

THE
UNWILLING

John Hart



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[permission line TK for verse "Come to the Edge"]

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Daniel Reed knew many things about ex-cops, and one of those things was that not all the *cop* died when a man quit or took early medical or got fired for smoking weed. Four years of pushing a bus station mop, and he still felt that burn beneath his collar, the prickle of skin that drew his eyes up from the slop bucket and busted tile.

He considered the young people first. They sprawled on a bench, drunk and loud, but that wasn't the problem. The families and the hippies came next, then the old men and the pregnant woman and the soldiers in uniform. Beyond the glass, the two fifteen from Raleigh idled in the bay as a dozen people waited for suitcases, old Mac sweating in the heat as he hauled them out and lined them up. Daniel had known a thousand days like it, small-city South in a country tired of war. Inevitably, his eyes found the pretty girl in the yellow dress. She was eighteen, maybe, with a shabby suitcase and leather shoes starting to split. He'd watched her, on and off, for an hour: the small walks from one wall to the next, little turns, the tilted head. At the moment, she stood unmoving, lips slightly parted.

Following her gaze, Daniel spotted the young man in a dim recess leading to the bay. Angular and lean, he stopped five feet from the double doors and stood long enough to study the people in the room. Daniel's first thought was, *Vietnam*, and not long from the war. Something about the way he stood, the awareness. When he stepped into the light, Daniel got a better look at the Zeppelin T-shirt, the cheekbones, the belt made of

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black leather, turquoise, and tarnished silver. Faded jeans brushed the tops of old boots; and when he walked past, he smelled like diesel and whiskey and tobacco. "Detective," he said; but Daniel looked away, ashamed that he was old and stoned and not a cop anymore. He waited until a swinging door flashed sunlight into the room, then asked the ticketing agent if he could please use the phone. She handed it over, and he dialed the station from long memory, requesting a detective by name.

"Just a moment, please."

Silence rolled onto the line, and Daniel watched the young man cross against traffic, breaking into a jog as he hit the final lane and a truck blew past. In the bright sunlight, he was a blade of a man: the waist, the shoulders, the angle of his jaw. He looked back once and slipped dark glasses across his eyes.

Shit, the old cop thought.

Just . . . shit.

Detective French took the call at a phone on his partner's desk. "French," he said, and listened. "That seems unlikely." He listened some more, then thanked the caller and hung up.

"Everything okay?"

French glanced at the familiar lines of his partner's face. He and Ken Burklow went back twenty years, and had few secrets between them. One was about to come out. "Jason's back in town. That was Reed, at the bus station."

"Reed's a burnout."

"Not so burned out he wouldn't know my oldest son."

Burklow leaned back in his chair, hard-faced and unhappy. "I thought Jason was still in prison."

"Halfway house in Raleigh. Seven weeks now."

"And you didn't think to tell me he was out?"

"I need to call my wife." French dialed the phone and watched emotions play across his partner's face. Sadness. Worry. Anger. "She's not answering."

"Would he go to the house?"

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“Not after the way things ended.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“He wouldn’t do that to his mother. Not after the last time.”

“You say that, but come on. Vietnam. Prison. Who knows what he’ll do. You’ve heard the stories.”

French scrubbed a palm across his face, and sighed unhappily.

Twenty-nine confirmed kills . . .

That was the story: twenty-nine in his first year.

Dialing a few more numbers, he asked his questions and hung up. “She’s not at the neighbor’s house or with either of her best friends.”

“What about Gibby, then? If Jason’s not going home . . .”

The sentence trailed off, and French thought of Gibson, his youngest son. “Gibby’s in school. He should be fine.”

“Uh-uh. Senior Skip.”

French did the math, and realized that his partner was right. Senior Skip Day had been tradition since the first year of the draft. Last three Fridays before final exams, the seniors cut school and went to the quarry south of town. Teachers looked away and so did the cops. Gibby would be there, and he *should be*, they all should. That was the thing about childhood and endings and war in some foreign fucking jungle.

“I’ll check the quarry.” Burklow stood. “That way you can look for your wife, and let her know Jason’s in town. Give her time, you know. Get her ready.”

“I should handle this myself.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Burklow shrugged into a coat, and checked his weapon. “Not even Superman can be in two places at once.”

William French was no genius, and was smart enough to know as much. He was steady and solid, a determined man who’d become a better cop than he had a right to be. It was the same with his marriage. Gabrielle was out of his league on the day they’d met, and still there on the day they’d married. He’d asked her once how someone who’d studied literature at Vanderbilt and lit up every room she entered could possibly settle for a college dropout three years into a job that might get him killed.

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She'd kissed his cheek, put a hand on his heart, and said, "Don't ever ask me that again." Three sons and thirty years later, she was still a gift—his whole life—but she'd lost one son already.

Now this . . .

He parked in front of their house, and thought, as he often did, how empty it felt. That, too, was about the war. They'd buried their oldest son, then watched his twin brother return from the same conflict only to spiral into violence, drugs, and prison. In that regard, Vietnam had killed two of their three boys, Robert with a bullet to the heart, and his brother more insidiously. Jason never talked about the things he'd done in the service of his country, but Burklow had a friend at the Department of Defense. He refused to provide details, but said once that there was *war* and there was *WAR*, and that Jason had fought the latter kind.

"Gabrielle?"

The silence inside was familiar from all the years of mourning, a large house with parts of its soul carved away. Nearing the bedroom, French heard running water, and stopped where the bathroom door hung open an inch.

"Sweetheart?"

She was in the tub and in the dark, but he could see her silhouette against the tile.

"Don't turn on the light."

He took his hand from the switch, wondering if she'd known or merely guessed. As his eyes adjusted, he saw more of her shape. Water rose to the curve of her breasts, and her arms were wrapped across her shins.

Without turning, she said, "Is he the reason you're here?"

"What do you mean?"

Her head tilted, then, and a glint showed in one of her eyes. "You haven't come home midafternoon since we were newlyweds. I'm asking if Jason is the reason you're here."

French sighed unhappily. "Who told you he's back?"

"Marion called. She saw him at the square. His hair was longer, but she knew him. She said he was pale, that prison cost him twenty pounds."

"I'm going to handle this, Gabrielle. I promise."

“Gibby will want to see him, to spend time—”

“I won’t allow that.”

“How will you stop it?”

“Gabrielle—”

“He’s dangerous, Bill. He’s a danger to our son. Don’t you see that? Can’t you feel it?”

French sighed again, and knelt by the tub. Gabrielle had tried to make room in her heart for the man Jason had become, but Jason had not made it easy for her. Heroin. Prison. The effect he had on Gibby. Before Jason’s conviction, all Gibby had wanted was to trail in his brother’s shadow, to know about the Marine Corps and war, and whether he, too, should go to Vietnam. “Listen,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you in person that Jason was back, to promise you that I’ll keep Gibson safe.”

“You think I’m silly, don’t you? A silly, overprotective woman.”

“I promise you I don’t.”

“If you were a mother, you’d understand.”

“Jason would never hurt his brother.”

“Not intentionally. Not with malice.”

She left the rest unspoken, but he understood the deeper fears, her worries about corruption, deception, dangerous ideas.

“Gibby’s not in school,” she said. “Did you know that?”

“It’s a skip day. He’ll be at the quarry with his friends. Ken is already looking for him.”

“What if Jason finds him first?”

French looked away from the fear in his wife’s eyes. Gibby was her world, and Jason was a destroyer of worlds. “I’ll go, too,” he said. “I’ll find him.”

“You do that. You bring him home.”

French stood, but didn’t leave. He pushed his hands into his pockets, and looked down on the crown of her head and the curve of a dim, damp shoulder, bits of his wife on an apron of dark water. “Sooner or later Gibson will want to see his brother.”

“Just make sure it’s later.”

“Jason was inside for two years and change. He did his time.”

“Only Gibby matters. I’m sorry, Bill, but that’s the truth.”

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“Won’t you at least talk to him?”

“To Jason?”

“Yes.”

“About what?” she asked. “Heroin?”

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The quarry means different things to different people. For me, it's about the drop. They say it's a hundred and thirty feet from the top of the cliff to the top of the water, and from the water that feels about right: the granite rising, the gray sky above that. All that sameness makes the cliff seem small, and I know what people think, floating on their backs or looking out from the narrow shore across the quarry.

I could do that.

The more they drink, the more certain they become. It's only water, they say, just a dive. How hard can it be?

But then they make the climb.

The first good ledge is sixty feet up, and people do jump from it. A few might make it to the next good ledge. Call it eighty feet. Somehow that looks twice as high as the one right below it. Those who make it all the way up tend to lean out from the waist and look downward as if somehow the laws of physics might have changed on the way up.

Seventy miles an hour when you hit the water.

Four full seconds to get there.

From thirteen stories up, the water looks like plate steel, and people remember the stories they've heard: the kid who died back in '57, the ball player who hit wrong and drove a knee through his jaw, breaking it in four places and shattering every tooth on the right side. I've seen it a hundred times. The boys go pale, and their girlfriends say, *I take it back,*

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don't do it. I'm not the only who's jumped—a few others have, too—but only one person had the balls to dive, and that was my brother.

The dead one.

"Come on, man. If you're going to do it, do it already." The voice was behind me, my oldest friend. "You know Becky's watching."

I looked into the quarry and saw Becky Collins on an inner tube a hundred feet out from the cliff. She was as small as the rest, but no one else wore a white bikini. Her head rocked back, and I thought she might be laughing. The girl beside her might be laughing, too. Around them, a collection of rafts and tubes held half the senior class. The rest were on the far side of the quarry or in the woods or passed out in any of the cars that glinted in the distance like bits of colored glass.

"Are you making this dive or not?"

I looked away long enough to catch the gleam in Chance's eyes. He was a small kid, but would fight anybody; try for any girl. "Maybe she's looking at you," I said.

"I'm not dumb enough to jump off this rock."

I wondered what that said about me. I'd jumped seven times, but never made the dive, and everyone down there knew it. I'd sworn to do it before graduation, but that was two years ago, and I'd been angry when I'd said it. "Do you think I'm stupid?" I asked.

"I think you're a rock star."

"McCartney or Jagger?"

Chance offered up a devil's grin. "That depends on if you jump or dive."

I looked away from my friend, and thought about hitting wrong at seventy miles an hour. Beneath me, people began to chant.

"Dive, dive, dive . . ."

When my brother did it, it was a swan dive drawn against a high, pale sky, and I see it still in my dreams: the way he rose and hung, and then the long fall—no breath in my lungs—and how his hands came together an instant before he struck. Only three of us were there to see it, but word of it spread.

Robert French made the dive off Devil's Ledge . . .

Did you hear?

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Can you believe it?

At the time, the world record cliff dive was only fifteen feet higher, some guy in Argentina. But this was Charlotte, North Carolina, a little place in 1967. That was five years ago, but on that day in this little city, my oldest brother became a god. People asked him why he did it and how and a thousand other questions, but only four of us knew the truth that mattered, and I dream of that part, too: the way light hit his face when it broke from the water, the eyes that looked brighter and more alive. *Let the Vietcong touch that*, he'd said; and that was the thing only a few of us knew.

Robert was going to Vietnam.

"I'm going to do it," I said.

"Bullshit."

"This time it happens."

"Go on, then."

"Becky Collins, right?"

"She'll love you forever."

I'd pictured the dive a thousand times, and it felt a lot like this: the wind in my face, the smell of heat and dust and distant rain. I rose to my toes, arms spread. "Give me a three count."

"Wait. What?"

"No talking, all right? This is hard enough as it is."

"Dude . . ."

"What?" I didn't look away from the drop.

"Dude. Seriously . . ."

Something in his voice was strange to me: a note of doubt or panic or fear. "What's the problem, Chance? We're here, right? Two weeks 'til graduation."

"Just jump, dude. Make it a jump."

"I'm sorry. What?"

"You know you can't actually do it, right? You can't make that dive." Chance looked embarrassed, turning his hands to show the palms. "I mean . . . come on. There's a pattern, right? You talk about it. You stand there. You never actually *dive*."

"But you egg me on. You tell me to do it."

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“Because I’ve never once thought you were stupid enough to actually dive. It’s thirteen stories.”

“You think I’m afraid?”

“No.”

“You don’t think I can do it?”

“I think your brother’s dead whether you do it or not.”

The color drained from my face.

Chance didn’t care. “Robert is gone, man. He won’t see the dive or pat you on the back or say, *Welcome to the club*. He’ll still be underground in that cemetery you hate. He’ll still be a dead hero, and you’ll still be a kid in high school.”

Chance was earnest and worried—a strange combination. I looked away as catcalls rose up the cliff, and someone far below yelled, *Do it, you pussy!* I found Becky Collins, a slash of brown and white. She was shading her eyes; she wasn’t yelling. “You think I’d die if I did it?”

“I know you would.”

“Robert lived.”

“Hand of God, Gibby. One in a million.”

I watched Becky, thinking of God and luck and my dead brother. The Marine Corps said he took one in the heart, and that it killed him before he felt a thing. A painless death, they said, but I didn’t buy it. “Two years ago I said I’d make the dive. I told everyone down there I’d do it.”

“You mean *that* everyone?” Chance pointed at the water, where even more kids were yelling up the cliff’s face. “You mean Bill Murphy, who told Becky to her face that you were a loser because your mom won’t let you play football anymore? You mean his lame-ass brother? Fuck that guy, too. He blew spitballs at the back of your head for pretty much all of seventh grade. What about Jessica Parker or Diane Fairway? I asked them both out, and they laughed at me. They’re not keen on you, either, by the way. They say you’re too quiet and that you’re distant and that you look too much like your dead brother. Listen, Gibs, you don’t owe anyone down there a damn thing. That crowd there, those people . . .” He pointed down. “Empty heads and bullshit and vanity. They don’t know you or want to know you. Maybe three are worth a crap, and they’re the only ones *not* yelling at you to kill yourself.”

I leaned out; saw jocks and stoners and pretty girls in mirrored shades. Most were laughing or smiling or yelling at me.

Do it . . .

Dive . . .

Dive, you chickenshit motherfucker . . .

They'd rafted up for the best view: a jigsaw of rubber and smooth skin and bits of bikini that looked like colored sails. I listened for a moment more, then studied the sky, the jagged rock, the far, familiar water. Last, I looked at Becky Collins, who, with a single friend, floated apart from the others. She was unmoving, one hand at her mouth, the other pressed across the heart. "You know something," I said. "I think maybe you're right."

"Really?"

"In part, yeah."

"What does that mean, *in part*?"

I disliked needless lies, so I shook my head, then turned from the edge, and started walking to the trail that would take us down. Chance followed, still worried.

"Dude, wait. What does that mean?"

I kept quiet, unwilling to share the conviction he'd put inside me. It was powerful and strange, and made me drunk with possibility.

Me alone, I thought.

Me alone when I dive . . .

It wasn't the first time Chance and I had walked the long trail down. We followed the slope east and then switchbacked through the trees, coming out a quarter mile later on the far side of the quarry, where people parked their cars. Walking to the edge of the field, we stood and looked down. Chance nudged me. "She's on the beach to your left."

"I wasn't looking for her."

"Yeah, right."

Becky saw me and waved. A squad of guys surrounded her, football players, mostly. One of them saw me looking, and spit on the cracked, granite ledge that passed for a beach.

Chance said, "Come on. Let's find a beer."

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We turned for the trail that would take us to the water, but saw movement in a shaded place beneath the pines. A man was squatting with his back against the trunk, and his head shifted as he ground a cigarette into the dirt. "I caught your performance. Thought for a minute you might actually do it." He stood, and moved into the light: black hair and denim and prison-pale skin. "Hello, little brother."

Jason was five years older, but my size and shape. The same hair brushed the collar of his shirt. The same eyes stared out from a face that was similar in every way but the hard edges of it. "You're out," I said, and he shrugged. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, believe it or not."

A pint bottle appeared from his back pocket. He unscrewed the cap and offered me a sip. When I shook my head, he shrugged and tipped the bottle back.

"You remember Chance," I said.

"Hello, little man." Chance bridled at the mocking tone, and Jason stood there looking unconcerned and dangerous and bored. "Why didn't you make the dive?" I shrugged stupidly, and Jason nodded as if he understood. "It was something to see, though, wasn't it?"

He was talking about the day our brother dove. Robert had been the kindest and my favorite. "Have you been home?" He shook his head. "You going?"

"After last time? I don't think so."

His grin, then, was the first truly familiar thing I'd seen. It had a sharp edge on one side, and the eye above it dipped in a quick wink. If Jason liked you, the wink said, *Life is good, I've got your back*. For others, it was different. Even in high school, grown men would back away from the wink and the grin, and that was before war and death and whatever devil Vietnam put inside my brother. He was calm at the moment, but that could change on a dime. Indian summer. Killing frost. Jason had both of those things inside, and they could trade places plenty fast.

He lit another cigarette, and I watched him do it, hating how much he looked like our dead brother. Were Robert here instead of Jason, he'd have wrapped me up, laughing. He'd have squeezed so hard I couldn't breathe, then he'd have pushed me back, mussed my hair and said, *My*

God, look how you've grown. I often wondered if war had changed him as it changed Jason. Was he harder in those last days? Or was it Robert's goodness that got him killed in the end, some softness that my other brother lacked?

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. Hanging out, I guess."

"Let's do it together, the two of us. You have a car. I know some girls." He smiled around the cigarette, then pulled in smoke and streamed it through his nostrils. "Robert and I used to do that, you know. Back roads and cold beers, life before the war. What do you say? It could be like old times."

"What girls?" I asked.

"This guy." Jason hooked a thumb, and looked at Chance. "What does it matter, what girls? You don't trust me?"

"It's not that . . ."

I hesitated, and Jason's grin faded. "Don't say it's our mother."

"You know how she is."

"You're going to bail on a day with two fine women and your long-lost brother because it might upset our mother?"

"You're not around, man. You don't see how she gets."

"Let me guess. Demanding? Judgmental?"

"I'd call it overprotective."

Jason shook his head, and pulled hard on the bottle. "You don't think Robert would want us to be in each other's lives? You don't think that, deep down, even Dad thinks it's wrong, the way she keeps us apart? But hey, you know what? It's cool." He flicked the cigarette, and showed the brightest, coldest eyes I'd ever seen. "If you're not man enough . . ."

"Don't say that, Jason."

"Man enough. Grown enough."

"Screw you, dude."

He grinned again, and looked at the cliff. "If you were man enough, you'd have made the dive. You used to be a tough little nut. You remember that? How that felt?"

The bright eyes were a challenge, and I felt the same coldness in me. "Like you could make that dive," I said.

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“Any day of the week.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“How about this, then? I make the dive now, and we go out tomorrow, you and me. Not only that, but you tell Mom what you’re doing. You tell her all of it—me, the girls—you tell her all of it and see what she says.”

I stared at the cliff, thinking of my mother. *Different kind of ledge. Different kind of dying.* “You understand what she’s afraid of, right?”

“Course I do,” Jason said. “She thinks you’ll go to war because Robert did and I did, or that you’ll decide it’s cool to be like me, that maybe you’ll get arrested or do drugs or, God forbid, screw a girl. I think mainly she’s afraid you’ll learn to think for yourself. Are you allowed to do that, little brother? Form opinions? Live your own life? Does she even know you’re here?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have to.

“Here’s the deal.” Jason stepped closer and draped an arm across my shoulder. “I make the dive and we go out this Saturday. All day. The two of us.” He squeezed my neck. “A brother should know his brother.”

I studied those bright, cold eyes, and something twisted inside, like grease and old metal. Did he want to know me at all or was he just messing with me? I replayed his homecoming from war: the bitterness and unanswered questions, the family fights and all the ways he’d changed. How many days before the first arrest? How long before the heroin? I stepped away from what I saw in those eyes, and his arm fell to his side. “I don’t want you dying because of me.”

“A deal’s a deal, little brother.”

“I mean it,” I said.

“I know you do.”

He gave the grin and the wink, and looked so much like our dead brother it hurt. Kicking off his shoes, he shrugged off the shirt, and I saw all the places he’d been wounded in war, the bullet holes and burn marks and ragged scars. Beside me, Chance was small and tense and staring.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Shut up, Chance.”

Jason ignored my friend, and that felt about right. This was about us, alone. “Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“You know why.”

“I really don’t.”

“Don’t be stupid. You know *exactly* why.” He pushed his cigarettes into my hand. “You keep those dry for me. I’m going to want one, after.”

“Jason, listen . . .” I ran out of words.

He turned and started walking, and Chance gave a strange, small laugh. “No way, dude. No way he dives.”

People stared as my brother moved out onto the stony beach, and I thought a few of the older guys recognized him. A couple of them nudged each other and whispered, but Jason looked neither left nor right. He made a shallow dive, and slid beneath the surface for a dozen beats. When he rose, it was into an easy crawl that took him out from shore.

“No way,” Chance muttered. “There’s no fucking way.”

Across the quarry, Jason pulled himself onto the face of the cliff, and was pale against the rock. He made the ascent with effortless grace, and by the time he reached the top, word of his identity had spread along the beach. I saw it in the whispers.

Jason French.

Vietnam.

Prison.

A few eyes found me, but I ignored them. Becky Collins looked my way, but even that felt like the tail end of a nightmare. “He’s going to do it,” I said, and felt the moment as if I stood beside him. The same wind licked the stone, and the water, below, was cold, gray, and hard. The only difference was the silence as Jason spread his arms. No one spoke or called out, and I would swear, in years to come, that the wind stilled and even the birds fell quiet.

Please, God . . .

The prayer came in the instant of my certainty. I felt his breath as if it were my own, his toes as they took the weight. I knew the bend of his knees, the commitment, the moment his life was not his own.

“Sweet Jesus.”

Chance spoke the words as my brother rose, and lint-colored sky

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spread between his feet and the stone. He hung on invisible strings, and looked as our brother had looked: the light on one side, the bow of his chest and arms. For that moment, he was pinned and perfect, then the weight of his shoulders took him down; and like that, I was thirteen again and choking; and I heard the same words, somewhere deep.

One Mississippi.

Two . . .

I counted as I had for Robert, and feared that a second brother would die. He was waiting too long, arms still spread as *Three Mississippi* sounded in my mind, and brought with it a terrible certainty.

He would hit wrong.

He would shatter.

But in the last moment his hands came together and, like the tip of a knife, split the surface to let my brother pass. He disappeared in black water, and I didn't breathe until I saw him again, his head above the surface, those long arms stroking for shore. Chance said something, but I was half-deaf from a sound like roaring wind.

It was blood in my ears, I thought.

Or maybe it was people cheering.

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For the rest of the day I thought of my brother and his dive and the deal we'd struck. *Saturday. The two of us.* I didn't tell my mother at dinner that night, even though we ate in awkward silence, and she opened the door as if to invite the conversation. "Did I see Ken in the driveway?"

She watched her food as she asked the question. I met my father's eyes, but they offered no hint of his thoughts on the matter. "He came in behind me," I said.

That was true, but not the whole story. My father's partner had found me at the quarry, and insisted on following me home. He said, *I told your father I'd make sure*, and those were his final words. He didn't mention Jason or the kids he'd seen drinking or the guilty way I'd started at his sudden appearance. He'd watched Jason with those flat, cop eyes, then stared Chance down with the same unflinching distaste. *Shouldn't you be leaving, too?* In the driveway, he'd watched me to the house, then waited as my father pulled in behind us. I missed their conversation, but from the door, I'd seen my father glance my way with the same cop eyes.

"You weren't at school today," my mother said.

"I was at the quarry."

"Senior Skip Day is tradition, I know, but you're back in school on Monday. That means homework, papers, final exams. No slacking because the end is near."

"Yes, ma'am."

She forked a bite of salad, and that, too, was part of the dance. No

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mention of Robert or Jason or the war. I wasn't sure where her mind went in the silence between questions, but guessed it was the future or some other bright place.

My father knew the dance as well: keep it simple and light and surface. "Have you thought more about a summer job?"

"They want to hire me at the marina."

"Again?"

He was disappointed, but I liked the boats, the water, the smell of fuel. His frown deepened, but he couldn't really argue. I'd be at college in the fall. That meant deferment. He smiled stiffly, and my mother sipped wine.

For me, though, the dance wasn't working. "Did you know Jason is out of prison?"

The question fell like a bomb. My mother choked on her wine. My father said, "Son . . ."

"You should have told me."

The anger came unexpectedly and suddenly, and its cause was unclear. *How they managed my life? The things I'd felt as my brother fell?* Only the emotion was certain, this unfamiliar anger.

"Who told you?" my mother asked.

"I saw him. We spoke."

She dabbed a napkin at the corners of her mouth. "About me, I suppose?"

"We might have touched on that."

She smoothed the napkin in her lap, and looked away.

"You knew, of course. Didn't you? You knew that he was back."

"We thought it best to keep the two of you apart." Her gaze, that time, was direct and unapologetic. She sat calmly and straight, an elegant woman. "Shall we discuss the reasons?"

"Has anything changed since the last time we discussed reasons?"

"Not for me."

I turned to my father. "Dad?"

"Give us a chance to talk with him first. Okay? After prison. After all this time. Give us a chance to feel him out. We don't know his plans or why he's back."

“And when you know those things?”

“Then we’ll see where we are.”

I looked from one to the other. Nothing had changed. Nothing ever would. “May I be excused?”

My mother lifted her glass. “Do you have plans to see him again?”

“No,” I lied.

“Talk to him by phone?”

“If he has a number, I don’t know it.”

She studied me with eyes that were as cool and bright as my brother’s.

“Are you still my good boy?”

“I try to be.”

“Do you love me?”

“Of course.”

“Are you angry?”

“Not anymore.”

Another sip. The same eyes. “Clear your dishes.”

I carried dishes to the kitchen, and took the back stairs to my room. Inside, I closed the door and tried to see the space as if it were not my own: the posters and old toys and plastic trophies. When my father knocked on the door, it was after nine.

“Come in.”

He opened the door, surprised by the state of my room. The posters were down. Half the stuff I owned was boxed. “What’s all this?”

I shrugged, and kept packing. “Just wanted a change.”

He looked in one box and then another. “You giving this stuff away?”

“I guess.”

“Your comic books?” He lifted a stack from a half-full box. “You’ve collected these since you were eight.” I didn’t respond. He put the comic books down and sat on the edge of the bed. “About your mother . . .”

“You don’t need to explain.”

“I’m happy to talk about it.”

“She’s afraid Jason will ruin my life. This is hardly news.”

“It won’t be forever, son.”

“It’s been years, Dad. Five years that she won’t let me play sports

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or date girls. I can't go camping or hunting. She barely lets me leave the house."

"She let you have a car."

"Because I paid for it myself."

"She still allowed it."

"She did, yes, and it's the only thing she's done that's fair."

"None of this is fair, son. It's not fair that Robert died, or that Jason changed the way he did. It's not fair for your mother to worry so much, or for any of this to land on you. Just work with me. Stay away from Jason, at least for a little while."

"He's my brother."

"I know he is, but there are things about Jason you don't know."

"What? That he did drugs? That he killed people in the war?"

My father frowned and studied the floor, less certain than he used to be. "Three or four days, just a little while."

"You should have told me he was back."

"You're angry. I get it. I still need your promise."

"I can't give it to you."

"Not even for your mother's sake?"

"Not even for yours."

I stared at him, and he stared back; and in the end, that's where he left me: in a silence that spoke of fathers and sons and difficult truths. I couldn't turn my back on Jason, not after losing Robert.

I thought my father understood.

That maybe he approved.

French stopped ten feet from the door, and took a moment to remember his sons as they'd been before the war: Robert, with his easy smile and gracious nature, and Jason, who'd been sardonic and brilliant and occasionally cruel. From the beginning, Gibby's love for Robert had been the most obvious, but he'd been more like Jason than he chose to admit. He had the same insight and self-awareness, the same cutting wit. Gibby's heart, of course, was immense, and the only reason he'd yielded, for so many years, to his mother's insane demands. No girls. No sports.

"Damn it, Gabrielle."

Rationality played no part in her overprotective nature. Robert had been selected in the draft, with Jason being spared only because he'd been born two minutes after midnight, which made them twins with different birthdays. Gabrielle had wept on the day Robert left for Vietnam, and broken entirely at news of his death. He'd been the first and the favorite. Gabrielle would never admit such a truth, but her cries in the dark of that terrible night still haunted his memories.

It should have been Jason!

It should have been him!

He'd tried to stifle the words, but believed, to this day, that they'd carried through the house. How long after that before Jason enlisted?

Two days?

Three?

French sighed deeply, and his face was rough beneath his palms. Pushing away from the wall, he made his way to the master bedroom door and peered inside. Gabrielle was in the bed, on her side. Moving quietly past, he lifted his weapon and shield from the dresser.

"Are you going out?" She rolled over, a rustle in the sheets.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry. Go back to sleep."

"Gibby's in bed?"

"Tucked in and safe."

"Where are you going?"

"A call," he said. "I might be a while."

"What time is it?"

"Not that late. Go back to bed."

He kissed her cheek, and she rolled again, showing the lift of a shoulder, a spill of hair. He felt bad about the lie, but had she known his intent, there would have been recrimination and tears; she would not have slept at all.

Outside, French slid behind the wheel, and followed a two-lane until he caught the state highway that would take him into Charlotte. As a city cop, he'd always felt guilty about life beyond the city line, but he was a father first, and city life had been trending down for years. It would be easy to blame the war, but the shift felt more fundamental than that. People didn't care like they used to. They locked their doors, and looked

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away on the street. There was less trust between neighbors, and no love for cops, either. It had been that way since the Kent State shootings, at least, since the race riots in New York and Wilmington, the uprisings at Attica, the bombing in Wisconsin. Even in a city as small as this—a half million people—French had seen things he'd never imagined, not just the protests and riots but bra burnings and flag burnings, the explosion of homelessness and poverty and drugs. To jaded eyes, the problem was larger than broken families or loyalties or even broken cities. The country was wounded and hurting. Was *divided* too big a word?

Once across the city line, French worked his way past the subdivisions and commercial areas, then downtown, where buildings rose twenty and thirty stories, and people were out on the sidewalks. The restaurants were busy, so were the nightclubs and bars. The main drag was four-lane, and cars cruised it slowly before turning around to do it again. His interest was little more than passing, but eyes still found the cruiser as if *cop* were written on the side.

Deeper in the city, French slowed as he approached a half-mile stretch of abandoned factories built in the late 1800s. An experiment in city renewal had seen attempts at rehabilitation, but the longed-for influx of apartment and condo dwellers never materialized. The buildings now were mostly vacant. There were a few flophouses, some struggling artists, a bit of industrial storage. The building he wanted was on the last corner of the worst block, so he rolled in quietly, and got out of the car the same way. Darkness pooled between distant lights, and there was movement in that darkness, hints of glass and cigarettes where people huddled on loading bays and crumbled stoops.

“Anyone here seen Jimmy Hooks?” French showed the badge as he approached a group of men on a loading dock, their legs stretched out, backs against the brick. They saw the shield, but didn't care enough to hide the needle. “Hey, Jimmy Hooks. You seen him?” One of the junkies turned his head and gave a slow blink. French held out a ten-dollar bill. “First to tell me gets it.”

“Oh, hey, man, I think I saw him . . .”

“Not you.” French knew the guy, a proven liar. “You two. Jimmy Hooks. I'm not going to bust him. I just want to talk.” He produced an-

other five, and all three junkies pointed at an old factory across the street. “If you’re lying, I’ll be back. I’ll take the money *and* your junk.”

“Nah, man. No lies. Jimmy Hooks. Straight up.”

French dropped the bills, and crossed the street, stepping over shattered glass and keeping his eyes on the door three stoops down. Two girls lingered there. *Hookers*, he thought. They saw him, and split. He let them go. Through the open door, he saw mattresses, old sofas, candle wax melted to the floor.

“Hey . . . mister cop.”

That came from a junkie so skinny a good breeze might lift him up and float him away. He was on a sofa, barefoot and shirtless and half-gone.

“I’m looking for Jimmy Hooks.”

The junkie pointed into a long, dark hall.

“Is he alone?”

“Shit, man . . .”

The junkie grinned a loose grin, and French thought, *No, not alone*. Following the hall, he found other rooms and other junkies. French was too jaded to feel much, but the spring inside wound a little tighter.

At the rear of the building, the hall bent right and ended at a steel door beneath a bare bulb. French palmed the revolver, and knocked twice. “Police. I’m looking for James Manning, goes by Jimmy Hooks.” If this were a bust, French would have men behind him and at the back door and in the alley outside. Manning, though, had never been busted for dealing. He was too clever, too slick. “Let’s go. Open up.”

He pounded on the door until metal grated and a dead bolt slid open from the inside. The door opened to the length of its chain, and a sliver of face appeared, pale skin and a dark, disinterested eye.

“Warrant.” It was not a question.

“Tell Jimmy it’s Detective French, that I want to talk.”

The head turned away. “Yo, it’s like you said.”

“So let the man in.”

The door closed, and the chain scraped. When the door opened again, French saw James Manning in a leather chair with his hands behind his head and his legs crossed at the ankles. He was midforties,

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a local, a dropout. The men with him were a full mix of skin colors and ages. The room would be clean of drugs and weapons and cash. Those things would be in the building, but with other men, in other rooms.

“Detective French.” Manning spread his hands in mock welcome. “I thought I might see you tonight.”

“So you know he’s back.”

“Your son leaves a ripple larger than most, so yeah. I heard.”

French stepped into the room. Five men, total. Only Manning was smiling. “Have you sold to him?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“I want to know if he’s using.”

“Hey, the world is full of *wants*. I want. You want.”

Two men slipped into French’s blind spot; he noticed but didn’t care. “Do you know where he is or not?” Manning showed both palms and a second smile that made French feel sick inside. He shouldn’t have to do this. He should know where to find his own son. “You have a kid, right? A daughter?”

Manning stopped smiling. “Don’t compare the two.”

“I’m only saying . . .”

“Your son’s a junkie. My daughter is eight.”

“But as a father . . .”

“I don’t give a shit about that.”

“What, then?”

“Favors.” Manning leaned forward in his seat. “I’ll go first to show you how it works. I haven’t sold to your son. That’s a favor, and that’s for free. I can tell you where he is, too, but it’ll cost you.”

“A favor in return.”

“A *cop* favor.”

French took a steadying breath. The men around him were bottom-feeders, the worst. He wanted to arrest them all or beat them until his hands bled. “I’m not asking for a kidney,” he said. “The favor will be commensurate.”

“That’s a nice word.”

“Where is he, Jimmy? I won’t ask again. I walk and the favor walks with me.”

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Manning settled back in the chair. Three beats, and then five. “You know Charlie Spellman?” he asked, finally.

“Should I?”

“Two-bit dealer. Wannabe player. He has a house at Water Street and Tenth, one of those little rentals. Your boy crashes there.”

“If the information’s good, I’ll owe you one.”

“Yes, you will, Detective. One commensurate fucking favor.”

French made his way down the filthy hall, ignoring the laughter that trailed him. He felt angry and unclean, and took those feelings all the way to Water Street and Tenth, a quiet intersection in a working-class neighborhood of small houses with small yards, of people good and bad. He’d known the area since his years as a uniformed rookie. Most calls were for domestic disturbances or vandalism or public drunkenness. There was little violent crime, almost never a homicide. Taking his time to study the houses near the intersection, he keyed the radio, and asked dispatch for the make and model of any vehicle owned by one Charlie Spellman. It didn’t take long.

“Records show a 1969 Ford Maverick, license number LMR-719, registered to Charles Spellman, DOB 9/21/50.”

“Thanks, Dispatch. Got it.”

He found the Maverick in a narrow driveway, five houses up on the west side of the block. It had bald tires. Spots of primer dulled the paint. A flashlight through the glass showed trash on the floor but nothing illegal. Approaching the house, French saw movement through the curtains, heard music and laughter. He knocked, and a pretty girl opened the door. She wore bell-bottoms, a tube top, and blue eye shadow that glittered in the light. She was drunk, but friendly. Small freckles crossed the bridge of her nose.

“Hey, come on in. Booze is in the kitchen. Charlie’s around here somewhere.”

She turned, and left the door open, so he went inside. A dozen people filled the first room, and he saw more down the hall and in the adjacent room. Blue smoke hung in the air. Some of it was weed. Moving into the house, French caught a few unhappy looks, but ignored them. Everyone

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else was blissful and vague. A couple was making out on the stairs. A few girls were dancing in the corner as “Brown Eyed Girl” spun on the turntable.

In the narrow hall, he turned sideways to fit his large frame past a good-looking kid and group of women in their twenties. “Jason French?” he asked the first one to catch his eyes, but she shook her head. At the end of the hall, he peered into the kitchen. Two beer kegs sat in tubs of ice, and open bottles ran the length of both counters. The men there were older, with mustaches and sideburns. “Anybody here seen Jason French?” No one answered, so French picked the one who looked most out of place and uncertain. “How about you? You know Jason French?”

The young man glanced at his friends. “Uh, upstairs, man. But he’s not exactly looking for visitors.”

“What room?”

“Uh . . .”

“Shut up, dude. We don’t talk about Jason ’less Jason says.”

After that, the group closed ranks, a common reaction. To certain men, Jason held a near godlike appeal. He’d enlisted to avenge a dead brother, done three tours, and kicked ass. He had the scars and attitude, the prison time, done clean. The aura of it still hung on Jason, but French was tired of it, all of it. He rolled back the edge of his jacket, exposing the shield, the holstered weapon. “I said, what room.” After thirty years of cop, he was good at this kind of thing. He could deliver a beating; take a beating. It gave him confidence that went beyond the badge and gun. “Come on, boys, it’s a simple question. No? No one? All right. That’s fine, too. But I’m going upstairs to look for Jason, and if I find any of you boys behind me on the stairs or in the hall or anywhere else near me, I’ll take it personally. Understand?”

He gave it a five count, then turned for the stairs. No one followed. On the second floor, he found a landing and four closed doors. Behind the first was a bathroom, empty. The second was a bedroom, and the door was locked. “Jason?”

He heard a stirring inside, then faintly, *Ah, shit . . .*

“Open up, son. I just want to talk.”

“Now is not a good time.”

“There never is with you.”

“I said, fuck off.”

“Right, then . . .”

French took the knob in one hand, put his shoulder on the door and felt the lock give. Cheap metal. Cheap door. Inside, a single lamp burned beneath a red cloth that softened the light and put shadows on the young woman’s skin. She straddled Jason at the hips, riding him with a slow and steady roll. Her hands were raised behind her neck and linked beneath a spill of long, dark hair. Maybe she didn’t hear the door give. Maybe she didn’t care. “Tyra, baby. Hang on.” Jason lifted his chin, and patted her hip. “Why don’t you give us a minute?”

Sliding off the bed, she dressed with an utter lack of shame or embarrassment. French averted his eyes, but she took her time, moving around the room to collect bits of discarded clothing. Dressed at last, she kissed Jason long on the mouth, then brushed past French, and said, “Pig.”

“Nice,” he replied. “Thanks for that.”

She gave him the finger, and he watched her go. On the bed, Jason was covered to the waist, the combat scars glinting in the reddish light. He reached for a pack of smokes, shook one out, and lit it. “Fresh out of prison, Dad. You couldn’t give a man five minutes?”

“I doubt that’s the first girl you’ve been with since prison.”

Jason hooked a hand behind his head and blew smoke at his father. “What do you want?”

“You didn’t tell us you were coming home.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to know.” Anger. Distance. Another jet of smoke. “So what’s with the drop-in? You heard about tomorrow?”

“What happens tomorrow?”

“Brothers doing brotherly things. I assumed you were here to stop it, Gibby being the favorite son and all, and Mom being such a flower.”

“Please don’t be disrespectful.”

“It’s the right word, isn’t it? Flower. Snowflake. Ash in a sudden wind.”

Jason made a gesture, as if sprinkling ash with his fingers. “Are you high?” French asked. “Are you using right now?”

“Does George Dickel count?”

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Jason tipped up a bottle, and all the resentment showed on his face: the intrusion, the questions, the last years of his life.

“Gibby is not a favorite son. He’s just young.”

“Same age as Robert when he was drafted.”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not a bit different. And you know the tragedy of it all, the inside joke?” Another slug of whiskey. “Gibby was the toughest of us all, back in the day. Thirteen years old, and he could keep up with us both: hiking and dirt bikes, hunting, fighting. The kid was unflinching. And what is he now?” Jason pointed with the cigarette. “It’s pitiful, what you’ve done to him.”

“That is patently unfair.”

Jason sighed as if suddenly bored. “What do you want, Dad? You want me to fuck off or leave town or stay away from my only brother? If that’s it, then say it and leave. Nothing good will come of it, but at least we’ll understand each other.”

French struggled for a response, but was out of simple answers. He loved the boy, but didn’t know him. “Tomorrow, then? Brotherly things?”

“Gibby was supposed to tell you.”

French nodded. He had nothing else. “Bring him home safe, all right? Nothing stupid or dangerous or criminal.”

“Roger that, Detective.”

Jason drank again, and French wanted so much, just then. He wanted to slap the anger from his son, to pull him up and squeeze him so hard there’d be no question of favorites or history or love. He wanted to say, *You’re my son, goddamn it, and I don’t care what you’ve done or what you are or even that you hate me.* He wanted to hold his boy until his heart was flooded and the sun rose and his arms hurt. Instead, he nodded again and walked away.