

ONE

SOMEHOW, HE HAD to get in touch with Stacy. He didn't know if she was in police custody, if she was hurt, or if she had any way to contact him. He had to find out what had happened to her and, in his current predicament, that wouldn't be easy.

He was in a hospital room. He'd figured out that much. From what he could gather listening to the conversations around him, he was fucked. Royally fucked. He was trying to remember the fight, but the only thing he was dead certain of was that he'd lost. Precisely what his injuries were he had no idea. His body was unresponsive to his weak attempts at movement, but he wasn't numb. He felt pain all over. His shallow breathing caused stabbing pains in his chest and his heartbeat was irregular. He couldn't see. Was he blind? He wondered if his eyes were bandaged and if so, why?

For a short time, one of the doctors had attempted to engage him in conversation, but that was before he knew where he was, while he was still in some semi-dream state. The same dream he always had. The worms. But they were talking, laughing, and big. When he realized he was awakening in a hospital bed and it was a human being who was trying to talk with him, he clammed up. For the next hour or so, he just listened to the activity around him.

He learned that they thought he was on the brink of death. It wasn't a question of if, so much as when, and when could be days to live, or even hours. A nurse was continually updating his heart rate.

Someone in the room used the term “cold storage.” What was that about? Is this official hospital terminology? Was he nothing more than meat with a pulse?

But death was out of the question. No matter what his injuries, he wasn’t going to die. Of that, he was certain. His heart was beating. His brain was working. The flesh and bones would heal. He’d die only when he was good and damn ready to die and that wasn’t in days or hours. No matter what condition he was in, he had to get word to Stacy.

That was job number one.

He could almost hear her voice—*another load of cosmic shit*—and it brought a slight smile to his lips, one of the few areas of his body where his muscles still worked. With his swollen tongue, he could feel that many of his front teeth, upper and lower, were broken or missing. But despite the pain and those hideous worms that kept squirming into his consciousness, he felt his strength gathering.

A voice broke into his thoughts. “Mr. Black, can you hear me?” He pictured a worm, a huge worm, a worm bigger than himself, with a fleshy mouth and no eyes. Should he answer? Did he really want to talk with a worm?

“Mr. Black, can you hear me?”

It was a new voice, not the doctor who had been attempting to engage him earlier. Not one of the voices that had been discussing his dismal state in the past hour. Someone new had entered the room. The worm image faded. He was trying to picture the human that belonged to this voice. It was male, younger than him but an adult, not a kid.

“Mr. Black, can you hear me?”

“Course I hear you—” his voice cracked. His slurred words sounded strange to him, slow and wet. He wanted to add, “you fucking moron,” but it hurt his throat to vocalize. He tasted blood.

“Do you know where you are?”

“Lemme guess—” He wanted to make a joke, but ran out of breath before he could get it out.

“You’re in the hospital, Mr. Black, in the intensive care unit.”

He wanted to say, "That would have been my second guess," but the impulse died to a wave of pain in his lungs. Instead, he said, "Can you turn on the fucking lights?" The last words sounded like "fun lice."

"The lights are on," spoke the worm. "Your eyes are swollen shut. Do you know how long you've been here?"

"Too long ... Coupla hours ... "

"Four days, Mr. Black. You've been in a coma. Do you remember what happened?"

Four days? Jesus Christ ...

"Got my ass kicked."

"Do you recall the circumstances?"

"The fuck are you?"

"I'm Sergeant Bruce Dorsett. Las Vegas Metropolitan Police. I just want to ask you some questions, Mr. Black. May I call you Bart?"

"At's my name."

"I just have a few questions for you."

"Fuck off."

He had to get rid of the cop. Was it even worth mentioning Stacy? Would the cop at least tell him if she was in custody? He'd humor the cop for a while. See if he could get any information out of him.

"It would be in your best interest to cooperate, Bart. Some pretty serious charges are pending against you."

"What about Miranda?" Sounded like "veranda."

But the worm responded, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Would you like an attorney?"

"You arrestin' me?"

"No. But it might be helpful to you to be cooperative. I just want to ask you some questions."

The cop had nothing on him. His threats were bullshit. "What happened?" Bart said, then added, "to the girl ... "

"I assume you're referring to Miss Thomas?"

"Referrin' to Stacy."

"Miss Julia Thomas."

"Name's Stacy."

"She's also been hospitalized as a result of the injuries she incurred at ... Do you recall the circumstances? Do you remember what happened to you?"

Four days later and she's still in the hospital? Was the cop telling the truth?

"Like I said ... Got my ass kicked. How long will I be here?" His words were slow and garbled, broken by his short, shallow inhales.

"The doctors didn't expect you to come out of your coma."

"Doesn't answer my question."

"You'll have to discuss that with your doctor, Bart. I'm just a cop, trying to get a handle on what went down. Your injuries are extensive."

"I was outnumbered."

"That's an understatement. We have two dozen suspects in custody right now for participating in the melee and more than a hundred were arrested. Your internal injuries are massive. Your skull is cracked and your brain is hemorrhaging. They were about to pull the plug on you this morning when you started talking. They couldn't understand what you were saying. The nurses had instructions to notify us immediately if you regained consciousness. It looks like you're going to make it. We have a lot of questions. Maybe you have some answers."

Was Dorsett lying? Did they really think he was going to make it now? Or was this alleged cop just the worm of his dreams and this would all go away when he woke up?

"Go ahead."

"Bart, I want you to be straight with me. I'm sure you're aware of the fact that you're wanted for serious crimes relating to Miss Thomas and you might ultimately be held accountable for her death if she doesn't survive her injuries. But from the witness reports, it appears you were defending her ... I'm hoping you'll tell me what you know about the incident. I'm on your side. Believe me. Can you just tell me what happened?"

So suddenly, Dorsett's a good guy?

Bart was on the verge of saying, "You got nothing on me so fuck off," but changed his mind. "An' I should do this why?" he said.

"Look, we know you were living with Miss Thomas in Reno and

that you came here with her some three or four weeks ago. Why did you come to Las Vegas?"

"Long story, Dorsett ... Hope you got a lot of time." His saliva was thick, almost like mucous. When he tried to swallow he could feel a tube running down his throat.

"I have nothing but time. Do you mind if I tape this?"

"Why don't you video it? Stick it on YouTube? Dead man talking."

"All right, I'm taping this with your permission."

"Came here 'bout two weeks ago ... Stacy came here couple weeks before that."

"Didn't you come here together?"

"No."

"But you both left Reno almost four weeks ago. Together."

"No. I went to California ... Came to Vegas later."

"Where in California?"

"Bay Area."

"Where'd you stay?"

"Friends ... That's where I'm from ... Berkeley, San Fran, Oakland ... Crashed around ... Took care of some old business ... "

His words were coming slowly, with long pauses between breaths. "Business" sounded like "fizzes" to him, but Dorsett didn't seem to be having any trouble understanding him. Not that it made much difference, as all of it was a lie. He'd never gone back to California and he'd come to Vegas with Stacy, just as Dorsett thought; in fact, he'd brought her to Vegas on his bike, a chopped 1947 Harley Davidson. But even in his present condition, he knew better than to tell that story. Even if he believed he was dying—which he didn't—he still had to protect her.

Since meeting Stacy, he'd lost his job, his best friend, all of his money, his scooter, most of his teeth, his eyesight, his ability to get up and take a leak, and now, the cops were grilling him for an explanation. Right. Like that was about to happen. *Why did you come to Vegas?* Like he had any intention of ever telling anyone that story.

The night he brought Stacy to Vegas was in many ways similar to

his current predicament. He'd found himself waking up in pain, confused and unable to move. He was just helping her move to Vegas, or get the hell out of Reno was more like it.

The story of that night was one he'd take to his grave, he hoped not in the too-near future.

TWO

HE WASN'T A flying saucer nut, nor was he investigating crackpot government-conspiracy theories. His concerns with politics had never stretched further than thinking the government ought to decriminalize pot and repeal the motorcycle-helmet laws. He had no business being anywhere near Area 51. He knew that.

But there he was, slowly awakening to the cool night air with an aching head, a stabbing pain in his back, and a confusing immobility. He remembered the sign he'd seen that made him turn away from the restricted area that would have gotten the feds on his tail:

Nellis Bombing and Gunnery Range

Restricted Area

No Trespassing Beyond this Point

WARNING

Photography is Prohibited

So he cut back east across the desert to get away from Area 51, and now he was somewhere between a major life catastrophe and deep shit. He didn't know exactly how much trouble he was in, but he knew it was more than he could afford. The state trooper's car was maybe twenty feet away, the headlights not quite pointing at him, but in his general direction, illuminating the dusty desert scrub. The engine was running, but where was the trooper? The driver's side door was wide

open. With the headlights glaring in his direction, he couldn't see inside the vehicle, but he had a feeling the trooper wasn't in there. He could smell the exhaust fumes. That car had been sitting there idling for some time. He wondered how long he'd been unconscious. The last thing he needed was trouble with the police. Cops never took kindly to him. A throbbing pain was developing just to the right side of the crown of his head. He'd taken a really good whack. He saw the beam of a flashlight waving in the distance off to his right, maybe a hundred yards away, maybe more. When he attempted to turn his head to better see the light that was bobbing and weaving erratically, like an insect searching for a place to land, a different stabbing pain, deeper inside his head, stopped him. But even in his semi-conscious state, he knew what was happening.

The cop was looking for Stacy.

From the way the beam was moving, the trooper was obviously facing away from him and moving even farther away. That was good. That would buy him some time.

His inability to sit up straight and the pulsing knot on his head were just starting to make sense. Ah, yes ... he remembered now ... the cop had knocked him in the head with his baton and, he surmised, handcuffed him. The jabbing pain between his shoulder blades told him he was handcuffed to his own bike. He had a Swedish-style chopper frame with a long stretch, and the way the knuckle cover was jabbing his ribs, he figured he must be cuffed to the down tubes.

It slowly came back to him ...

They were tearing down Highway 375 with the trooper in pursuit. Speeding. That's all it was. Speeding. He remembered glancing at his speedometer, midway between 85 and 90 mph. Normally, he'd just pull over and take the goddamn ticket. But he didn't figure Stacy's phony ID would hold up, especially with the cops actively looking for her. He wouldn't even be in this godforsaken desert if it wasn't for Stacy's problems with the law.

"Cut her loose," Clance had advised him just a few hours earlier. "Otherwise, your ass is fried." Why didn't he listen to Clance? Why didn't he listen to himself?

It's not hard to lose a cop car if you're on a bike in the city. If the traffic's heavy, you can cruise between lanes, weave in and out between cars, turn around and drive the wrong way down the shoulder, even escape on the sidewalk if need be. If he doesn't have your plate number yet, fuck him. And Bart always kept his license plate smeared with grease and just enough dirt to ensure illegibility at anything less than about ten feet. But out on the open highway, it's just a speed test, and with Stacy riding bitch and all of their stuff crammed into the saddlebags, he couldn't chance trying to outrun the trooper. He had to outmaneuver him.

So he pulled off the highway onto the desert terrain. The trooper slowed to a crawl on the road, trying to decide if he should attempt to chase him through the thick brush and cactus. Bart cut his headlamp to make it more difficult for the cop to see him. A thin sliver of moon provided enough light for Bart to see a few yards ahead of him, but he also had to slow down. If he could just get far enough into the scrub, the cop wouldn't see him at all. Then the cop's spotlight hit him. Fuck!

As he put distance between them, he was praying the cop would give up, just call the feds and report a crazy biker getting close to Area 51. He was already planning an escape route once he got out of spotlight range, cutting south through the desert about 50 miles to come out on Highway 93 on the east side of the restricted area. There wasn't much out there but empty desert—other than the Nellis Air Force Base Bombing Range, which, he hoped, wasn't in active use at the time. Surely they'd assume he'd try to get back to Highway 375. Who'd expect a chopped Harley to try negotiating 50 miles of rough desert terrain in the darkness of night? With a helicopter, they'd have no trouble finding him. But they wouldn't send a helicopter if he avoided Area 51, not for some pissant biker who was just speeding.

Then he saw the trooper's headlights turn in his direction after he'd gotten a hundred-yard jump on him. Persistent sonofabitch.

Unfortunately, a Harley isn't a dirt bike, so this was slow going. It was also pretty dark, despite the waxing crescent moon hanging low in the eastern sky. He was doing his best to avoid ruts, cactus, tumbleweed, large rocks ... He went on for quite a ways with the cop not

quite keeping pace. He knew that without Stacy on the bike, he could definitely lose the cop. It was time to lose the baggage.

"Look, Stacy, you're going to have to make a run for it. I'll shake this jerk and come back for you."

"No way, Bart! You're losing him! Don't stop now!"

He pulled to a stop. "Get off the fucking bike! I'm going that way." He pointed. "I want you to run that way!" He pointed in the opposite direction. There was no time for an argument. "Now! He'll follow the bike. Trust me."

"That cop wants to kill you, Bart!"

He felt her arms tighten around his midsection. Jesus fucking Christ.

"He wants to write a speeding ticket. Now it's evading arrest. Much more serious. I can't let him catch me! Get off the bike!"

"But he turned his siren off. He turned his flashers off. He's crazy!"

"He doesn't need a siren off-road. Look, I'll come back for you after I ditch this asshole. Just stay low after you get out there a ways. He'll never find you."

"But he's going to kill you!"

"Well, if he catches me with you on the bike, you'll be kissing mommy and daddy hello tomorrow morning."

That was the threat that hit home. She slid off the bike. "You better not leave me out here," she said and took off running.

Wondering if that would be the last time he ever saw her, Bart turned his headlamp back on to make it easy for the cop to see him as he took off in the opposite direction. Just as he'd thought, the cop car turned to pursue him. The trooper was definitely picking up speed as he got the hang of negotiating the desert foliage, but Bart knew he could outrun him now. No contest. He couldn't go too fast right away or the cop might decide to give up on him and go after Stacy. He had to give her some slim chance of getting away. So, he led him on for a while, letting him keep up, giving him some hope while he was giving Stacy time to disappear. He figured she'd probably head for the highway and stick her thumb out. He was envisioning a half-dozen more troopers converging on the area. Surely the cop had radioed for

assistance by now. Was there any chance they wouldn't find Stacy? The whole situation was fucked up. But even if they did catch her, if he could get away, he knew she wouldn't rat him out and she wasn't in nearly the trouble he'd be in if he were caught.

He hadn't traveled much more than a mile or so, slowly putting more distance between him and the cop, when he came to a dirt road and saw that Nellis warning sign. He sure didn't want to get the feds involved, so he headed east until smack! He dumped his bike. He didn't know what he'd hit. A rock? A ditch? A cactus root? He went flying off the seat and by the time he got up and managed to get the bike upright, the trooper was there, out of his car with his gun drawn, and all Bart could do was reach his hands up and pray the bastard didn't shoot.

What could he say to the cop? What the hell was he doing so close to a restricted area at three a.m.? The truth? That he was just trying to entertain Stacy?

They were making the trip from Reno to Vegas and she just had to see the flying saucer area. Had to see it! *Had to see it!* How could he have let her talk him into it?

"Please, Bart, we have to see the Extraterrestrial Highway!" She showed him the map in a guide book she'd picked up at a gas station convenience store in Sparks before they'd left. Damn if there wasn't a stretch of road out in the desert wilderness called the Extraterrestrial Highway. *Is that the official fucking name?* Now his ass was going to be dragged to jail, and who knew what would become of her? If they somehow managed to find her—and that was a pretty good bet since they got him—he was really up piss river. Harboring a runaway sixteen-year-old girl isn't just a speeding ticket. Was there any way he could talk his way out of this?

But the trooper didn't ask any questions. He simply said, very calmly, "Remove your helmet and drop it."

Bart did as told, then again raised his hands. But despite the fact that he was standing there with his hands in the air, the cop pulled out his night stick and whacked him on the head. Then, apparently, he'd handcuffed him to the frame of his bike so he could go after Stacy

on foot. It occurred to Bart that this nitwit of a cop must have an IQ about half his age. You'd think he'd at least drive back toward the area where Bart had dropped her to cover a good portion of the territory a bit quicker than going it on foot. And why the hell wasn't he waiting for reinforcements?

As he was thinking about how he got into this jam, he remembered that he had about thirty-two thousand dollars in cash in one of his saddlebags and ten thousand or so in the other. How could he have been so stupid? If he was making a run from Vegas to Reno with an underage girl and a shitload of unexplained cash, why in God's fucking name was he speeding? He just hadn't figured on a cop patrolling such a godforsaken stretch of highway.

Three things were going against him. First, the girl. That wouldn't sit well with the authorities, no matter how he tried to explain it. Second, the money. There was just too much of it. He could probably kiss that goodbye. And third, those gorgeous tattoos of Satan on his right bicep, his chest, his back, even one of his calves. Of course, the first one they'd see would be the reversed pentagram on the back of his left hand with the name S-A-T-A-N spelled out in the five points of the star.

Although his ninth-grade IQ test gave him a score of 165, he was now trying to decide where he ranked among the severely retarded. In the 1940s, the American Psychiatric Association determined that the official classification of someone with an IQ below 30 was "idiot." An IQ of at least 30 but lower than 50 was officially an "imbecile." And with an IQ of at least 50 but less than 70, you were a "moron." A lot of people think that idiots, imbeciles, and morons are all equally stupid, when in fact, in a room full of idiots and imbeciles, the moron is a mental wizard.

He decided to stop thinking about Stacy, the money in the saddle bags, and his classification as a mental deficient, and buckle down to the business at hand. *Satan, help me. Into your hands I place my fate.* He had to free himself from the handcuffs before the cop returned, and only if he returned with Stacy would he have to come up with some kind of an explanation for what the fuck he was doing out in the middle of nowhere at three a.m. with a runaway teenage brat. He

asked himself the question he always asked himself when faced with any dilemma:

What would Satan do?

Gee, your honor, I saw her hitchhiking and it looked awfully dangerous for an innocent young girl to be out there alone in the desert with all the rattlers and rapists, so I was trying to do my duty as an upright citizen and give her a lift to the nearest phone booth where she could call mommy and daddy whom she misses so much.

THREE

THE WORM WAS barking, baring its fangs. He was up against a wall, couldn't back away any farther. Its breath reeked of ammonia and disinfectant and death ...

"Bart? Bart?"

There had to be a way out, an escape ...

"Can you hear me? Bart?"

The ICU.

The cop.

The fucking pain.

"Loud 'n' clear, Doormat."

"Are you still with me?"

"The hell do you want?"

"You're fading out on me, man."

"I'm right here ... Don't get your panties in a bunch."

He couldn't shake his mental image of Dorsett as a talking worm, now with razor-sharp teeth, drooling, licking its fleshy pink lips.

"Yeah, well, all I asked was why you came to Vegas and you start asking me what Satan would do. What's that about? And what's with all the devil tattoos anyway? Are you really some kind of satanic priest? That's what they're saying about you, you know."

"Not a priest, Doormat ... Just an apostle ... Want to talk to a doctor ... Find out about Stacy ..."

"It's Dorsett, Bart. So, was this whole event, this riot downtown,

some kind of satanic group or what? Tell me what happened.”

“Not into Satanism, Doormat ... Tattoos? Just art ... I like art. No meaning. They’re pretty. That’s all ... I’m an atheist.” More lies.

His tattoos had a lot more meaning to him than Dorsett would ever know.

FOUR

BART WAS IN the ninth grade when he first embraced Satanism, but he had no more use for the formal doctrines of Satanism than he had for any other organized religion. In his opinion, Madame Blavatsky was a phony and her Theosophical Society was a scam; Aleister Crowley was a blowhard snake-oil salesman who pretended to be connected to dark magical powers; Anton Szandor LaVey was a self-promoting opportunist, probably a run-of-the-mill atheist, who'd never even considered the true meaning of Satan worship.

But at the age of fifteen, Bart declared his undying love for the devil over breakfast with his parents. His father was leafing through the Berkeley Gazette while his mother was grading term papers.

"God's a prick," Bart announced casually.

His mother pursed her lips and looked at him disapprovingly over the tops of her wire-rimmed glasses.

His father said, "Don't use language like that, Bart," without looking up from the newspaper.

"I've been reading the Old Testament," Bart said. "Have you read it?"

"Yes, I've read it." His father was Jewish. He looked up from his paper, but not at Bart, to signal he didn't like being interrupted. "But I have an agreement with your mother not to discuss these things with you until you're older. I'm not practicing and you're being raised Cath-

olic.” His father went into one of the phlegmy coughing fits that had been plaguing him for months. Within the next year, his father would be dead from esophageal cancer.

“But is it true what the Old Testament says?” Bart asked when his father was through spitting into his napkin. “In Exodus, it says God slayed all the firstborn sons in Egypt. All of them, sparing only the Israelites. Is that true?”

“That’s the story of the Passover. It’s sacred to both Christians and Jews.”

“That’s sick. Did God really go and murder all these innocent babies just because they weren’t Jewish?”

His father cleared his throat and again spit into his napkin.

“Do you have to do that at the table, Harv?” his mother said.

“How about when God orders the Jews to go around slaughtering anyone who isn’t one of the ‘chosen people’? No wonder the Arab world hates us. I’m ashamed of my name. You should legally get our family name changed from Rosenfeld to something else. Smith, or Brown, or Johnson, anything.”

That got his father’s attention. “The truth of the matter is I’m an atheist,” he said. “Your mother didn’t want me to tell you that, but it’s a fact. But I’m very proud of my name and my ancestry. We’re not just a religion; we’re a race of people.”

“Well, I just want you to know I’m not a Catholic anymore. I’ve decided to worship Lucifer.”

This announcement got a genuine gasp out of his mother. His father just shook his head.

“Did you ever think of how much courage it must have taken for Lucifer to rebel against his own Creator?” Bart said.

“Bart,” his mother said, “I think you should spend more time on the New Testament. That is sort of our Lord’s revised edition.”

“Have you read the Gospel according to John?” he asked her.

“What do you mean?” There was exasperation in her voice.

“Did you read the line where Jesus says, ‘Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you’?”

“Yes.”

"It's a bald-faced lie, Mom. Have you ever asked God for something in the name of Jesus? Might as well be asking Santa for a pony."

"Bart, you don't ask God for frivolous things—"

"Jesus didn't say, 'Whatsoever you ask, he'll give it to you, unless it's a frivolous thing.'" Bart looked up toward the ceiling. "Oh, God, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, I'm asking you right now to turn my eggs and potatoes into chocolate-covered marshmallows."

"You know God isn't going to start delivering marshmallows to people."

"I asked God a hundred times to make me taller. That's not frivolous, not to me. I just want to be normal."

His mother sighed and gave his father a look. His father had the shrimp gene. Bart knew he was an accident, because no one would willingly pass such a trait to an offspring.

"God's had more than enough time to make me see results," Bart said. "Did you ever stop and think, Mom, that maybe the Bible is really just a test? That God purposely made himself look like a mean bastard, just to see if we'd fall down and worship an evil god just to save our souls? I think if we do worship him, it'll just show him what cowards we are. That's what I think. The only people he'll take to heaven'll be the ones who refuse to worship an evil god."

"I think you should talk with one of the priests," his mother suggested. "A priest could answer your questions. Right now, I have these papers to grade."

"Well, there's a lot of other stupid stuff in the New Testament," Bart said, once more raising his voice. "When Jesus begs his father to let him off the hook so he doesn't have to be crucified, God insists that the crucifixion go forward *to pay for mankind's sins*. But when Jesus dies on the cross, does God abolish Hell and allow all men into heaven because Jesus paid for our sins? No! Even today the church says we'll burn in Hell if we sin. Hey! I thought Jesus paid already! My sins are supposed to be fucking paid for!"

"That's it, Bart!" his father said, rising from his chair. "Away from the table! Now!"

Bart got up from the table and picked up his plate. "Lucifer saw

God for what he was and he stood up to him. If the Bible's right about God, then I'll stand proudly with Satan in Hell when I die!"

He headed off to his bedroom, but when he looked back down the hall into the kitchen, his parents had returned to their reading.

† † †

By the time he was twenty-one, Bart had the tattoos that attested to his religion. The ink on his left forearm was a beautiful piece of skinwork, the face of Satan crowned with thorns. Bart had designed it himself, a mockery of Rubens' famous oil painting of Christ being presented to Pontius Pilate after the scourging at the pillar. The face of Lucifer was modeled on Gustav Dore's "Fall of Satan," the only work of art Bart had ever seen that showed the suffering of Satan with empathy for the heroism of this angel who'd dared to challenge God himself.

His chest piece was a rendering of Dali's "Corpus Hypercubus," with the body of Christ replaced with the blood-red body of Satan, his barbed tail wound limply around one of his legs. The cubic cross itself was in flames.

Across his back, in Olde English lettering, were Satan's words from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "I'd rather reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."

FIVE

“BART? BART? BART!”

Not the worm again.

The stabbing pains in his arms, legs, insides. The pressure in his eyeballs. The pressure in his brain. The worm ...

“Bart!”

“Yeah, man ...”

“Are you still with me?”

“Not goin’ anywhere.”

“You keep nodding out on me, Bart. If I stop talking for a minute, you disappear. Do you want me to turn the TV on? Get a little background noise in here?”

“No.”

“Try and stay with me, man.”

“Sorry, Doormat.”

“The name’s Dorsett, Bart. Are you trying to irritate me? Look, we found more than fifty-nine thousand in cash in your room. Where’d you get it?”

“Reno. Tell me where Stacy is.”

“How’d you get it?”

“The hell you doin’ in my apartment?”

“We got a warrant.”

“Motherfucker.”

What he wouldn’t give for a couple hits of weed right now, just

enough to put him into a nice stoned slumber. He wondered if his lungs could take it. He wanted to sleep.

"How about an explanation?"

"Huh?"

"The money, Bart. Where'd you get it?"

"It's mine ... Earned it ... Saved it ... Motorcycle mechanic ... Fix bikes ... Mostly Harleys."

"I don't buy it."

"Tell me where Stacy is ... Or fuck off."

"I'm supposed to believe the garage pays you in cash?"

"Garage? Work on the street ... Cash only. Never take a check from a biker ... Don't even have a bank account."

More lies. True, he didn't have a bank account. And he got a lot of the money in Reno. It was what was left of the forty-two thousand that was in his saddlebags when they left Reno a month earlier, plus a good chunk of dough he'd made in Vegas. But it didn't come from fixing bikes.

SIX

JUST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS before running into that cop near Area 51, Bart was sitting at third base on the best blackjack game of his life. In the parlance of professional gamblers, he was a hole-carder, what casino surveillance would call a “peek freak.” The strategy is legal in the state of Nevada and the edge that hole-carders get on the house is so big they have to misplay a lot of hands so the eye in the sky doesn’t start weeping blood.

He was working with Johnny who was assigned to the play by Clance, the team manager, specifically because Johnny was Asian. Asians have a reputation in casinos—well-deserved—for spreading big and playing crazy. Clance needed a player who could get away with a lot of unusual plays. This was a very special game.

Bart had found it the previous night when he was on a game with Jersey Jimmy. He was at third base catching the hole card and signaling the info to Jimmy. Stacy was standing behind Bart with her hand on his shoulder, just watching. Jimmy was betting the money. The dealer was an old-timer named Dewey who had badly-dyed thinning hair and a bristly gray mustache, one of those porcupine jobs with stubbly thick hair poking every which way. Bart wondered why anyone would dye the hair on his head Hershey-bar brown, but leave the mustache chimney-soot-gray? Kind of defeats the purpose of the dye job, doesn’t it? Dewey was a man who probably hadn’t been kissed in a very long time.

Bart had never seen Dewey before, but because of his age and the way he handled the cards and payouts, he knew Dewey had been around a long time, so he should have known better. But every time he loaded his hole card under his upcard, he gave up just enough of a flash of the face for Bart to read it. Not read all of it, not every detail. Just enough. Sometimes it was just the flash of yellow that told him he'd just seen a face card, the only cards with yellow on them. Stuff like that. On this night, every hand, Bart knew what Dewey had in the hole. A dealer who gives it up every hand is called a hundred-percenter. This gave Jimmy—who was betting four-hundred bucks a round and playing his hands according to Bart's signals—more than a bit of an edge on the house. Much more than a bit. More like eight percent—roughly, a brain surgeon's salary for playing a game of cards.

But that's not what made Dewey a special case. There were a lot of flashers in Reno just like Dewey. They're the bread and butter of any hole-card team. It was Bart's job to find these dealers and surreptitiously call plays for the guys on the team who bet the money. He was the guy with the scruffy beard at third base in the grubby biker duds, betting table minimum and keeping a low profile.

What made Dewey special was that not only was he flashing his hole card, he also had a habit of flashing the index of the next card to be dealt from the top of the deck. This guy was a hole-carder's gold mine! It was Stacy who noticed it. On a hand when Bart had a total of thirteen, she leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Hit. The next card's a seven." He didn't hit, but when the dealer hit his own hand with the seven, Bart was astonished. How the hell did Stacy know the next card to be dealt? She didn't leave him bewildered for long. "Watch the deck when he pulls it up to his chest," she whispered.

Shortly after he started catching the index, Bart called off the play, left the table and buzzed Clance.

"I nixed the play," he said.

"Too bad," Clance said. "I thought you said Dewey was a hundred-percenter."

"He is. But he's also flashing the top card."

"No shit? Plus the hole card?"

"A hundred percent on the hole card. Maybe seventy-five percent on the top card."

"Why didn't you stay on the game?"

"I've never played a dealer like this before. Have you?"

"Never found one," Clance said. "You should have crushed him."

"I started to play him," Bart said. "But we need some new signals, maybe some new procedures. If I know the next card to come off, I really need to know what Jimmy's hand is. Just telling him if the dealer's pat or stiff doesn't cut it. If I know the next card's an eight, there's no way I want Jimmy to hit if he's got a fifteen or sixteen. But if he's got a twelve or thirteen, then I want him to take that card. The way we play now, Jimmy doesn't show me his hand. We've got to think this thing through, Clance. We're going to need some new signals if we really want to milk old Dewey for what he's worth."

"I'll call Johnny," Clance said. "We'll meet at my place tomorrow afternoon and work it out."

"It was Stacy who started catching the indexes," Bart said. "I didn't even notice it till she clued me in."

"We'll cut her ten percent on the play. Two p.m. at my place to work it out with Johnny."

"Why Johnny?" Bart asked. "Jimmy's pretty hot to play this guy."

"Let's say the top card's an eight or nine," Clance said. "And your big player's got a twelve. If it's Jimmy, you'd have him hit. With Johnny, you can have him double down."

"Double down on a hard twelve?"

"Why not? Johnny's a crazy Asian. Anyway, it looks kind of funny if you're back on the same game tomorrow with Jimmy since you two aren't supposed to know each other. We don't want to raise suspicions."

Jersey Jimmy would be pissed. He wasn't especially fond of Johnny the Jap. Jimmy was a stocky guy in his early thirties. His head was shaved, the style for guys his age. He had massively muscled arms and broad shoulders from pumping iron. His bike was a late-model Harley Sportster, chopped, but with lots of chrome and a custom-painted gas tank. He had a very cocky air about him that bugged the shit out of Bart.

The day Bart first met Jimmy at Clance's place—which was the day after Bart got to Reno—Jimmy never sat down, just paced the floor in his leathers. He had a long stringy blond beard that would compete with the best of ZZ Top. Both of his arms were sleeved in ink. Some of the work was nice, but a lot of it was pretty crude.

"I want you to shave tonight," Clance said to him after making introductions. "Tomorrow we'll take you shopping for clothes. You're gonna have to wear long sleeves."

"Everybody's got tats now," Jimmy protested. "Tats don't mean nothin'. My banker's got more ink on him than me!"

Clance reached across the table and tapped Jimmy on the forearm just above the wrist. "Does he have one like that?" he asked, indicating one of the better designs—a baroque script lettering in royal red and gold with light blue highlight work. It said, "Eat Shit."

Jimmy just shrugged and didn't argue it further.

Johnny the Jap wasn't Japanese; he was Korean—a huge Korean, about six-foot-six and well over three hundred pounds. He rode a Japanese bike, a chopped Honda VTX 1800. There aren't many bikers who ride Hondas and hold their own with the outlaw factions of the biker community, most of whom tend to be rabid Harley-Davidson freaks. But Johnny was such a mountain of a man, he stood tall in tough crowds.

That didn't stop Jersey Jimmy from breaking his balls over beer at Clance's kitchen table shortly after Johnny arrived. It was the first time Bart had ever met either of them, as he and Stacy had just gotten to Reno the night before.

"Is that your rice burner out there?" Jimmy said.

"Point of fact," Johnny said, "the Honda VTX burns high-octane gasoline, not rice."

"You're livin' in the U.S. of A. now."

"I was born in Los Angeles. Never lived anywhere but the U.S.A."

"So why don't you get yourself an American bike?" Jimmy said.

"Harleys are made in Milwaukee, not Tokyo."

"I've got nothing against Milwaukee," Johnny said. "They make great beer. But a Harley-Davidson is just a heavy slow-ass beast. I

prefer to go fast. My bike was manufactured at the Honda factory in Marysville, Ohio.”

“I’m talkin’ about gettin’ an all-American bike—not a bunch of Jap parts slapped together on some assembly line here to save on shipping costs.”

“Next time you pull your fender off, I’ll show you where it says ‘Showa Japan’ on your authentic all-American Harley front end.”

“Horseshit.”

“I’ve got a set of wrenches if you want to go outside right now. You want to put a couple hundred bucks on it?”

“You’re full o’ shit, man. Maybe my bike has some imported parts, but a Harley’s an all-American bike. Hondas are strictly for tourists, man. Tourists and frat boys.”

“Hey, any time you want to hit the highway and see who leaves who in the dust, let’s do it. I’ll be pulling a lot more weight, but I’m still willing to bet my bike’s faster than yours. You know why Harleys go so slow, don’t you?”

Jimmy narrowed his eyes.

Johnny said, “If you go any faster than sixty on a Harley, you can’t see where all the parts fall off.”

“Fuck you, man. That joke’s older’n you are.”

“There’s a reason why it’s an old joke. Just put your money where your mouth is.”

That’s when Bart decided to butt in. “You take that bet, Jimmy, and you lose your money.”

“Shit, Bart, you’re a Harley man. Ain’t that your flathead out there? That greasy ol’ rat bike?”

Bart turned to Johnny. “Your bike’s faster, Johnny, but that’s not the issue. It’s a matter of aesthetics. I don’t give a fuck how fast your bike is, how many trophies it’s won, or whatever the fuck *Consumer Reports* has to say about it. Your bike doesn’t look like a Harley. It looks like a bike that wishes it was a Harley.” He turned to Jimmy. “And you’re a fuckin’ moron,” he went on. “I shoulda let you take the bet. You don’t even know your front-end’s made in Japan? Maybe forgivable. You can’t tell a flathead from a knucklehead? Unfuckingforgivable.”

Jimmy listened to this with a sour expression on his face, then leaned back on his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He narrowed his eyes at Bart and said, "I'd kick your fuckin' ass if you weren't one of the seven dwarfs."

Bart stood up so quickly his chair tipped over behind him with a loud bang. "You wanna run that by me again?" he said as he stepped in front of Jimmy.

Jimmy just sat there, the picture of sneering relaxation. He looked mildly amused, but he made no response.

"I asked you if you'd care to repeat your last remark," Bart said, moving as close to Jimmy as he could without touching him. "Didn't you say something about kickin' my ass?"

Jimmy snorted a nervous laugh. "Are you jokin'?" he said, flexing his enormous biceps without removing his hands from behind his head.

Stacy looked worried. Bart weighed in at somewhere around 130 pounds, while Jimmy was closer to 230, much of it muscle. But Bart saw her catch the calm smile on Clance's face as he shook his head. Clance had seen Bart do this a hundred times and didn't take it seriously.

"Let's get something straight," Bart said, his face not more than six inches in front of Jimmy's. "I'm not joking and I fight dirty, so watch your nuts. And don't ever let me get my face this close to yours again, because I bite. I'll take your fuckin' nose off. Unless you want to look like the ugliest motherfucker that ever kicked my ass, you better keep your fuckin' distance."

The look on Jimmy's face had gone from amused to alarmed. "Hey, Bart, we're just havin' a friendly discussion here about aesthetics. That's all. No need to get physical. We're on the same team, man."

Bart backed off a step, but continued to stare Jimmy down.

"Speakin' of aesthetics," Clance interrupted. "I got a hat for you, Bart."

Bart took another step back, then slowly turned to look at Clance. "I don't wear hats," he said. He turned to Debbie, Clance's wife, who was sitting at the far end of the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee.

"You got another cup of that mud?" he asked her.

Bart had attended their wedding in Berkeley a year earlier, an outdoor affair. She was a big, buxom woman in her forties, with long, wild, curly blond hair that splayed over her shoulders. She wore tight clothes and looked like what she was, a tough biker chick.

"There's coffee in the pot," she said, without looking up from her smart phone. "You can rinse out that mug in the sink ... And thanks for leaving Jimmy with his nose. I wasn't looking forward to cleaning up the blood."

"Here's the deal, man," Clance said to Bart. "We're not counting cards anymore. We're playin' the dealer's hole card. It's a lot stronger. How are your eyes?"

"They're not what they used to be," Bart said, rinsing the ceramic mug under the faucet.

"Are you wearing contacts?" Clance asked.

"I'm not required to wear corrective lenses. I read the DMV eye chart a month ago. That's all that matters to me. But I can tell you for a fact my eyes aren't what they used to be."

"Can you still read the shop manuals without a magnifying glass?" Clance had always kept a magnifying glass with his shop manuals and was always amazed that Bart never needed it.

"I haven't looked at a shop manual lately. I know my bike blind-folded and I haven't had much repair business lately." Bart sat down next to Debbie and spooned some sugar from a bowl on the table into his black coffee—two, three, four spoonfuls. Then he picked up Debbie's pack of cigarettes from the table in front of her, shook a few up from the pack and looked at her questioningly.

"Same old Bart," she said. "Go ahead."

He took a cigarette and tore the filter off, tossing it into the ash-tray. "I owe you one," he said.

"You owe me a couple cartons," she said.

Clance dug a dog-eared Harley parts catalog out from under a tall stack of *Hustlers* on the floor behind him. He opened it and flipped a few pages, then held it out in front of Bart. "Read that," he said, pointing to some fine print.

Bart started to reach for it but Clance stopped him.

"Just read it from there," he said. He was holding it about five feet from Bart's eyes.

Bart started to read the text Clance was pointing to: "... metering device controls oil delivery to the top end, ensuring rapid lifter pump-up and reducing possibility of oil starvation to the bottom end—"

Clance yanked the manual away and looked at the page Bart had been reading from. He moved it closer to his eyes, then further away, then held it for a moment studying it at arm's length, squinting.

"It's right under 'Hydraulic Tappets' at the bottom," Bart said.

Clance fished a magnifying glass from a small drawer built into the underside of the table top. He examined the text. "Goddamn it, Bart," he said. "You've got the best fuckin' eyes on the planet! I've got a twenty-three-year-old kid working for me—twenty-twenty vision he says, never wore glasses in his life—and he can't read this damn thing at that distance."

"Actually," Bart said, "I'd've had more trouble reading it closer. I have to back up now when I'm slinging ink—for the detail work. I've lost a lot of my close-up focus."

Clance snorted a laugh. "Your focus is dead-on where we need it," he said. "The distance from your eyes to the dealer's hole card is about four to five feet, plus or minus."

Bart had known a few hole-card players he'd met at the tables. They called it "front-loading." The term comes from the type of blackjack dealer who loads his hole card beneath his upcard from the front—instead of the back or side—allowing an alert player to get a flash of the face of the card. "I've never been able to see a dealer's hole card," he said to Clance. "I've been counting cards for twenty years and I've never even spotted one accidentally. What makes you think I can do this?"

"You just have to know which dealers are flashers," Clance said. "We're scouting the joints on every shift. Usually it's the break-ins who haven't been properly trained. The ones that got juiced in, they're the ones that get shitty on-the-job training. We're pretty much only playing the hand-held games—one and two-deckers. Most dealers don't

flash from a shoe. With your eyes, man, you're a natural. And you're short. You can get a good angle on the card without looking like you're restin' your head on the layout. All you need is a baseball cap to hide your eyes, man. You don't want the boss or dealer to see where you're lookin'."

"I don't wear baseball caps."

"Hey, man, it's just for the play. You don't have to change anything else about your appearance. You gotta hide your eyes."

"I'll wear shades."

"Shades won't work, man."

"Why not?" He pulled a pair of wraparound Oakleys from his jacket pocket and put them on. "Can you see my eyes?"

"Let's test 'em," Clance said. He opened the shop manual, then turned it toward Bart at the same distance as his initial eye test. "Read that line," he said, pointing to some fine print.

Even squinting, Bart couldn't make it out. "Mary had a little lamb," he said.

Clance put the manual down.

Bart took off his sunglasses.

"You see, man," Clance said, "I already anticipated this problem." He tossed Bart a small black plastic bag that had been sitting on the table.

Bart looked inside, then took the cap out. It was black with an orange and silver Harley-Davidson logo. "It's awfully damn new-looking," he said.

"Well, they weren't selling used ones at the bike shop. I'd be happy to fuck it up for you. I could take a shit on it or something."

Bart put the cap on and pulled the brim down to his eyebrows. "So why aren't you trying to clean up my biker act? Last time I was up here you kept trying to make me look like a socially respectable citizen. You think playing hole cards I'll be able to clean out the dealer's check rack regardless of what I look like?"

"You're not betting the money, man. You'll be signaling the hole card to a big player. You're just the grubby local biker dude who likes to play nickel blackjack. They won't even be lookin' at you, man. First

off, you look like a biker—and by that I mean a biker of the road scum variety—which means you’re probably a high school dropout, not exactly long on brains. And you’re sitting at a six-five game—further evidence you’re brain-dead. If you had any smarts you’d walk twenty feet and sit down at one of the shoe games where you get full pay on your blackjacks. Plus, you’re bettin’ a nickel a hand. You’re a nobody, man. Totally invisible.”

“What’s a six-five game?” Stacy piped in.

“It’s a crappy new blackjack game,” Clance said.

“Are you going to be the BP?” Bart asked him. “BP” was card-counter slang for “big player,” the guy at the table betting the money.

“No, man. I can’t even be seen with you. I got a little too well-known in this town.”

“Are you dead sure about the law on this.”

“Damn straight. It’s already been decided in the courts. State of Nevada versus Einbinder. Einbinder won. It’s the dealer’s job to conceal the hole card, not the player’s job to avoid seeing it. So long as we’re just finding sloppy dealers—exploiting their incompetence—we’re clean in the eyes of the law.”

“What if they figure out what you’re doing?” Stacy asked.

“They kick us out,” he said. “They might send a flyer out on us but they generally deal with it in-house because they’re embarrassed to tell the other joints they’ve got poorly trained dealers. Usually all they do is eighty-six us and fix the dealer.”

“How many dealers have you got right now?” Bart asked.

“About a dozen between Reno and Tahoe. Some of ’em aren’t all that consistent. Maybe half a dozen really strong ones. Most are workin’ grave. That’s when they break in the rookies. But there’s new ones showin’ up all the time. It’s these six-five games. They’re spreadin’ like a disease. All the card counters are pissed off, but we’re getting’ more hole-card opportunities than ever.”

“What are six-five games?” Stacy asked again.

“Blackjacks pay six-to-five instead of three-to-two,” he said. “That short-pay triples the house edge. The squares love ’em. What do they know about percentages? They just want to play single-deck.”

"How do I keep under the radar so surveillance doesn't spot me?" Bart said.

"The main problem isn't surveillance. Those guys couldn't find shit in an outhouse. You gotta watch out for Barry's crew. He's our competition, a real fucking asshole. He's doing the same thing we're doing, but he keeps cutting in on our plays. When he spots us at a table, he sends in one of his players to pick off our signals. It blows the play. You can't have multiple players at the same table bettin' big money and all makin' the same types of weird decisions and all kickin' the dealer's ass when they should be losin'. With one guy doin' this, they can believe he's just a jerk on a lucky streak. What's worse, when you got that many chips movin' out of the dealer's check rack, it brings down the heat even if nobody was noticin' the weird plays. Worst of all, some of Barry's guys have been eighty-sixed so many times they bring down the heat just by showin' up. The dealer gets fixed and my players get branded in that joint. One of the reasons I wanted to get you up here is that Barry doesn't know you. It's a fuckin' war, man."

"Even if he doesn't recognize me," Bart said, "won't he recognize the BP at my table?"

"You're not going to be workin' with any of my old crew, man. That's why Jimmy and Johnny are here. There's a few more dudes comin' too. I recruited 'em at the Laughlin rally a couple months back."

"No shit?" Bart said. "A biker team? Are we gonna get jackets? I'll design the colors. The Socially Respectable Motorcycle Club of Reno."

"I want one of those!" Debbie said.

"Did you inform them they'd have to scrub the grease out from under their fingernails?" Bart asked, with a sidelong glance at Jimmy.

Jimmy gave him the finger.

"They're all good people, Bart. I hand-picked 'em. They know the score."

"Who hand-picked them?" Debbie asked.

"Debbie picked them," Clance quickly corrected himself. "The hard part is still going to be keeping Barry's crew from pickin' off our signals. Sooner or later, his scouts'll spot the play."

"Why don't you just change your signals?" Stacy asked him.

"Yeah, I've done that, but they still pick 'em off. There just aren't that many ways to signal that look natural."

"Have you ever studied semiotics?" she asked.

Clance grinned at her. "I think that was an elective course in my kindergarten class," he said. "But I signed up for Tinker Toys instead."

"It's the study of sign language," she said. "What you need is a pragmatic language system that's clear to the interpretant, but undetectable to any third party. You've created a sign language, but it's too transparent. Did you ever study cryptography?"

Clance was studying her intently. "I substituted Lincoln Logs for that," he said.

"It's the study of codes and ciphers," she said. "You need to encrypt your signals in such a way that your competition can't read them, even if they know you're signaling."

"Where'd you find this girl, Bart?" Clance said. "You know, Stacy, I could use a girl like you. I mean, aside from this signaling idea, you'd be a great distraction on the arm of one of my BPs. Then again, in the right outfit you could pass for a high class hooker with a gambling problem. You could get some real money on the table. You don't look twenty-one though ..."

"I'm nineteen," she said.

"Maybe I could get you some ID."

She chose to ignore the job offer. "Tell me about your signals," she said.

"You should bring her with you when you play, Bart. She'd be a great distraction. Those surveillance dudes will spend all their time focusing on her cleavage."

"I don't have a lot of cleavage," she said.

"Just wear something tight. Hot babes are the best distraction."

"What if they card me?"

"If you're not playing or drinking, nobody's gonna card you. And if they do, they just tell you to move along."

"I think you need decoy signals," Stacy said. "Keep using your current signals to confuse Barry's guys, but those won't be the signals your

players will be reading. You can use different more subtle signals for your players."

"I can tell this is gonna be way too complicated," Clance said. "I've already got problems with missed signals when they're simple as shit."

Clance picked up the phone and ordered a couple pizzas.

Debbie started to question Stacy about semiotics.

"I think it'll lead to massive confusion," Clance interjected before Stacy could answer. "Our own guys'll be screwin' up."

"Then we'll have to get smarter players," said Debbie. "We can't afford to have our best dealers fixed and our players eighty-sixed."

Debbie asked Stacy a couple questions about how the decoy signals would differ from the real signals, but Stacy said she hadn't really thought it out. "I can try to come up with a set of signals if you show me how the game goes. I was never even in a casino until last night."

Debbie turned to Clance. "We've got to try this," she said to him. "This way if Barry's players sit down at our table, they'll think they can read the signals, but they'll think our guy is screwing up and they'll leave because the game looks too weak to invest in."

"Whatever," he said. "But I foresee massive confusion."

Listening to Stacy expounding on the merits of semiotics and cryptography, Bart was getting pissed off. He could see Clance was humoring her, while Jimmy and Johnny were engrossed in the merits of Clance's *Hustler* collection. For the moment, Bart held his tongue. But later that night, when he and Stacy were alone in their motel room, he lit into her.

"Semiotics," he said sarcastically. "Cryptography! You're gonna reinvent hole-card signals? Gimme a fucking break. Do you know how fast this game is? You think I wanna be giving two sets of signals, one decoy set and one real set? Jesus Christ, you gotta keep it simple. It has to be smooth and accurate. No mistakes. Clance thinks you're an idiot."

"I thought Clance liked me," she said.

"Yeah, he thought you'd make good eye candy."

The night after Stacy discovered Dewey was flashing the indexes, Bart found himself sitting on Dewey's game with Johnny the Jap. Dewey might as well have just cleared the chips out of his check-rack and pushed them across the table because they were all just going through the motions. Johnny was crushing the game, up more than eighteen large and he was betting only five hundred a hand. Stacy wasn't with Bart. Clance didn't want her presence in the casino that night—just his feeling for changing the look of the play.

There was a suit convention in the pit—the pit boss, two floor-men, the shift manager, and some guy in a polo shirt Bart guessed to be from surveillance. All of them kept looking over at Johnny and mumbling and whispering to each other, generally appearing nervous and hot under the collar. One of the bosses was looming menacingly over the table, staring at Johnny like he hated his guts. But Johnny was perfect. He acted like he didn't even notice the boss's scowl and at one point put a wood-tipped Black & Mild in his mouth and asked the boss for a light.

Bart was thinking he had to call off this play soon, when a hand came up where Johnny held a pair of sevens and Dewey was showing a nine with an eight in the hole. The next card to come was an eight. Bart signaled Johnny to split the sevens and by the time the hand finished, Johnny had split and resplit sevens and doubled down on one of the hands, earning another two thousand when all of his hands beat the dealer's. This put him up over twenty thousand on the play—so Bart gave him the signal to walk.

Johnny stood up and started stuffing his massive stacks of black chips into all available pockets, waving off the dealer who wanted to color him up.

It was all Bart could do to keep from laughing. This big fat crazy Korean in a bad-fitting suit had just won more money in two hours than any of those bastards in the pit made in two months.

Bart stuck around, betting his quarter chip at third base for another twenty minutes or so. He wanted to hear what the suits had to say about Johnny's performance. Sitting there in his biker rags, he was,

to all intents and purposes, invisible to the mucky-mucks. They made little attempt to keep their voices down.

Everything he heard was good. Johnny was a degenerate Chinaman, the worst player they ever saw, but the luckiest sonofabitch on the planet. They hoped he would come back. They planned to raise the table limits for him next time he played. His luck couldn't hold out forever. The surveillance dude assured one and all that Johnny wasn't counting cards and his weird plays couldn't have been based on hole-card information. One of the bosses pulled the deck off the table and instructed the surveillance guy to "check it out." But Bart knew the deck was clean. They wouldn't find any marks on the cards. They never stopped to consider that their veteran dealer might have a few weak spots in his technique. There would be a host meeting Johnny at the cage to try and give him a room for the night. Of course, they didn't know it, but Johnny wouldn't be stopping at the cage.

Bart left the casino feeling on top of the world. He'd been hole-carding for only three months, but he knew he'd found his calling in life. He'd discovered a skill that would earn him real money, maybe even make him rich, and he was better at what he did than anyone else he knew. He wasn't just a nobody scooter tramp anymore. He was someone the world had to deal with.

SEVEN

“DAMN IT. BART, don’t fade on me!”

The dream again that he feared was not a dream.

“Not fading, Dorsett ... I’m right here.”

“Thank you for getting my name right. Where’d you get the money? Five neat bundles of hundreds—ten thousand each—that’s not the way your biker buddies pay you for adjusting theirissy bars. Where’d you get it?”

“Money’s irrelevant ... Nothin’ to do with what happened out there. In the desert.”

“What desert?”

That’s right ... Dorsett knew nothing about that night in the desert. That wasn’t what he was asking about. That was a month ago, the night they came to Vegas. That was a different cop, a cop who asked no questions.