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HOLLOW MAN

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Inquiries should be addressed to
Seventh Street Books
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228
VOICE: 716–691–0133
FAX: 716–691–0137
WWW.SEVENTHSTREETBOOKS.COM

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To my brother, Richard.
I will always be grateful for your belief in me
and your support all these years.
I love you very much.
And, sooner rather than later,
I shall see you on the slopes . . .

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“Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death’s other kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men . . .”

—“The Hollow Men” by T. S. Eliot

CHAPTER ONE

CACTUS LAND

My parents' lawyer called with the news as I climbed out of my car, our conversation a hesitant hopscotch of words until we caught up to the slight delay that comes with international calls. His voice seemed thinned out by the distance between us, me in a downtown garage in Austin, Texas, him in his small village in England.

Or perhaps the quaver in his voice came from what he had to tell me. The news, of course, wasn't good. People don't make long-distance calls to strangers for anything but the bad, and so he cleared his plummy little throat and told me that my parents were dead. Killed yesterday, on the family farm.

"I'm frightfully sorry," he said.

I thought at first he must be joking, or mistaken. But English solicitors don't play cruel practical jokes, and they certainly don't make mistakes like this. Which meant that my mum and dad, both of them, were really dead and had been since yesterday. Dead when I went to bed last night, dead when I got up this morning, dead when I was deciding how many tacos I wanted for breakfast. I didn't know what to say, and when I tried to speak, nothing but a croaking came out, so I stayed silent.

"There was a big storm," he explained. "The next morning your parents went for a walk to see if there was any damage, trees blown over, that sort of thing. Your father stepped on a downed power line." My mum, he said, raced over to help without realizing what had happened, and reached for her husband's hand one last time.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, “I’m sure this is quite a . . .” He couldn’t very well say *shock*, but it was the right word.

“Thank you for letting me know,” I said. I closed my car door behind me and kept the phone to my ear.

“You’re probably wondering about . . . the farm, all the practical stuff.”

I wasn’t, of course. I was struggling to bring up a clear picture of my parents. It’s a funny thing that when you’ve not seen people for a decade, even people you love and who love you, their faces seem to quiver in your mind, blurring in and out. I stood there in the garage, a block of sunlight creeping toward my toes, and I simply couldn’t bring up a clear image of them.

But Craig Whitfield, Esquire, didn’t know that. He was like so many English people of his generation and class: welcoming the busy necessities so they could blanket those awkward emotions that one was supposed to experience weakly, and express not at all.

“Not the best news there, either, I’m afraid,” he was saying. “You see, farming isn’t what it was twenty years ago. The new, open Europe has been good for everyone except farmers—can’t compete, and the subsidies are a fraction of what they used to be. As a result, I’m afraid your father picked up a spot of debt along the way. More than a spot, quite frankly. The land is worth something, but some of the larger fields he’d already sold off and was leasing back.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.” I didn’t know that because I hadn’t spoken to my parents in many years.

“I’m the executor of the will, so I’ll have more information in a week or so, once everything’s tallied up.”

“What about the funeral arrangements?”

“They didn’t want one. You know them—they weren’t religious in any way and didn’t believe in making a fuss over the dead. They have identical wills, which say they want to be cremated and their ashes spread in the back meadow. No service, no memorial.”

Just gone.

My mind held a picture of them now, a little fuzzy but safely created and tucked away, high on a shelf but visible for when I wanted to see it. My father thin and weathered, an unruly flop of hair his only departure from a life of order and logic. My mother just as wiry, a pretty lady when she made the effort, but a woman of the country, just as hardy and ready to work as her husband.

I struggled for something to say, wondering what I *ought* to say to a stuffy English solicitor bearing bad tidings. I didn't really know even though my mind was working overtime, processing all he'd told me, but I knew that I didn't want this call to end, not yet. It couldn't end because then I'd be left holding a phone in the gathering heat of a Texas summer morning, and everything would be the same as yesterday, except my parents would be dead. This moment, this call, it was too brief to herald the obliteration of the people who'd conceived, raised, and eventually exiled me.

But I had nothing to ask. I knew how they'd died, and I knew the farm would disappear into the debt hole they'd created; and with them and it gone, all connections were severed. Just a final "tally up" from Craig Whitfield, Esquire, probably no more than an e-mail letting me know precisely how worthless my inheritance was.

"Right," I said. "No funeral. That makes sense for them, I guess. Do I need to come over there for anything?"

"No," he said, a little too hurriedly. "I'll spread their ashes, it's what they wanted. I'll take care of all the paperwork, the legal mumbo-jumbo, and send you a copy of the wills. Like I said, I don't know that there'll be much—we'll have to have an estate sale to take care of the bills. There's a guitar, though, your dad's old one that he wanted you to have. You play?"

"I do. Prosecutor by day, musician by night."

"Splendid. You'll appreciate the guitar, then."

"Absolutely. Thanks again." I stood there in the shadows of the garage, the stale smell of urine and dust coming into focus as Mr. Whitfield's presence receded.

“Yes, you’re very welcome.” His voice softened, as if emotion was allowed after all, or a measure of sympathy anyway. “And my condolences, Dominic, it’s all quite a shame.”

Indeed. My parents had been electrocuted to death, and even though I’d not seen them in a long time, they’d finally abandoned me permanently, irrevocably, taking into oblivion with them the house I’d been born in, the fields I’d played in, and the woods I’d explored for my most formative years. So yes, at that moment I tended to agree with Craig Whitfield, Esquire, that it was all quite a shame.



I put the phone in my pocket and stared out into the sunlight, perched on the hood of my car, wondering whether to go home, go to England, or do what my parents would have done: carry on with a stiff upper lip. They’d done that after I left, got on with their lives while allowing for the occasional parental exploit, a Christmas or birthday card. Eventually, like the missives from a senile grandparent, the cards stopped arriving. I didn’t mind as much as I ought to have, just because I knew what my parents were like and I knew that day would come. It wasn’t born of callousness, either, just practicality. Logic. What would an estranged son want with a birthday card from someone he’s not seen in years? Exiling me wasn’t an act of callousness, either, though it’s easy to see it that way, pitch it as one. As much as anything, it was a way of saving me from something I’d done, something that could have had much worse consequences than a new life in America.

It happened when I was sixteen years old, on a foggy morning in the English village of Weston, when I mistook the florid features of a local man for a rising pheasant and shot him in the face.

The man died the next day, and as usual I thought I could atone for my misdeed by writing a song. My family called me cold-blooded, and when I tried to explain some of the things the man had

done, they wouldn't listen, they didn't care, as if death erased the man's own misdeeds. It wasn't the first time they'd failed to believe me, but it was the most serious, and the last. Instead of writing my song, I was shipped to wealthy and disinterested relatives in Texas. There, I lived out my youth in a military school where I hung on to my accent for dear life and carried a guitar everywhere I went. I stayed in Texas when I graduated and my most prized possession remained my guitar, but I quickly bought a gun and loved it enough to make my guitar sing with jealousy. It was a semiautomatic Smith & Wesson, sexy but not as beautiful as the antique Purdey shotguns I'd left behind in England. The shotguns. When I was on the phone with the lawyer, I'd wanted to ask for them, ask him what would become of them. But the thought seemed crass. Hell, maybe my father already sold them, after what happened.

In all other ways, and as I've done ever since I came to America and came to know myself, I donned the local camouflage and learned to fit in: I kicked my car door closed with a cowboy boot every day and strolled into work with a breakfast taco in each hand. After a few years, I thought I was free and clear of my tragic past but, as they say, accidents happen in threes.

The first one came with that pull of a trigger and exiled me to Texas. The second one was a slower kind of disaster that hid itself inside a normal Thursday, a day that started out like any other. A slow-burn disaster that, step by step, twisted my future out of trajectory. Not as quickly as the blast of a gun but in a way that, much later, made me think I should have seen it coming.

A car passed me, adding its fumes to the rancid air in the garage, and I wanted out of there. Not to go home, I didn't need to spend the day in maudlin reverie. Nor was I needed in England. I'd do what I could to honor my parents and behave the way they'd hope for, the way they'd behave and expect me to. I'd go to work.

I opened the front door and retrieved my 9mm from the glove compartment and tucked it into its cloth bag. A second wave of oil

and piss hit me, and I held my breath while I locked my gun and guitar in the trunk, as I did every day. This garage was for county employees only, but defendants at the neighboring courthouse used it without compunction, which should have surprised no one, but seemed to. As a result, I threw furtive looks over my shoulder as I stashed the guitar case and felt that daily twinge of hope it'd be there when I finished work. I'd asked to have cameras put up in the garage (I had a thing for cameras and surveillance, having won some of my biggest trials because critical moments were caught on tape), but neither the county nor the city wanted to pay for them.

They went everywhere with me, the gun and the guitar, everywhere except the office. Even though I prosecuted murderers and rapists for a living, my boss had seen fit to ban us from packing heat while at work. Our offices were in the same building as the courts, so he was right that the place was stuffed to the gills with cops and sheriffs but, for an Englishman living in Texas, not being allowed to carry my sidearm was a grave disappointment.

I took the stairs to exit the parking deck, having learned my lesson about the unreliable lift on two separate occasions. To my right sat a small park, a hollow of dead grass and bare earth with a surrounding ribbon of sidewalk that guided men and women in suits toward the criminal courthouse. Sitting catty-corner to the courts, the park was littered with the unmoving bodies of the homeless, a dozen or more lying still in the gathering heat. It was the first of July, and soon these men, and a few women, would rise like zombies to begin the daily ritual of plodding across the worn, brown grass to their favorite tree to bag space for the day. As the sun rose and normal people sought shelter in air-conditioned offices and malls, these people shuffled their packs and ragged bodies, creeping in tiny circles like the shadows of a sundial in their attempts to stay cool.

I stood in the shade of the parking lot and watched, something I often did. Had always done. My best friend back home had once come across me—I think I was about nine years old—sitting in a

tree in the school playground. My back to the trunk, legs dangling as I watched my classmates roam around beneath me. He'd likened me to a leopard, alert, solitary, a cat of prey sitting high on my branch while the world passed by.

A chorus of voices drew my attention to a row of colorful media trucks that lined the curb around the courthouse plaza, their engines humming in anticipation of action, antennas spiking from their roofs and wires spilling from their sides. The reporters, called *talent* for no reason I could figure out, were getting ready for the morning's live broadcast, coiffing their hair and powdering their noses. A quick scan showed they were all male.

I moved toward the news vans, and when I got close, I spotted Patrick Stephens. He'd covered my last murder trial and given me some airtime when the jury came back with a guilty verdict. I liked him more than the other reporters who, with their serious faces and fake importance, were like car salesmen always looking for an angle. Not Patrick. He was like a friendly Irishman who'd buy you pints at the pub and expect nothing in return except a joke or two. He was red-haired, roly-poly, twinkly-eyed, and the only person I knew who looked ten pounds lighter on camera.

"Hey, it's Dominic, the musical British prosecutor," he said. "You look frowny, what's wrong?"

"You know, the usual. Shitty news arrives early in the morning just so it can screw up your whole day."

"That's why we have a morning show," he grinned. "Care to unload on a friend?"

"When I find one, I will." My smile was supposed to be friendly, to show I was joking, but I expect it looked as insincere as it felt. "Also, I'm a musician, not musical. And I'm English, not British. How would you like me to call you Canadian?"

"Just fine. I'm from Ottawa."

"I feel like I should know that. Eh?"

"Hilarious. But I've been in Texas ten years, so don't sweat it."

He interrupted a stroke of his comb to look over at the growing crowd.

“Why are you chaps here?” I asked.

“Covering the Wilbert trial,” he said. “Closing arguments today. Should be good.”

“Yeah, any time a kid gets stabbed it’s awesome.”

The Wilbert trial. The man looked like a librarian but had stabbed his ex-girlfriend thirty-six times with a knife he took from her kitchen. When her five-year-old ran screaming to his momma’s side, Wilbert stabbed him four times. Momma died at the scene, but the boy lived, which, if nothing else, seemed like poor planning. Leaving a witness, and all.

“You know what I mean.” He poked me in the chest with his comb. “And don’t act all high and mighty—we both make money from other people’s tragedies.”

“Except I do something positive about them, whereas you guys turn them into gossip.”

“I’ll remember that next time you ask for some airtime.”

“*Touché.*” I looked toward the courthouse but the main entrance was out of view. The building was U-shaped, the left wing being the jail, the right wing housing the admin buildings, and the entrance at the end of a walkway that ran between them. The protestors filled the walkway that led to the main doors. “So, not here to report on the protest?”

“We’ll cover it,” he said. “Your office rarely seeks the death penalty, so this lot doesn’t usually come out.”

“Well, have fun. I have a boss waiting for me.”

Before I could move off, a chorus of shouts exploded from the courthouse entrance. We couldn’t see what was happening, but the shouting got louder and several deputies dropped their cigarettes and started running toward the noise. The reporters finished patting their noses in double-time, and the cameramen hoisted their equipment onto their shoulders and headed into battle.

By the time I got there a line of brown-shirted sheriff's deputies had blocked the passageway to the front doors. Behind them, eight more deputies knelt on the wriggling bodies of four men. The TV cameras were trained on the melee but it wasn't the subdued protestors that had their attention.

The glass front of the courthouse, including its two enormous doors, dripped red, the crimson liquid pooling on the sidewalk and creeping out toward the crowd. On the ground, a dozen Mason jars lay cracked or broken, glinting on the white concrete like busted teeth lying amid unfurling tongues of red.

I walked up to the line of officers, aiming for one I recognized from the courtroom. I covertly checked the tag on his chest.

"Hey, Bateman, what the hell's going on?"

"Protestors," he said.

"No shit. I hope that's paint."

"Nope, it's blood."

"Delightful. Cow or pig?"

"I wish." He looked over his shoulder at the mess. "Theirs."

"The protestors'?"

"Yep." Bateman nodded. "One of the assholes said they've been storing it up since the beginning of the trial, about twenty of them. Taking a pint here and there, sticking it in the fridge. They showed up with jars of it, just started flinging the stuff all over the front."

"Jesus. That's disgusting."

"It's a friggin' health hazard, is what it is. We got the ones who did the actual throwing, though." He grinned and thumbed toward the four in custody. "The stupid fuckers were too weak to run."

More bad planning. "Anti-death penalty nuts?"

"Right." He mimicked them while pulling a pouty face. "If the state can spill blood in our name, we can spill our own."

I could smell it now, a metallic odor that clung to the air and started to coat the inside of my nostrils. It was 9:15 a.m. on the first day of July, and every day of June had been over ninety degrees. I

could almost hear the flies swarming toward us, rising up from the dumpsters and roadkill, passing word to each other about the delicacy that soaked the courthouse like gravy, human blood ready to simmer and bake in the heat, a once-in-a-lifetime treat not to be missed.

“Who’s cleaning that mess up?” I asked.

“They’re sending a hazmat team. Who knows how many of those fuckers have HIV or hep-C or some shit.”

“So the courthouse is shut down?” My voice rose with hope.

“Closed to the public. They’re letting the lawyers in through the judge’s entrance. No day off for you.”

“Great. Any chance some others will come back and splatter the judge’s entrance before I get there?”

Bateman laughed, the cracking sound in his throat telling me he was due for his morning cigarette. “They’re guarding it pretty good, so I’m guessing you’re out of luck.”

I moved away, pushing through the crowd. As I reached its outer edge, I noticed several people looking back and forth from the scene to the bus stop across the street. Two women stood there, apparently disinterested in the chaos and confusion, which told me they were probably involved. One of them was Hispanic, and she’d squeezed herself into jeans and a T-shirt several sizes too small, giving her a bulge of fat that surrounded her waist like a ship’s life preserver.

The other girl turned to face me, and my throat closed up. She was strikingly pale, with wide-spaced eyes that returned my gaze without blinking. She wore no makeup that I could see, but her brown hair tumbled onto her shoulders with perfect Lauren Bacall elegance. Best of all, she wore a tight, lime-green dress that shimmered as it hugged her figure, catching the light and my eye like a hypnotist’s crystal. China-white legs curved out from the hem of her dress, down to delicate ankles and a pair of red heels that were brighter, and even more startling, than the pools of blood she’d just left behind.

With everything that had happened that morning, she was something glorious to hold on to, a beautiful flash of lightning in a doom-laden sky, and I couldn't tear my eyes away. I stood and stared until a bus came between us, breaking the spell and taking her away in a roar of hot diesel fumes. I couldn't see her through the tinted windows of the bus, but I stared at each one just in case, and I hoped like a teenager that she was peering back at me.

When the bus had gone, I stood in the quiet street for a full minute, wondering what had just happened. Not love at first sight, I wasn't capable of that, but nonetheless a childlike rush of excitement that I waited to analyze, that I let myself enjoy before dissecting it into rationalities that made sense to me, labeling it with worlds like *curiosity*, *surprise*, *interest*, and the more carnal and justifiable *lust*.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRICKLY PEAR

Puzzled and oddly chastened, I made my way to the judge's entrance, punching numbers and swiping my way through three security doors. As they thumped shut behind me, they pushed the girl in green from my mind and I made mental adjustments to begin the routine of the day.

My job at the DA's office wasn't always the most exhilarating, but the pay was decent and at least kept my head and budget above water, though barely. Today I was going to cross swords with a recalcitrant witness, the kind of thug I took great pleasure in putting behind bars. Normally this idiot would be the one holding the gun, but for this case he'd been one of the victims. He was recalcitrant in that he didn't want to testify in the upcoming trial, and I needed him to.

That was the one part of my job I did relish, the part that fed the performer in me and made my day-to-day acting a benefit, not a burden: the theater of a jury trial. It began with the drama of opening statements, when the story of the crime was first revealed to the jurors, twelve men and women twitchy with anticipation, eager to soak up my words. Then came the witness examinations, the orchestrated reinforcement of my opening statements, when the jurors would nod along and think to themselves, *Yes, the prosecutor said it happened that way, we should believe him.*

Occasionally there would be cross-examination, when a half-witted defendant would take the stand and try to lie his way out of

a conviction, and those moments, not just for me but for any prosecutor, could be sublime. The gentle questions that would begin to unravel his story, without him even knowing, then the flourish of a question, asked with eyes on the jury, not the dirtbag defendant, and a slow turn to watch him squirm in his seat as he realized the game was over. A game for me, of course, not so much for him.

And finally, the closing arguments. Most lawyers claim that jurors are decided on a verdict by the time we stand to close. But I never believed that, and anyway I had more than persuasion in mind when I argued my case. I was handing those who agreed with me the tools, weapons even, to challenge any jurors who wanted to acquit. In Austin at least, criminal juries were more than willing to set free an obviously-guilty man on some meaningless, mindless argument made by a desperate defense attorney. So I shot those down the first chance I got, and always reminded the jury that a victim, as well as a defendant, awaited their verdict. *Remember the victim*, echoing in my softest, most heartfelt voice, the moment when, if I could cry, tears would prick at my eyes and spread to the weakest, most feeling of the jurors. It was a badge of honor to make a juror cry, and I did it whenever I could.

Ah, yes, each trial was a play in three acts, with the requisite tears and histrionics, and just occasionally a courtroom fistfight. Usually an unhappy defendant punching out his lawyer, and no one much minded that.

The sight of Michael Cherry standing outside my office captured and clarified my drifting mind, the look on his face hauling me into the present and telling me all was not well.

I called the man “Cherry,” everyone here did, and I suspected his mother had done the same. Each of the seven courts had four prosecutors assigned, and he was the most experienced attorney in ours, which made him our chief and my immediate boss. He was a longtime prosecutor who dressed like a 1950s model, tailored in his tweeds and double-breasted worsted suits. He was about four inches

taller than the next tallest prosecutor, which was me at six feet, and he had the stooping, stalking gait of a giant heron. Everyone liked the guy, me included. He was unfailingly polite to all of us, and when you talked to him, his hooded eyes would settle patiently on your face, absorbing everything, following your logic with gentle nods, his tongue flicking his lips when he spotted a flaw in your thinking. With me, he knew there was something a little off but he couldn't quite figure out what, and so, as some sort of coping mechanism, he liked to practice his sarcasm.

“Good of you to show up,” he said.

“You're welcome. How's Vicky this morning?”

He'd been talking to our secretary, Vicky, when I came in. We all did it, despite the fact that she was a one-armed and entirely legless mannequin taped to a swivel chair. Our previous secretary, Adriana, quit in a huff about something, and because we work for a governmental agency we got tired of waiting for a replacement to be hired. Truthfully, Vicky's attitude was something of an improvement on the chair's previous occupant, as was her productivity level. Some joker had covered her mouth in bright-red lipstick and then drawn a thick red line from her nostril, bleeding it artistically down her chin and into her blouse. She was, after all, originally purchased as a prop for our trials, the poor girl having been raped, robbed, and murdered more often than the gypsies under Stalin. Hence her missing limbs and her name, which was short for Victim.

“She's fine, I think. No complaints from her, anyway.”

“Good. Where's our hero?”

Maurice Darrell Griffiths, aka “Stuttering Mo,” was an eyewitness to a murder. Not one of the cool ones you see on TV, no, this was one of the classics we get in this business, a killing that warranted news coverage until someone figured out that drugs and gangs were involved. At that point it all seemed rather seedy, and pretty quickly no one gave a shit anymore. Except the family and friends of the dead guy, of course.

So it was with this case. Mo and a few other worthless members of his crowd were drinking and smoking PCP on a quiet street in East Austin when a rival moron drove up and shot one of them. I'd brought Mo in to interview him here because when I went to his house he slammed the door in my face. I figured that was for show and he might actually want to help, as long as the prying eyes of his neighbors weren't watching.

"He's not here. Let's talk in your office," Cherry said.

"That doesn't sound good. Someone bump him off overnight?"

I followed him into my office and sat behind my desk. Cherry sat opposite me in one of the chairs usually reserved for files.

"Some bad news, I'm afraid. I've had to reassign the case."

Something told me that wasn't the extent of the bad news. "Why?"

"Because someone reassigned you."

"Seriously?"

"Yes." Cherry held up a warning finger. "Now remember, you've been in this court more than three years, which is very unusual. Hardly anyone gets to stay in the same spot that long."

"Where am I going?"

"Juvenile."

"Fuck."

"Yes, I thought you'd say that."

"Did you stick up for me? Try to get me out of it?" I was annoyed, not just because of the transfer but because he didn't seem bothered enough.

"Sure. But what can I do?"

"Jesus, Cherry, I just won a friggin' cold case. One of the hardest cases we've had here for years." And by "hard" I meant a twenty-five-year-old murder case with no forensic evidence or eyewitnesses, just strands of circumstantial evidence that I connected tightly enough to get a conviction. Some in the office weren't convinced the guy was even guilty, the case was that weak. I didn't much care either way, but as I said to them, *How good am I if I can convict an innocent*

man with shitty evidence? Of course, they laughed and walked off as if I was joking.

“Yes, you did.” The way he said it switched on a light in my head.

“Shit, does that trial have something to do with my reassignment?”

Cherry held up a placating hand. “Not that I know of. It’s true that you’ve been in the news and on the TV more in the last month than our dear leader has in a year, and I’m sure he doesn’t like that, but I’m also pretty sure he doesn’t do revenge reassignments.”

“Bullshit.” I felt my hackles rising.

“Look, you think you’re immune from the way this place works? You think your floppy hair and pretty accent mean you can stay wherever you like for as long as you like?”

“No, Cherry, I think I’m one of the better trial lawyers in this office, and I think that it makes no fucking sense to take me away from prosecuting murder, rape, and robbery so I can give probation to wannabe gangbangers who smoke weed and steal sneakers from Wal-Mart.”

“Hey, corporations are people, too. Apparently.”

“Shut up, Cherry, it’s not funny. I’m better than that, I don’t want to be doing that.”

“My, we do have a high opinion of ourselves.”

“And I deserve to, don’t you think?”

“As I keep explaining, my opinion doesn’t matter.”

I knew he was right, and I liked him enough not to cuss him out anyway. “When does this move happen?” It being Thursday, I had a pretty good idea of the answer.

“Monday. Maureen Barcinski is the chief down there. I told her you’d stop by this afternoon to say hello, meet some people, and then move over by Monday.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Hey, you’ll be sharing an office with Brian McNulty. He’s a musician like you, so take your guitar.”

“OK, stop right there. First of all, Brian illegally downloads music off the Internet and burns CDs for people. That makes him a thief, not a musician. Second, I’m *sharing* an office?”

“Yes, everyone does except the chief. They don’t have much room down there.” Cherry shifted in his seat, like he wanted out of there. “One more thing, too. You’re not going to like it.”

“That surprises me. So far it’s been nothing but good news.”

“Yeah, well. Part of your docket will be handling drug cases, where the kids are sent to in-patient treatment here from other counties. Sort of an inter-county liaison.”

“Sounds awesome.”

“Thing is, that’s a state position.” He sucked in his cheeks, clearly uncomfortable. “Paid for with a state grant, rather than a regular county position like you have now.”

I sat up. “Oh, no. No. Don’t tell me—”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“A fucking pay cut?”

“A little less of the green stuff, yes.”

A vision of the girl in green popped into my head, but right then I wanted to be annoyed and didn’t appreciate the comfort, or distraction, she offered. With the stress of this conversation, of her, I barely noticed the hum that set into my hands, the twitch that on weekends made me grab my guitar just to feel the strings against my fingertips. I’d written a song about that feeling, comparing it to the shivering skin of a “cutter” or to the cold gasp of a drug user’s desperate veins. I needed the sweet relief of my guitar, but instead Cherry was still talking.

“You’ll keep your current benefit package,” he said, “including healthcare and retirement. Vacations and sick time will remain as is, too.”

“Cherry, look. I know every prosecutor has to do their bit, and these moves happen.” I leaned forward over the desk. I wanted him to know that the joking was over, that this mattered to me. “But I

just moved into a new apartment, with a roommate no less, but I have more than forty grand in school loans. I have credit-card debt and a car lease I can't get out of."

He held up placating hands. "It not that much of a pay cut. Couple hundred a month."

I clenched my fists and worked hard not to punch the desk, the wall, him. "I'm on the edge as it is. I don't have leeway to give up a couple hundred a month."

"You have your music gigs. Don't they pay?"

"No, Cherry, they don't. The going rate is a couple of free beers and a waitress passing around the tip jar."

Austin, the Live Music Capital of the world, was chock-full of musicians like me, part-timers who could play well enough but who competed for time at the smaller joints and had no hope playing at the big ones, except as an opening act. Which took luck and a crapload more exposure than a part-time soloist like me could manage. Meanwhile, the pubs and small clubs gave us stage time for tips while they cleaned up with the sale of booze. Win-win for the bars and customers, not so much for the free help, the hopeful, the dreamers like me.

"Ah, I didn't realize," Cherry said. "I'm sorry about the money thing—all of it really—but there's nothing I can do at this point."

I sat back and loosened my tie, wondering whether it was for moments like this we weren't allowed guns in the building. It crossed my mind to tell him about the phone call this morning, make him feel like a weasel for doing this to me on the day I heard my parents were dead, but I knew it wouldn't make any difference. He and I were cogs in the machine, and the machine had been pre-programmed to spit me out into juvie and didn't have the capacity to care.

"How long is this for?" I asked.

"They're trying to keep these rotations to a year, give or take a few months. A year is the goal, though." He scratched the back of his

head and squinted. “I’m not being facetious, but technically this is a promotion. As far as your résumé goes, that is. You’ll be second in command over there, under Maureen but senior to the three other juvenile prosecutors.”

“A promotion.” I needed deep breaths to stop myself from throttling the messenger. “I’ll be handling shoplifting, weed-smoking, car-breaking little punks instead of real criminals. I’ll get a pay cut and will share an office with a dork. How the fuck do I apply for a demotion?”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.” He looked up, like a hopeful child. “I gather the workload is much lighter. Less stress and all.”

“I know this isn’t your fault, Cherry, but that won’t stop me plotting your miserable death as I stare out of my window on those interminable, but low-stress, days.”

“Yes, well.” He stood and smoothed down his trousers, a tiny smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. “I suppose my demise is far from imminent then.”

“Meaning?”

“Funny thing, really. They’re all interior offices down there. You won’t have a window.”



There’s a coldness that settles around my heart when my life starts to slide in the wrong direction. It’s a physical sensation, not an emotional one. I don’t really do emotions, you see, not like most people. I can feel some of them, ones like anger, disappointment, and lust. Emotions that begin and end with me, those I can feel, but my life is generally governed by logic, reason, and manipulation. Emotions that tie me to others, like compassion, love, or even fear, those I don’t feel. I pretend to, of course, I’ve been pretending since I was a kid, and my success in life depends on me wearing the right mask at the right time.

So when Cherry walked out of my office, I wore the hangdog, poor-me face that he expected, lowering my eyes so he couldn't see the dead space in them that held visions of a knife slicing through the wrinkled skin in his neck, covering his crisp, white shirt with blood, and severing his exposed windpipe. I wanted to release that inner demon that I kept locked up and hidden away, to look the other way and feel nothing as he sought revenge for trashing the one part of my life I'd made something of, my job.

I wanted to be, just for once, the psychopath that I am.