.

Lonnie mumbled, and dug out two quarters.

Three of Peggi's friends came to the door and she flagged them on in. “What did you let them do that for?” I said.

“I can give passes,” she said.

“I don't get to?”

“Go ahead and give one if you want.”

The band played a couple of songs. They were just kicking into “You Better Move On,” when Treava Lee showed up at the door with Roddy Tullman. He had his fingers at the small of her back. She looked at me and at my eye where Bo had caught me. She seemed sad and for a second I thought I saw all the memories of us together flash across her face. I wanted to reach over the money box and touch the bare skin of her arm. I didn't though. She looked away, showing me the wispy, dark hairs on the back of her neck. They looked fine and soft under the sprayed part.

“Big date?” I said over the noise of the band.

She looked back at me, her lips mashed tight. Tullman had his wallet out. He was a big guy. A basketball star. His dad owned all the ranch land north of Sauer's flat. He slapped a dollar down on the table in front of Peggi.

I reached over Peggi's shoulder. "Excuse me," I said, taking fifty cents out of the shoebox-till. I clicked the money down on the table in front of Tullman. "Free pass for the lady, my treat."

He gave me a hard look and I gave it back, but with an *I was there first* smile at the corner of my mouth to go with it. He touched her back again and they walked away, leaving the two quarters sitting there.

"Asshole," I said.

Peggi had everybody stamped and the room was full of people. Eddie and the Bwannas were playing "Ain't No Cure for the Summertime Blues." Tullman was dancing with Treava. He looked stupid out there waving his arms around. Treava hadn't liked that I wouldn't dance. She said it wasn't much fun just cruising gut in my car. You'd think a girl who could change the oil filter on her dad's tractor would have realized what I had under the hood. But *she* liked to *dance*. I'd slow danced with her once or twice at the school when the floor was crowded. The only place I was going to wave my arms around was in the ring.

The real problem was her dad, Ben Riley. She'd bring up things that she couldn't believe he'd said about me: *Why does he skip class? Why do you always meet at the Hamburger Haven? Why the loud car? Why no plans for college? Why the lousy grades? Why the drinking problem? No drinking problem—what do you mean? It's right here in the paper; he got his third MIP. What about stealing the booze? Oh, he just happened to be with somebody. I see. What about breaking the window at City Hall? You bet accidents happen. That's why we have laws. What about the speeding tickets? Don't make excuses for him. Don't get yourself tied up with a loser. Why were you out so late? He'd better not be drinking when he's driving with you. Why just the one boy? You're too young. You're too good for him.*

On, and on, and on, and on.

The band started up a slow song, "Last Night." I could see Tullman above the others, bent over her out in the middle of the dance floor. I went out the door to get some air.

It was a warm, clear, moonlit night. I recognized every car parked in the clearing, all from a twenty-mile stretch off 199—O'Brian, Cave Junction, Kerby, Selma. Cave Junction was the only real town. The others were just places along the road—a store, filling station, church. The valley was supposed to boom after they built the tunnel through the mountain in '61. But it hadn't changed a bit.

I could smell Lake Selmac across the road—a froggy, low-water smell. There was a picture of a bass on a sign at the gift shop just up the way, but nobody I knew had ever caught one there. The Illinois Valley Betterment Association had built the lake five years ago to attract California tourists, but all it had attracted was mosquitoes. One buzzed around my ear and I slapped it away.

"Hey Reese."

I recognized the voice and saw Jerry Beard's Impala at the edge of the woods. He was Frank's sister's son, which made us cousins by marriage, though I wouldn't claim him. He was twenty, two years older than me, and he used to shove me around some when we were kids—hold my head under the water at the Forks—shit like that. His old man, Jack Beard, was a logger and as big as Frank, but with more belly. Jerry had been a star lineman on the Illinois Valley Cougars but he hadn't done much in the last two years but get a beer-belly like his dad.

Beard was with McNaught and Murph. The three of them were leaning against Beard's Impala and they laughed at something Jerry said as they watched me walk over. I knew what Beard's problem was. My 296 had chewed his Impala's ass out on Rockdale road, even after we'd changed his tranny to a four-speed.

McNaught was smirking because Beard was smirking. I was still pissed at McNaught for saying I'd never get into Special Forces. We'd see about that.

Murph was smirking because he always smirked, just being a little prick. These guys would shit if they knew about my letters of recommendation.

"Heeerrre's Reese," McNaught said.

“What’s that you got,” Beard said, “a black eye?” He looked at me closer.

“Fat lip, too. Uncle Frank bust you?”

“Smokejumper tagged me.”

Beard took a pack of Camels from his T-shirt sleeve and offered me one.

“I don’t smoke when I’m in training,” I said.

“Shit,” Beard said. “I’m coming to the Smoker just to watch you get your ass kicked.”

“Sign up,” I said. “I’ll kick your ass for you.” Then I said, “Fuck it, I’ll have one.” I took the cigarette after all.

“I don’t have time for the Smoker,” Beard said. “Anyway, I’ll be fighting my butt off soon enough.”

“Frank told me.” Beard had fucked around and gotten himself drafted into the army. “When you leaving?”

“End of October,” Beard said. “What are you, Reese, the bouncer or the doorman?”

“I’m the bouncer.”

I flicked ash toward his car. “Looks good. Too bad it’s all show and no go.”

“What did you say?”

I laughed. “Pisses you off, don’t it.”

“I think we’ll take this dance apart,” Beard said.

“Like I say, all show and no go. What are you drinking?” They were bleary-eyed.

Murph reached in the back of the car and pulled out a quart jar.

“That looks like still-liquor,” I said, reaching for the bottle.

“Careful with the cigarette,” he said. “That shit will actually ignite in your belly. McNaught was breathing fire, earlier.”

I took a drink. My cut lip burned. The stuff was strong. “Goddamn,” I said.

“Definitely,” Murph said.

We passed the hooch around. Beard killed it, did a three-sixty, and heaved the jar into the woods, thunk, against a tree.

I said, "Don't throw bottles around here."

"Why the fuck not?" Beard said.

"They find bottles around here in the morning, it gives the band a bad name: *Don't let your daughter go to the Bwannas' dances. Don't rent the Bwannas a hall. Kids drink there, bla bla bla.*"

In the grange the band was playing *GLORIA*.

"I know what your problem is," Beard said. "We saw her walk in. With Tullman."

"Fuck off," I said.

That cracked Beard up. McNaught and Murph both grinned. Beard put his dukes up and pranced around me, pretending to parry a blow I hadn't thrown. I put my hands in my back pockets, holding the cigarette between my lips. "Go ahead," I said.

"Kick his ass, Jerry," Murph said.

"In his wildest fucking dreams," I said. "Go ahead and take a shot." I touched my chin with my middle finger, squinting to keep smoke out of my eyes. The moonshine was warming my belly. Fuck Treava. Fuck Tullman. Let them have each other.

Jerry stopped prancing, dukes still up. "Fuck you, Reese," he said, not looking at my finger. I kept it pressed against my chin. Nobody said anything. The band ended "*GLORIA*."

Jerry put his dukes down and laughed a fake laugh. I took a drag on the cigarette and grinned a fake grin.

"Reese, you kill me. I love it when you get irritable." He leaned against his car again. "Seriously Reese, I'm telling you as your cousin and your buddy. Fuck that bitch." He leaned back against the car and looked up at the sky. He took a drag off his Camel and blew smoke rings into the air. The light from the moon and stars was so bright you could see the little halos waft up into the pine branches.

McNaught drummed on his chest as the band started up "Little Latin Lupe Lou,"

but he couldn't keep a beat. Even I could tell that. Murph leaned back and put his head on the Impala's hood.

Still looking up at his smoke rings, Beard said, "Get off my fucking car."

Murph stood up.

"Come on with us, Reese," Beard said, "and we'll go out to Old Man Merle's and get another jug. You got any money?"

I tossed my butt on the ground and crushed it good with my heel. It was fire season. "Wait a minute," I said.

I crossed the lot and pulled in around the corner where Peggi was sitting at the till-box, counting change. The dance floor was full now. The air was moist with the smell of perfume and sweat. The band, all but Eddie, stopped suddenly and stepped to the corners of the stage. People stopped dancing so they could watch Eddie play a solo. I stopped by the wall and watched too. As he got more complicated, I couldn't hear the beat anymore, but I could feel it somewhere in the middle of what he was doing. Everybody knew Eddie was going to be a professional drummer. Eddie looked up at the ceiling as he played. Everybody watched but he didn't seem to care. The Russians could invade and Eddie wouldn't care as long as they didn't take his drums away.

Peggi sat at the till. She hadn't seen me yet. She was staring at the stage, smiling at Eddie's playing, like everybody else. I reached in the till and took out a handful of bills. If it was more than my cut for helping, I could square it up later. The way Beard drove, we'd be to Merle's and back in less than an hour.

They were all three in the front seat when I got back outside.

"What the fuck," I said.

"You're in the back," Beard said.

I opened the passenger door. "Get out."

Murph and McNaught both got out and got in the back. That cracked Beard up again. "That's my old Reese. See, I told you he'd do that. Ha ha. Ride nigger? Not Reese. Ha ha."

Beard rolled out of the dirt lot, laid a long patch in second, skipped third, and we were cruising. Sweet tranny. It was the only thing I envied. I looked at the gas gauge. "You're almost empty," I said.

"I've got a can and hose in the trunk," he said.

"This has got to be quick," I said.

"Well shit, I'm doing seventy."

"Fuckin' Beard is crazy," McNaught said.

The tires squalled over the turns on the narrow road, Beard straddling the line around the blind corners, figuring he'd see the lights in time if anybody was coming the other way. Beard claimed to have outrun a state cop on 199 by crossing the California border late one night. *Cop couldn't do a fucking thing. I was out of his jurisdiction.* I knew how he drove, which was the only reason I'd agreed to go along. I needed to be back before the dance was over.

I pulled the bills out of my pocket. There were four, like I thought, except one of them was a ten. I'd taken thirteen dollars from the till. They usually cleared around thirty-five or forty. I'd taken way too much. But I'd have it back before anybody noticed.

"By the way," Beard said, "do not fucking puke in my car. If anybody needs to puke, say so and I'll pull over."

"Pull over," Murph said.

"Hey, don't fuck around," Beard said. "I'm serious."

"Pull the fuck over," Murph said.

Beard slammed the breaks. "Get out."

But Murph was already halfway out the door. He staggered a few feet from the car and bent over with his hands on his knees, breathing deeply. For a second I felt sorry for him.

"How often are we going to have to stop for this little pussy," I said.

McNaught snickered behind me.

"Relax, Reese. Better this than he pukes in the car."

We waited while Murph heaved and got back in the car.

Beard hit pavement again at Sauer's flat and we finished the straight doing 110.

We took Laurel Road to the Holland Loop and drove through the small-ranch land, smelling the hay fields, cows, and horse shit through our open windows, feeling the warm night air on our skins.

Four miles out we came to the Holland store and the old dirt road to Browntown. Old Man Merle lived two miles out, and then there was eight miles of old rut that dead-ended at an abandoned mine. Browntown had been a mining community in the 1800s, but now it was just a name and a few rotting shacks.

The Holland store wasn't a store anymore, either. The Powells lived in it. You could still smell the ash and burned timbers that used to be the old woman's house behind the store, the one who had about a hundred tame ducks before Danny and Ronny Powell set fire to her place to get rid of the smell. People said Dan Powell had a thing for his sister.

We left the pavement and headed in the direction of Brownstown. About two miles out Beard doused the lights, and cruised through a break in the fence, letting the car roll up under an oak out of the moon glare. Merle lived in a caretaker shack up over the hill. Beard hit the horn—one long and two short. Merle would meet us half way. That is, if he wasn't asleep or passed out. If he didn't meet us, we'd turn around and leave. You didn't just go up to Merle's shack uninvited.

Beard and I got out and walked up the hill. We saw Merle in the moonlight as he came into view. He had a quart jar in one hand and a gun in the other. The breeze shifted and I got a good whiff of him. It wasn't a stink so much as just an old, caked-on smell—sweat, tobacco, wood-smoke, whiskey. Merle had mined back when Browntown was up and running, and it had been a ghost town for fifty years now. You used to see a miner once in a while at Hammer's Market, or Ken's Hardware getting supplies, but not anymore. Not even Merle was prospecting these days. At least that's what he said. He'd gotten the caretaker job and begun brewing still liquor. He could have been a hundred years old, it was hard to tell. He still looked like nobody you'd want to tangle with. He had fingers missing and a beard

that a bird could have nested in. I didn't know anybody who had actually seen the still, or knew where it was, exactly, but he was said to have a five gallon propane heater and a fifty-two gallon wooden barrel he kept filled with mash out in the woods somewhere.

Once when I was about ten I'd met him walking on the road near town. He'd told me there wasn't any God, and people who said there was were full of crap. I'd pretended to agree with him, though I wasn't too sure. It didn't go along with what I'd heard. Anyway, you could take Merle a couple of ways—deep thinker or crazy sombitch. I looked at the shotgun. The barrel on the thing looked wrong. Too damn big. That had to be a ten-gauge. Nobody I knew shot a ten gauge. Nobody I knew owned a ten-gauge, except Merle. You had to be squirrel-wiry to shoot a gun like that or the recoil would tear your arm out of joint.

Beard and I each held out two dollars. Merle took it, and handed Beard the jar. He may have been grinning but you couldn't say for sure. He had no teeth in his head that I could see.

"Hepees," he said, pointing with the wad of bills. "I see them all out around in here now." As he said it his eyes lit up yellow in the moonlight.

Beard glanced at me and at his feet, trying to hide his smirk.

"Any of those crazy sons of a bitches come around here," Merle said, taking another breath, "they'd better watch themselves." His voice cracked like his vocal chords were sprung. You had to wonder how he got enough air through his wind pipe to drive so much sound out. He seemed either scared of the hippies or mad that they'd copied his style of dress. It kind of made you wonder what the hell a hippie was, anyway. If it was just the way they looked, Merle himself had been a hippie all along.

Moonlight glinted off the barrel of Merle's old ten-gauge. I looked at him, his watery eyes and toothless grin, then back down at the gun, then back at Merle. He was free and easy and living off the land like the hippies wanted to do. But Merle was no hippie. Merle was dangerous, is what Merle was.

* * *

“Merle is jumpier than usual,” Beard said, when we got back to the car.

“He’s crazy,” McNaught said.

We passed the jar around.

“Fuckin’ Merle is going to kill some hippie I bet,” Beard said. “They’ll find one out in the woods somewhere shot to hell one of these days soon. I’d put money on it.”

“Bob hates the hippies,” Murph said from the back. He was talking about his step dad, Bob Grant, the owner of the *Illinois Valley News*. “It would be okay with him if they all got taken out and shot.”

I didn’t say anything. I was thinking of Sara, remembering the dream. I saw us up on Sucker Creek fishing. Then I saw us lying in the sand together. I wondered if Milcalf had been out to get the runaway.

“Let’s go,” I said. “I gotta get back to the dance.”

“Fuck the dance, Reese” Beard said. “And fuck that bitch.”

“Fuck her,” I said. “I’m not going back for her.”

“Fuck no. Don’t go back to her.”

I flagged that away. “That’s not what I mean.”

“You don’t know what the fuck you mean. You’re fucked up Reese. Hey, I’m not putting you down. We’re buds, guy. We’ve known each other a long time.”

“Okay, but that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t even know what we’re talking about. What are we talking about?”

McNaught laughed at that. “Yeah, what the fuck? You guys don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Shut the fuck up Naught-head,” Beard said. “We’re having a serious conversation.”

“I need to help the band,” I said.

“Those pricks?” Beard said.

“Fucking right,” I said.

“Okay, we’re going to get you back, buddy.” He started the car and backed out onto the road.

When we got to Holland we saw car lights on the loop. The Yardboroughs' '59 Pontiac pulled in and stopped on our passenger side. They shared the Pontiac between them and it was a piece of shit. They'd blocked up the rear suspension and cut the wheel wells out with a hack saw to fit a pair of big cheater slicks, which was bullshit because the engine wouldn't turn them over in first gear on dry pavement.

Beard leaned in my direction so he could see out my window. McNaught and Murph got quiet in the back.

"Yardbirds," Beard hollered out the window.

"Fuck you fucker," Richard said out the passenger window.

Edwin said something to Richard that I couldn't make out. Richard said, "Edwin says he bets you been out to Merle's. Ain't that right?"

"Could be," Beard said. "What are you so smiley about?"

Edwin said something to Richard again. "Edwin says never you mind that, we'll smile all we want."

Sure. Just a couple of happy-go-lucky guys. They'd both flunked their induction physicals. They said it was because of flat feet and pretended to be upset about it.

"Does Edwin do all your talking for you?" Beard said.

"Yeah," Richard said. "And Edwin says 'fuck you'."

Richard and Edwin laughed. The Pontiac rocked on its suspension springs. I wondered how long this was going to take. I needed to get back to the dance.

"I know Edwin says *fuck you*," Beard said, being good-natured about it. "But what do you say, dickhead?"

"Fuck you," Richard said.

Beard shook his head. "What a moron," he said, just to me.

Edwin appeared in the passenger window. "How's your pinball game, Reese?"

"Fuck you," I said. You had to be an asshole or they'd take it the wrong way.

“I get a hold of you,” Edwin said, “your fancy footwork won’t do you no good. You’ll have to fight like a white man.”

“What makes you think you’d get hold of me?” I said. I decided to leave the *before I kicked your ass* out of it. Also the part about *I wouldn’t suffocate, I’d die of the stink*.

“Pass that hooch over here,” Edwin said.

“Fuck that,” I said to Beard. “Let’s go.” But I knew he wouldn’t just drive away. That wouldn’t be polite.

“Pour some into that cup on the floor,” Beard said to me. “Not too much.”

I put about six shots in the cup and passed it out to Richard. Edwin revved his engine and pulled away, leaving a trail of oil smoke in the direction of the Powells.

“What a couple of dumb shits,” Beard said. “I’d have given them more if they’d asked nice.”

“Fucking assholes,” McNaught said. Bolder now that they were gone.

“Assholes,” Murph chimed in.

“Fuck off,” Beard said. “You didn’t pay for it.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

“We’re going,” Beard said. “What were they so smiley about, I wonder?”

Chapter 9

The Holland Loop would have taken us over Tycker Creek and on back to the highway, but at the intersection to Dick George Road, Beard pulled a sudden, hard left. “What are you doing?” I said.

“Gas,” Beard said.

Dick George was long and narrow with fields on each side broken here and there by stretches of brush and trees. There were no side roads or houses at all until you got past Sucker Creek. Beard goosed it until we crossed Sucker, then slowed and started looking for a driveway.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Slow down.” I wouldn’t have noticed it was a driveway if I hadn’t been looking for one. The berry briars hadn’t been trimmed back and the entry was narrow and hard to see. I almost missed the mailbox, which was nearly covered in brush. “Right there,” I said. “Turn in.”

Beard turned and quickly doused the lights. “Fuckin’ berry briars better not scratch my car,” he said. There was just room for the Impala to slip between the thicket on each side of the drive. Beard stopped and cut the engine.

As my eyes adjusted to the moonlight I began to get a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. There were two cars—one small and one big—parked in front of a house. The people were still up because there was light in the windows. Not steady light but flickering light. The house sat at a slant, like its foundation framing had partly collapsed. I recognized the outline of an old baler blade and tractor tire on the far side of the big car, which was maybe a Caddie. Definitely a Caddie—mid-fifties—and on its far side, darker and harder to see, was a Volkswagen Bus. I knew where we were. This had to be the 520 house that Milcalf and Curly were talking about. My throat contracted and I swallowed back a lump of rusty-tasting bile.

“We’ve cruised by here in the daylight,” McNaught said. “I never even knew there was a house back here.”

Murph sat up, suddenly alert. “They’re burning candles.”

“Candles,” McNaught repeated behind me.

“This is no good,” I said. “Too many people. Pull back out.”

Beard leaned forward, peering hard through the Impala’s windshield. “You know what that is?” he said.

“Fuck it,” I said. “Too many people. Too out in the open. Bad idea. Let’s find another car.”

He leaned back in the seat again, hitting the wheel with the sides of his fists. “That’s them goddamned hippies.”

Fuck.

McNaught came up snickering and pounding on the back of my seat.

“Stop hitting my car, dickhead,” Beard said.

“What do you think they’re doing in there?” McNaught said.

“Probably on dope,” Beard said.

“Who cares?” I said “They could just be brushing their teeth and getting ready for bed.”

Beard slugged me in the shoulder, holding it there and burying his face in the crook of his elbow to muffle his laughter.

I pretended to laugh myself. I said, “Let’s go.”

We sat staring at the house, at the dim flicker in the windows.

“Newspaper heading,” Murph said. “Local Boys Caught Partying with Dope Addict Hippies. Hippies Half Crazy on Old Man Merle’s Moonshine.”

That cracked Beard up again. “They could be having an orgy right now,” he said. “Fact, that’s probably what they are doing.”

“Hell yeah,” McNaught said.

“Listen to him,” Beard said. “The pervert likes that idea.”

“Hey, fuck off,” McNaught said.

“Shut up and pass that jug,” Beard said.

“We can’t get gas here,” I said. “No cover. It’s too light out. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“How come you’re so jumpy all of a sudden, Reese?” Beard said.

“I’m not jumpy,” I said. I shut up, seeing Sara’s face in my mind, her smile when I wiped the rock off for her. My own face felt hot. “It’s just—they’re awake in there. Anybody could come out.”

The reasons were weak. We’d stolen gas before in worse situations. I needed to think.

Beard rubbed his chin, staring at the flickering lights from the hippies’ window. He reached for the jug. “You can bet we’d look good to them hippie women,” Beard said.

“Yeah,” McNaught said.

“Not you, Naught-head. I’m talking about me and Reese.”

“Some big old hippie come out and kick your ass,” McNaught said.

“No way,” Beard said. “Ain’t no such thing as a ass-kicking hippie.”

We were miles from my place by road, but I *could* cut east on foot and follow the river. That would be a lot shorter but rough going in the dark. And by this time tomorrow every fucking guy in the valley would think I was afraid of hippies. Or that I was a hippie lover. Which would be worse? I licked my fat lip where Bo had tagged me. My tongue was swollen and dry.

“He’s right,” I said. “Hippies are just people. Could be ass-kicking hippies same as there’s chickenshit hippies.”

“Can’t be ass-kicking hippies,” Murph said. “That would be a contradiction in terms.”

Beard twisted around. “A contra what in what?”

Or push it the other way. Get it over with. We’d have the gas and I could still get back to the dance. Why would the hippies see us if we were quiet about it? I took hold of the door handle. My throat tightened and I tasted the rusty hooch-bile.

“A contradiction in terms,” Murph said.

“Yeah, well you do and you clean it up,” Beard said.

I pulled up on the handle.

“Careful of them briars on my paint,” Beard said.

“If we’re going to do this,” I said, opening the door gently, “let’s do it.”

Beard got the hose and tank and squeezed between the car and the briars. We slunk over to the Cadillac first. I unscrewed the cap and stuck the hose in all the way. Putting the other end in my mouth, I pumped my cheeks until I tasted the gas, then lowered the hose down to the can and spit. A trickle came out and then stopped. I tried it again, making sure the hose was all the way in, but it was no good.

“Fucker’s too empty,” I whispered. “I’m getting air in the hose.”

Beard picked up the can and hose and stepped over to the bus.

“Let’s just get out of here,” I said. “These Kraut tanks ain’t big enough to piss in.”

“Fuck that,” Beard said. He took the cap off and got the siphon started.

I looked up. The stars were clustered up even tighter than they were earlier. I looked at the hippie house—at the door, and at the flickering light from the windows.

When the can was full, Beard dropped the hose, letting gasoline run onto the ground. I pulled the hose out of the tank and headed back toward the Impala.

“Leave the hose,” Beard whispered. “I’m going to put this gas in and get some more.”

“No,” I said.

Beard set the can down. “All right then, you pussy. We’ll go. First though—”

He turned back to the bus and went for his fly. He was going to piss in Joe and Nicki’s tank.

I dropped the hose and lunged at him, slamming him into the car.

“What the fuck, Reese?” He turned and shoved me back, his dick still flopping out of his pants. “You almost made me piss on myself.”

I shoved him against the car again. “Put your dick away, sonofabitch,” I whispered. “We ain’t doing this.”

He shoved his dick in his pants and zipped. “Fuck you,” he said, poking me hard in the chest.

“No, fuck you,” I said, poking him back.

The front door of the hippie house swung open and we both dove for the ground. The silhouette of a big hippie man filled the doorway, the candlelight flickering at his back. Right away I knew it was Hippie Jim. He walked out into the yard, not looking our way, but up at the stars. He turned around and around, staring up. He stopped and stood and then reversed his direction. Still looking up he opened the fly of his baggy shorts, worked his pecker out, and began to piss. He looked to be holding it with both hands, the way you'd hold a fire hose, and as he pissed and turned, and turned and pissed you could make out the long, arching, stream glistening in the moon and starlight.

When Hippie Jim was through and had gotten himself re-situated in his shorts, he started back. But suddenly he turned around and stared hard in the direction of Beard's Impala, sitting under the dark canopy of briars twenty yards away. He took four steps toward it and stopped and stood there, looking. I'd had a doe do that to me once—come out of some cover with some other does and fawns, walk right up to me and stare, come closer, stare again, ten feet away, like she'd never seen a human being before. When she figured out I wasn't a tree, she jumped twelve feet in the air and bolted down the slope.

Hippie Jim turned and went back into the house.

We sprinted for the Impala, Beard carrying the gas can. I left the hose. The trunk was open and he put the can in and closed it. We were both in the car by the time the hippies all started out the front door.

"Fuck," Beard said. "I scratched the shit out myself."

"Drive," I said.

Beard turned the key and revved the engine. He had his hand on the gear shift but he didn't put it into reverse. He goosed the throttle twice all the way to the floor and the full-race pistons backfired through the chrome headers like a gun going off.

"What the fuck, Jerry. Let's go," I said.

"Relax, Reese. It's just hippies."

"Fuckin' pull out, goddamn it," I said.

They were coming across the yard. Laurel, Hippie Jim, Geoff. Sara, Nicki, Tina and a woman I didn't recognize —the Dana woman I figured. I tried to find Joe but I couldn't see him anywhere.

I heard McNaught and Murph click their backdoor locks.

“Go,” I yelled.

“What the fuck, Reese? I don't believe this? You're afraid of some fuckin' hippies.” He looked over and glared at me, his face scrunched up with disgust. “You fuckin' chickenshit.” He spit it out like it was making him sick. He turned the lights on and the hippies stopped ten yards in front of the car, shielding their eyes from the glare. I couldn't see Laurel or Hippie Jim. I heard a car door slam, the Caddie, though I couldn't see it either in the glare of the headlights.

“Hey, why don't you leave us alone?” Geoff yelled.

“Don't you have something better to do?” This was Nicki.

Sara stood resting her weight on one leg, one hand on her hip, the other shielding her eyes from the light. “Hey,” Sara said, “This is private property. We're trying to *live* here.”

The other woman took three strides toward us. “Get the fuck out of here, assholes.”

“Hey, why don't you go back to California,” Beard yelled through his window as he started to shift into reverse. The new tranny was still tight. Beard revved, and double clutched, and just as he did that, Hippie Jim and Laurel came into the light again. Hippie Jim held up two fingers in a V. “Peace,” he said. He raised his other hand and I saw the black shape of a gun.

I ducked down and there was the short, loud pop of a medium caliber pistol, like a .38, and with it the dull, metallic thud and rip of a bullet smashing through metal. I felt the vibration of it through the seat—felt it in my ass, and spine, and belly.

Things slowed down then. I heard Nicki's voice—“Oh my God, stop.” And I heard my own, though I don't know what I said, mixed with the other voices and sounds inside and outside the car, a jarring mixture of voices, and yelling, and wide-

eyed faces, and the sickening sound of the new tranny's gears grinding the shit out of the Peterson syncro-mesh as Beard tried frantically to get the thing into reverse.

I saw my chance and took it, throwing the door open and diving from the car—the sharp, gouging prickers on my arms and face. My head tucked between my elbows, I drove backwards through the brush until I was free of it, and rolled, and came up in a crouch. I ran, not knowing what direction I was going, running blind, anywhere away from the crazy hippie with the gun. I found darkness and hit the dirt, and turned around.

The Impala lurched backward, then brodied suddenly around, gravel banging the pan from the reverse spin of the tires, and smashed rear-end first through the blackberry thicket. The open door slammed shut. The car sat broadside to the hippies, engine revving, gears grinding. I waved my hands to yell just as Hippie Jim raised his arm again and shot, and the gun blast and the bullet ripping metal drowned out my holler and nobody turned around, and there was the grinding of the new tranny's gears again, and then the car lurched forward, scraping and dragging out of the berry briars, causing the hippies to scatter. I ducked back into the shadows and found myself in an alleyway between the house and a shed.

Hippie Jim's gun arm hung loose at his side. I expected him to raise it again as Beard spun and brodied backward out to the road. I got a mental picture of Murph and McNaught slumped over dead in the back of the car in a pool of gore. When Beard finally got out to the road he floored it, popping the clutch, and squalling for a quarter mile.

And just like that it was quiet again. The burned rubber smell from Beard's cheater slicks wafted across the hippies' yard.

“Owwweeeeeeyyeeeahhhhhhhh!” Laurel said. He squirreled around in the yard, sending up a spray of dirt and dust with the heels of his motorcycle boots. He tilted his head back and shouted at the moon: “Do *not* fuck with Hippie Jim.”

“Oh God,” Nicki said. She walked around in circles, beating the sides of her head. “Oh God.”

“That wasn't too cool,” Sara said, her voice shaking a little.

Tina plopped down cross-legged in the dirt and began to sob.

“Put that gun away, Jim,” the Dana woman said. She had her hands on her hips. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused them now? What is Joe going to say?”

Laurel looked down and scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot. “Aw, don’t worry, Dane, Hippie Jim wouldn’t hurt nobody.” He looked from his feet over to Hippie Jim. “You didn’t hurt nobody, did you Jim?”

They waited. Hippie Jim stood with his gun arm hanging loose at his side.

“Jim?” Laurel said again. “Jim? You didn’t hurt nobody, did you?”

“Just their feelings, maybe,” Hippie Jim said.

“Just their feelings, maybe,” Laurel said, doubling over.

“Oh thank God,” Nicki said over Laurel’s laughter.

I lay back against the wall of the hippie house, feeling a warm, weak numbness flow from my belly out through my arms and legs.

“Just a little body shop work on that Impala is all they’ll need,” Laurel said calming down some but still sputtering and laughing. “Hells bells, that’s a nice piece of machinery too. What was that, Jim, a ’61?” or ’62?”

“’61,” I mumbled to myself.

“’61,” Hippie Jim said.

“Joe had a ’palla,” Laurel said. “A ’58, before he turned Guru. That used to be his street machine. That car chewed up everything in Alhambra.”

“I ’member,” Hippie Jim said. “I was just a little kid. But I ’member.”

Laurel walked out onto Dick George and spread his legs across the yellow line.

“Cocksuckers,” he said to the deserted road.

“Yeah,” Hippie Jim said.