

John-John's Lonely Grave

I.

In the opinion of J.D. Breckenridge, there was only one place in Port Davis that served real coffee. And it wasn't any of the fancy coffee shops with their roasters or their baristas or their national brands, it was the Double Cup Diner, down by the harbor. It smelled of fry grease, and the sea, and the diesel fumes of the trucks coming and going that shook the salt shakers and made the blinds quiver, but the coffee was just as he liked it. Black as night, bitter as broken love.

He looked into the cup, and saw his own face, rippling with the tiny movements of his huge hand, his fingers far too large for the hole in the handle. The cup was almost too hot to hold. It was perfect. Every time.

The face he saw on the surface was a little more careworn than he would have liked, but that came, he supposed, with the life he led; always a part of other people's tragedies, searching for the lost, and being a "fugitive" from a government that considered him an "asset," not a person. His curse, his "talent" made him far too valuable to be allowed to be a free man.

"We'll see 'bout that," he silently reflected, and took a hot, bitter, drink. It stung a little, and was warm all the way down to behind his breastbone.

He looked out the window. This wasn't the richest part of town, nor would most people have found it attractive, like the tree-lined suburbs to the North, or the gleaming towers of the business district, but the money that made those displays of wealth possible was made here. In these old, worn, gray buildings, people were making their living, sending goods from everywhere, to everywhere, and bringing in the luxuries that the folks who lived in the prettier parts of town valued. Even at this late hour, this place was alive. Downtown was dead at midnight, and the streets of the suburbs were quiet, every middle manager and bank supervisor in their mortgaged, nearly identical houses. But the harbor never slept, and the Double Cup Diner never closed, not even on Christmas.

A dockworker walked by, toward the harbor, his face grim, his hands in the pockets of his work pants, his work gloves hanging from a loop on his worn, oil-stained jacket. It would have never occurred to that man to put his work gloves on to protect his hands from the unseasonable cold snap and the wind that whipped off the bay. Work gloves were for working. He was on his way to work, not working yet. He would put on his gloves, put away who he was outside the harbor gate, and become a cog in the vast machine of commerce, a cog made of muscle, blood and the determination to earn an honest living.

J.D. heard footsteps approaching his table. He looked up to see a smile, and better still, a glass pot bearing a refill for his coffee cup, barely half empty. "Howdy, Miss Myra," he said. "Bearer of the life-givin' bean." He put his cup down where she could fill it easily. In all the time he had been coming here, he had never seen her spill a drop.

She wore a pink, old-fashioned waitress uniform, worn, but freshly laundered and pressed. Her graying hair was up in a net, her fingernails short and clean. The whole diner was clean as a rich man's hospital, a near obsession with Missus Myra, who had owned the place, along with her brother, Tom, the short order cook for years.

“Now, Ma'am, ah don't know why you're workin' th' late shift, seein' as y' own the place. Seems you an' Tom could work when y' want.”

She smiled a little wider. She was stout, and her face and hands showed the constant, hard work she had endured to keep her little business alive through all the changes, ups and downs that had come their way. There was a star-shaped scar on her neck, toward the right hand side, an old bullet wound that was a reminder of an armed robbery attempt from years ago that she had defied with a pot of coffee in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other. She tried to cover it with makeup and powder, but it was not the sort of thing that a man like J.D. Breckenridge would fail to notice.

He had never mentioned it, of course. That would have been impolite, and maybe painful for her. He had looked it up in the news archives. She'd never mentioned it either.

“I like the late shift,” she said, filling the cup expertly. “It's quiet, and I can get the cleanin' done. Can't find anyone who cleans proper these days.”

“I imagine not, t' your high standards, Ma'am. And I like it plenty. Nice to have a clean, quiet place for a cuppa coffee.”

“I'm glad. Thanks for bein' such a repeat customer. Always glad to see you, Hun. Care for somethin' hot to eat? Bowl of Tom's chili? He just made a batch yesterday.”

J.D. stumbled for a moment. One adventure with Tom's chili had been quite enough for him. The food was not up to the expectations that the coffee set, and the regret it had caused J.D.'s stomach was long and memorable. “Uh, I...like your coffee.”

“All right, Hun. You just let me know if you need anythin'.”

“Will do, Ma'am. And thanks again.”

He drew his pocket watch out of his vest and looked at it. It looked very small in his hands, silver and delicate. It was almost 1am. Maybe time to get back to his hotel and try to get some sleep, nightmares or no. He thought about it, and took another long drink of coffee.

The bell over the door jingled. A women entered, looking around, searching for someone. By her manner and her expensive shoes, she did not belong in the harbor district at 1am. Her hair was styled, her clothes were far too stylish for someone coming from a regular job. She looked at him, hesitated, and headed for his table.

By habit, his hand dropped casually to his pistol grip. She didn't look threatening, holding nothing in her hand but a large envelope. But it's the one you don't see coming that gets you.

By the time she had come all the way to the end of the diner, where J.D. sat, he knew she was probably a client, not some government gungel. She looked anxious, like she couldn't wait to talk to him. She walked quickly, as if she were afraid he'd disappear.

She stopped at his booth. “You're Mr. Breckenridge, aren't you?” she said, and her voice inflected upward, trembling just a bit.

He slid out of the booth and stood up. She took in a little breath as he towered over her. He smiled, trying not to look like a dangerous man, but he knew that usually didn't help much. “Yes, Ma'am,” he said, nodding slightly to indicate that he was not a threat. “Can I help you in some way?”

“I hope so,” she said, looking down at the envelope she carried.

“Well, then, shall we sit down an' talk?” He gestured toward the booth. She sat down quickly, looking around wide-eyed like a doe during deer season. He glanced out the window, looking across the street, and down to the corner. She was acting a lot like someone who thought they might be followed.

“I hope so,” she repeated. She opened her envelope, and withdrew a folder, and another smaller envelope. She looked around again before opening the folder.

J.D. softened his voice, “Should we be expectin' someone t' join us, Ma'am?” She looked at him, eyes widening still further, her mouth coming open just a little to reveal perfect teeth. Expensive teeth.

“How did you...never mind,” she said. “I'm just not...used to this part of town. I'm probably just being paranoid.” She tried to smile, failed, and opened her folder.

“I hope you can help me Mr. Breckenridge. I don't know what else to do.”

“Ah hope ah can too, Ma'am. And most folks call me J.D.”

She did manage a little smile at this. “My name is,” she looked around again, “Aubrey Styles.”

She waited for a reaction. J.D. knew the family name. A wealthy family that owned a substantial portion of Downtown, and the glass towers that lowered over it. “And what can ah do for you, Ms. Styles?”

“Aubrey's fine,” she said, forcing a laugh. “You're a very polite man, for someone in your...profession.”

“Ah try t' be,” He smiled, and this time, it did seem to soothe her somewhat. Her weight settled into the booth, and she no longer appeared to be ready to bolt like a frightened squirrel.

Myra appeared at the table. She smiled at the new arrival. “Mornin' Ma'am. Can I get you anythin'? J.D. here likes the coffee, and I just put on a fresh pot.”

“No...no thank you.” She said.

“If you need anything, just let me know.” Myra said, and walked away.

J.D. noticed that Aubrey watched her go, and waited until she was well away to speak.

“I hope you can help me, J.D.”

He nodded. "Let's see. He took the folder, and looked over each picture carefully. One with an older man, sharp-eyed, his face deeply creased, standing in an impressive looking office. Another with the same man, older and careworn, with Aubrey and a younger, pale looking man. Another with the younger man, alone, managing a smile, but slightly stooped and paler. He reached over and picked up a photograph out of the folder. "This your brother?"

She nodded.

J.D. regarded the photo in his hand.

"How long has your brother been ill?"

"All his life," she said, "How did you know that?"

He smiled and sat back. "Ah really like the coffee here. Much better than what you'd expect in an all-night diner, even one calls itself the "Double Cup." But ah've never asked Myra how they manage that. D'you know why?"

"No."

"Cause if they tol' me, I'd have t' stop believin' that it's magic. Ah kinda like believin' in a little magic."

She looked puzzled.

"Now, if ah tell you that your brother is wearing a medical alert bracelet in that picture, y' won't be as impressed, now will y?"

She laughed. A real, if shallow laugh. She visibly relaxed.

"Now, let's hear about your brother. How long's he been missin'?"

She looked startled again. He shook his head. "Folks don't generally come lookin' for me t' talk about coffee."

"Oh, right."

"So, how long's he been gone?"

"Two weeks. Since the day of my father's death."

J.D. looked at the picture of the brother again.

She sat shifting her weight from side to side, silently watching J.D.'s intense gaze on the photo. "His name was...is..."

J.D.'s eyes flickered up to hers, then back down to the photograph. "Ah'd take it as a kindness if y'd not

tell me his name quite yet.”

She sat, squirming, more evidently uncomfortable by the minute.

J.D. set the photo down gently. “It’s not uncommon for folks t’ want t’ get away for awhile after somebody they care ‘bout dies. You sure he’s not just off somewheres, wantin’ t’ be alone with his thoughts?”

“No.” She said abruptly. “That can’t be.”

“Because,” J.D. said, “His condition don’t allow long trips. Hasta be near his doctor, and his meds, right?”

She nodded.

“An he’s been gone two weeks.”

She nodded again.

J.D. paused. “You can give me his name now. Full name, at birth.”

“John Early Styles,” she said.

He looked out the window, away from her. He had learned that when he was reaching for someone, there was a look in his eyes that scared folks. One had called it “corpse eyes.” Another had said, “emptiness.” J.D. figured his eyes probably looked like pieces of night, with more night behind them.

He focused silently on the name, fast, slower, slower, feeling himself spread thin across the whole world, waiting for the little tug at his mind that would tell him where John Early Styles was.

But there was no tug. No feeling. Nothing. John Early Styles was beyond his reach. Beyond his sister, beyond anything.

He turned to face her. “Ah’m sorry Miss Aubrey, Ah don’ think ah kin help y’”

“Why not?” she said. J.D. could see her shoulders drop, but line of her mouth and the shine of her eyes showed him something.

“Ah don’ mean t’ be rude, but ah think y’ know why.” He stood up, and headed for the register.

“Wait,” she said. “I...wasn’t fully...I didn’t tell you everything. I’m sorry.”

J.D. turned around and looked at her. “John Early Styles is dead. An’ you knew that b’fore y’ walked in here.”

“Yes.”

“Then why did y' try an' deceive me, if ah may ask?”

She looked down at the table. “I...need closure. I need to bury my Brother,” she said.

“Try agin’,” J.D. said, his voice flat and even. “Not buyin' it.”

She sighed. “I don't know how you knew he was dead.”

“Magick.” J.D. replied,

She looked up. “Do you really need to know why?”

“If ah'm goin' to help y', and it ain't gonna be easy, yes, ah do.”

She paused. “Our father left...a lot of money. Property. He told us that the will was divided up three ways, evenly to each of us.”

“So there's 'nother sibling. But he don't appear in th' family picture y' showed me. Why not?”

“He and Dad...well...they didn't get along. Not bad enough to write him out, at least not yet, but they weren't close. Too much alike – headstrong, ambitious, neither of them could admit they were wrong about anything. Ever.”

“Y' didn' mention him either. So y' think he's got somethin' to do with John Early's disappearin'?”

She stared at the table again. “I...I don't think he'd...I mean, he's...difficult, but I don't think he's a murderer. Not of his own brother.”

“Half-brother.” J.D. said.

“How did you...”

“Your fathers' wearin' a weddin' ring in th' picture in th' office. In th' one where he's with you an' John Early, he's not. Widower doesn' usually stop wearin' his ring unless there's another woman aroun'. Was John Early the one that was by...the other woman, one he didn' marry?”

“Yes. After Mom died, he...brought in another woman. Jeanette. John-John, that's what we called John Early, was her son, by him. He never married Jeanette. He promised her he would, but he...ran out of time I suppose.”

“How long ago d' y' mother die? Some years, ah expect.”

“Twenty years or so.”

J.D. nodded. “So you, no more than, say, eight. An' your other brother, what's his full name?”

“John David Styles.”

“He was no more'n ten.”

“Yes.”

“An John Early, 'bout say, three?”

“Yes.”

J.D. came back to the table, and sat down across from her. “Y' don't have a picture of your Momma.” It was a flat statement. “Y' came home from school one day, and they's all gone.”

“Yes.”

“An' John Early was born...b'fore your mother passed.”

She didn't look up from the table. “He was good to John-John,” she said. “Made sure he got his medication, got him the best doctors. Said he did it for Jeanette's sake. He sent his assistant over with the meds every week, to be sure he got them.”

The silence hung in the air for a long moment.

“An' your father's name was John.”

She looked up. “I suppose that was an easy one. Yes.”

J.D. picked up the folder. “Ah'm gonna do m' best t' find out what happened to your brother, Miss Aubrey. We can discuss m' expenses when the job's done.”

“Thank you.” Tears shone in her eyes, but she held them back.

“But,” J.D. said as she stood to go, “Y' better never play me for a fool agin. If y' lie t' me, or leave anythin' out that y' know y' should tell me, I'll walk on this. We understand each other?”

She nodded.

“Y' want t' find a way to cut John David out of the will.” He said. “This ain't about buryin' poor John Early.”

“No.”

“Best not be. 'Cause somebody's already done that. Corpses that ain't been buried tend t' turn up pretty quick.”

She left hurriedly. Myra came, and poured him another cup. “A case for you, J.D.?” she said, smiling.

“Now, Miss Myra, y' know a cain't talk about..”

“Of course not,” she said. “But you almost walked out on her. Why'd you take it?”

He looked at the picture of John Early Styles. There was a forced smile for the portrait, the eyes showed a long history of pain.

“Ah guess it ain't for her. It's for the poor little rich bastard...sorry ma'am. Poor sick lil' John-John. Ah figgur he prolly deserves better than a lonely grave out nowheres.”

II.

The music hit him well down the hallway of the apartment building. It thudded, again and again, relentlessly. J.D. sighed. He came to the door he was looking for, and pressed the intercom button. “

The music came thumping out of the intercom. “Sprite!” J.D. yelled, “Ah'm here.”
The music abruptly stopped. J.D. quietly thanked his good fortune. He was getting a headache.

Several locks rattled, and the door opened. A small, round, pale female face emerged, at the level of J.D.'s stomach. It was framed in straight, glossy black hair. She wore an oversize black t-shirt with a large red “A” on the front. Several silver rings pierced both her ears.

“Hello, Monster Man,” she said.

“Howdy, Sprite. Y' busy?”

“Not too busy to take your money. Come in.”

He entered the apartment. It was, as always, filled with dirty clothes, food delivery boxes, wrappers of various types, and stacks of electronic equipment, blinking with red and green lights. Several scented candles burned, mixing their waxy, heavy spiced scents with the greasy smell of fast food.

In a separate room, the only other one in the apartment, a bare mattress lay on the floor, illuminated only by the light from six computer screens. On a pile of plastic boxes, a keyboard and mouse faced the screens. Sprite turned to him.

“So, Godzilla, what you got for me?” She smiled and cocked her head.

“Ah need some info, pretty quick.”

“Pretty illegal, I hope?”

He nodded. “Prolly. Ah need personal documents on several members of a family. Name a “Styles.” Ah need th' medical records for all of 'em. An ah need t' know how they spend their money.” He paused, “An it needs t' stay where it is.”

She sniffed. “Rich pricks. I know 'em. The old fucker is dead, right?”

“Dead, an very buried.”

“Oh yeah. I heard about that! He took it all with him, right? Under a great big rock. You treasure hunting?”

He smiled. “Naw. Jus' tryin' t' figgur out what happened. An' a few other things.”

“I think his brats killed him for his money,” she shrugged. Funny that it's under a big ass rock.”

“Well, I guess I'll figgur it out, one way or t'other.”

“Snaking their financial records won't take long. The personal records will be soft as cake.” She sat down and put the keyboard in her lap. The mouse was placed on a pizza box to her right. “Go do some detective stuff and come back tomorrow afternoon. I'll have it all then.”

J.D. shook his head. “You're sure good a' this, Sprite. Amazin'.”

She didn't look away from the screen. “Wrong, King Kong. I'm the *best* at this. That's why you pay me the long, long green.” Her fingers set the keys to rattling like a machine gun.

“Ah suppose y' could afford a house cleaner. An' a hazmat team. Or two.”

Something darted out from one of the trash piles and shot across the floor, inches from J.D.'s boot. He jumped back. “Wha th'...y' got a rat!”

She stopped, turned, and looked at him balefully. “That is Mister Ip. He's a ferret, not a rat.”

J.D. looked at the gray, tube-like creature that seemed to be all disproportionately huge fangs on one end, and a stubby tail at the other. A faint, musky smell came faintly to him over the smell of fast food grease and candles.

“Well, ah spose that's an an improvement over th' spiders an' lizards y' used to have.”

She rolled her eyes extravagantly, and returned her gaze to the screens, now alive with letters, numbers, and symbols that J.D. found incomprehensible. “Spiders and reptiles get boring. Mister Ip is always getting into things. I love him. See you tomorrow, Godzilla.”

“See y' then.”

III.

J.D. walked slowly among the headstones. The graveyard was large, with hundreds of graves, but his destination was clear enough.

On a hill near the center, a large, square stone dominated the horizon. He approached it. It was unlike the graves around it, dwarfing and dominating the graves around it. It was not a mausoleum, it was a single, unadorned block of black marble, eight feet square.

One one side, above eye level, engraved in gilt, was a name. There were no dates, no epitaph, as if they were unnecessary. Everyone would know this name.

John J. Styles.

Here was the father of Aubrey Lynn Styles, John David Styles, and John Early Styles.

J.D. sighed. All that he had gained was a middle initial.

The silence was broken by the steady hum of a mower. J.D. turned to see a man in coveralls on a riding mower. He walked up to him.

The man on the mower turned off the engine and smiled. J.D. pulled his flask from his jacket and handed it to the rider. He took a quick swig, and sighed appreciatively.

“Good bourbon, that,” he said. “Miles Garvey, I’m the caretaker. Here to see Styles’ Rock?”

“Ah suppose so. Kinda dif’rent.”

“That it is. We get a photographer now and then. Don’t know that I’ve ever seen one like it.”

“Well, Mister Styles was a unique fella.” J.D. said, receiving his flask, and taking sip in turn.

“That he was.” He nodded toward the stone. “He’s not in that thing. He’s under it. Had it commissioned, brought all the way here, and put on top of his grave. Cost a lot of money, but not much to him, I suppose.”

“Sup’ose not.” They looked up the hill for a moment. “Why, d’ya figgur?”

Miles Garvey smiled. “Well, I hear that he was afraid of grave robbers. Rumor is that he took quite a haul with him. Gold, jewels, an antique or two. I’ve even run off one or two folks poking around there at night, trying to figure out how to get at it.”

“Looks like quite a job.” J.D. said.

Miles Garvey laughed. “Oh, yeah. I’ll worry when I see ‘em coming with a bulldozer. Maybe a crane.”

“Y’ ever see any mourners? He’s only been dead a coupla weeks.”

“No. Just photographers, and the would-be robbers. Graveside service was a bit of a circus, though.”

“How so?” J.D. said.

“Well, the two kids and Styles’ trophy girl got in a screaming row. About came to a fistfight from what I could see. No minister, but the funeral director tried to break it up. I had to come drag him out.” He laughed. “Rich folks, you know?”

“Ah'm learnin'. Well, ah've had 'nough time here, ah suppose.”

The caretaker nodded, and smiled again. “I suppose you'll have plenty of time, someday. We all will.”

J.D. walked back to the gate. He heard the motor start up again.

IV.

The house was a huge mass of gray stone. It reminded him of the gravestone, brutal, square, enormous and plain. If it weren't for the windows, and the huge, bronze doors, he would have thought it was a bunker. J.D. reached for the heavy brass knocker.

Before he could knock, the door opened. A stout, sour man in a white dress jacket and a black turtleneck stood in front of him. He said nothing.

“Howdy. Ah'm J.D. Breckenridge. Aubrey Styles sent me.”

The man stepped aside without a word. J.D. entered the house and stopped, stunned.

The entry room was vast. An enormous skylight filled the room with sunlight. He had expected to see rich paneling, marble floors, elaborate, dark, expensive woodwork, rich imported rugs, artwork – the things one expects to see in a mansion. He blinked. Nothing changed.

Every wall was gray, unvarying concrete, unpainted. The walls were unadorned. The impression was that of an exceptionally clean prison. One broad flight of stairs went up to a mezzanine. Concrete. Grey. Completely empty.

The only other features were two plain steel doors on the left and right side of the room. The one on the left opened silently, and a woman walked through.

She was short, around five feet tall, with grey hair severely tied up in a bun. Her eyes were a piercing, intense blue. She wore no jewelry, no make up, and flat black shoes. A simple navy blue dress completed the look of uncompromising practicality. She looked like she belonged in this concrete box, like a senior flight attendant, or a prison matron.

She did not smile as she walked up to J.D., nor show the slightest hesitation walking up to the huge stranger towering over her. “Can I help you?” she said, in a tone that indicated that she was completely uninterested in the answer to her question.

“Yes, Ma'am. Ah'm J.D. Breckenridge. Ah was asked t' come here by Aubrey Styles.”

“Then you are expected. Miss Adkins is in the gymnasium. Follow me.”

She walked past him, toward the door on the right. A soft, heavy clunk sounded at her approach, and the door swung open to reveal a long hallway. The walls were of the same gray concrete, but they were adorned from floor to the ceiling. Every available inch of both walls were covered with mounted trophy

heads. Antelopes, deer, leopards, bears, cape buffalo, wolves, big cats of every description, even a few rhinoceroses and elephants. A huge hippopotamus, crocodiles, rabbits, and every other animal that could be hunted, anywhere in the world was frozen in a snarl, or an endless stare. A thousand glass eyes glowed in the light from the ceiling.

There was one blank spot, about two-thirds of the way down the hall. The faint, lighter color of the patching of the holes for the mounting screws was still visible. Whatever had been there was large.

She walked on, making no comment, not looking back to see if he was still following. The steel door swung shut with the same ominous thud of a heavy bolt sliding back into place. He felt his stomach tighten a bit, knowing that he would not be getting past that door without her permission.

“This place's sure...secure.” J.D. said.

“Yes,” she said, neither stopping, nor looking back.

They arrived at another steel door. This one, he was a little relieved to see, had a lever handle. She opened the door and stood aside for him to enter.

The room was, like all that he had seen, lit by an immense skylight that admitted the afternoon sun. It was a full three stories in height, and vast. Unlike the rest of the house, the floor was of polished wood. Many stacks of black, cast iron weights were carefully stacked on racks around the walls, and wooden benches without padding were placed among the weights, chrome steel bars propped on stands above most of the benches shone. There were no machines, no mirrors, no treadmills. Six chin-up bars were bolted to the walls, and one wall was completely occupied by a climbing course, irregular hand and footholds bolted to it. There was, he noticed, no provision for a safety harness. Three thick, rough hemp ropes were bolted to the skylight far above. No mat waited at the bottom for those who might fall while attempting the climb.

J.D. thought that twenty athletes could easily work out in this vast, well-equipped space. But only one person was here. On a thin mat, a woman slowly and gracefully twisted herself into an elaborate handstand.

She was, he reflected, a sight to behold. She was blond, her hair fixed back into a braid long enough that she had it loosely looped twice around her neck, and tied with a blue silk ribbon. The fashionable, pale blue yoga gear she wore showed her carefully maintained, athletic frame, graceful, rather than sinewy. She was six feet tall, and moved her long, supple limbs with unhurried, effortless grace into positions that J.D. would have thought painful, or impossible.

She did not acknowledge his entrance until she had finished her exercise, twisting at last, with the same easy grace into a cross legged, sitting position, facing him. She opened her eyes, and looked at him. Her eyes were of the same pale blue as her yoga gear. They were intelligent eyes, sizing him up while flashing a well-practiced smile.

“Howdy, Ma'am,” J.D. said. “Ah'm J.D. Breckenridge. Miss Aubrey sent me t' look into the disappearance of your son.”

She stood. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Breckenridge." She looked around at the gym. "Impressive, isn't it?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"By the look of you, you know your way around a gym. What do you think of it?"

J.D. looked around for a moment. "It's pretty impressive, Miss Adkins. Old-school, ah'd say. The whole staff work out here?"

She smiled again. "Heavens, no. Aside from me, and when he forced his sons to work out here, Only John Senior was allowed to use it."

"Seems like a lot'a iron for just a few to work," J.D. said. "Not a mat t' be seen anywheres. Ah take it Mr. Styles wasn't one t' value comforts."

She smiled again, but the corners of her mouth were tensed. "No. He wasn't. A big, "no pain, no gain" sort of man."

"Welp," J.D. said, "That musta been hard on your son, John Early. Bein' in poor health an' all."

The smile vanished. "John-John hated this place. His father...well...plenty of screaming, you can imagine. The doctor finally forbade him to exert himself."

"Ah cain't imagine that went over well with John Senior."

"No, it didn't," she said, flatly. "John despised weakness in any form, for any reason. He got plenty of work out of John Junior in here though. They competed to the point of exhaustion. Once, when he was twelve, John Junior fell from the climbing wall and broke his leg. John laughed at him."

"Hard man," J.D. said. "Not t' speak ill of your dead husband. Sorry for your loss."

"More loss than you might think, Mr. Breckenridge."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She turned. "I'll go, freshen up and change. Glenda will show you to the sitting room. I'll join you there in a few minutes."

J.D. looked at her neck, which showed a strange, slightly paler band around it. The terse, unsmiling staffer, who he now knew was "Glenda," led him back down the long trophy hall, through the immense, gray reception area, and across to the other door. He decided to attempt conversation once more.

"Mister Styles was shore inta stayin' fit, wasn't he?"

"Yes," she said, not slowing her onward march.

“Kinda tough on John-John, though, bein' sick an' all.”

She stopped. After a moment she turned, and fixed him with a look that said that no further conversation on that topic was welcomed.

He persisted. “You've been here for a long time. Been in service t' th' family since the kids were small.”

“Yes.”

“An y' took care of 'em. Doesn't seem like somethin' Mr. Styles would have cared t' do, an Miss Adkins don't seem like the matronly type t' me.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her lips compressed into a thin, tight line. She was silent for a long moment. Her face softened very slightly. “I...did my best,” she said, and turned quickly, resuming her march at a quicker pace.

“Ah reckon y' did. An' they were grateful, I expect.”

“John-John...Mister John Early, was. He was a...gentle child.”

J.D. let it rest there. He could ask his other questions to Jeanette Adkins, and he reasoned that she might be more forthcoming.

They arrived in a smaller room. Six chairs, more accommodating than anything he had seen in the house, were arranged in a circle around a low table. J.D. noticed that one of them was set slightly higher than the others, although they were otherwise identical.

“Ah figgur ah shouldn' sit in this'n,” he said to Glenda. “John Senior's chair?”

“Yes,” she said, back to her usual terse and uninflected manner. She left.

The only artwork, aside from the taxidermy, that he had seen was in this room. On the wall opposite the single steel door was a larger than life portrait, professionally if not sensitively done in oils, of a hard, fit looking man in an immaculate business suit. The black, heavy boots he wore seemed incongruous with the careful tailoring of the suit. Looking closely, J.D. noticed that they even had a bit of mud on them. The background was plain and dark, almost chiaroscuro in effect. The face suggested intensity, even cruelty, and the dark, determined eyes spoke of absolute strength. The head inclined toward the viewer, The pose was powerful, rigid, even defiant, the legs slightly spread, the body square in the frame.

The one oddity was that the arms were crossed over his chest, almost protectively. It was, J.D. reflected, a gesture seldom seen in formal portraiture.

Another portrait stood beside the entry. Two figures, one clearly Jeanette Adkins, and the other, her son. The boy had his father's features, but the effect of lifelong sickness was faintly visible in the thinness of his face, his very slight stoop, his fragile smile and the way he contra posted toward his mother, her

slim, delicate, heavily bejeweled hand resting on his shoulder.

Her pose was that of a contestant in a pageant. One leg forward, showing a long, shapely leg exposed by a high cut in her shining, perfectly tailored gown. J.D. raised his eyebrow a bit at the dramatic decolletage that exposed quite a bit more cleavage than one would normally associate with a formal portrait. She had the same professional, well-practiced smile that had greeted him in the gym. Around her neck was a series of gleaming, jeweled necklaces, and a black, velvet choker. Picked out in gems on the choker were the letters “JJS.”

On the wall to the left of John Style's was a portrait of Aubrey Styles. The style was clearly that of a different artist. The lines were softer, the brush more impressionistic. Where the artist of the other two portraits seemed to be trying to imitate Caravaggio, this portrait reminded him of the work of William Merritt Chase. The flesh of her face was vibrant with color, the brush strokes looser. She sat in what looked to be an office chair, her arm resting on a severe, modern looking steel desk. She was slightly turned away from the viewer, looking back over her shoulder toward the portrait of her father. She wore a business suit, gray and carefully tailored. Her shoes were flat and black, more practical than stylish. They looked very much like the shoes that the staffer wore. The desk had only one thing on it – a picture in a frame.

The details of the picture were blurred. It might have been a portrait of a woman, dark haired. He looked more closely. The brushstrokes were blurred. The obscuring of the details had clearly been done after the portrait was complete. And the subject of the painting, Aubrey Styles, was turned away from it.

The only other adornment on the wall was incongruous. On the wall to the right of John Senior's portrait, was the mounted head of an African warthog, fierce and ugly, with a scarred snout, large, vicious tusks, and a mouth opened as if to roar at the viewer. J.D. thought that this must have been an exceptionally large specimen.

Jeanette Adkins entered. Her stride was smooth and even. She brushed her waist length blond hair back with a casual, gesture. She wore a fitted dress of the same pale blue as her eyes, the same as the yoga outfit. J.D. nodded at her. He regarded the mounted head. “Mister Styles s' quite a hunter, ah guess.”

“Yes. He spent most of his time chasing animals all over the world. I'm sure you noticed the hall of horrors.”

J.D. nodded. “Yes, Ma'am.”

“Are you a hunter, Mr. Breckenridge?”

Suddenly, J.D.'s memory flashed back to waking up naked, deep in the wilderness, covered in blood, the remains of...something in gory tatters around him, the screaming roar in his ears.

“Are you all right, Mr. Breckenridge?” she said.

He recovered himself. “Fine. Ah hunted as a kid. We din' have a whole lotta choice. No hunt, no meat for th' table. Haven't done much since...as ah remember.”

She sat down in one of the chairs. Stately heels adorned her feet. J.D. wondered why such a tall woman would wear such dramatically high heeled shoes.

She noticed. "I don't own a pair of shoes that aren't heels, Mr. Breckenridge. John insisted."

"He wasn't a tall man, ah gather," J.D. said. "Seems like he mighta' been...uncomfortable with y' being s'much...taller."

She smiled at this. It was the tense smile that he had seen earlier, when the subject of the children had come up in the gym.

"An th' blue...everthin'. Mr. Styles' idea, too?"

"John's insistence. Command, really."

He nodded. He looked at the portrait of Aubrey. "Thas' a bit diff'rent. Not as diff'rent as a pig's head, mind."

"Yes," she said. "Different artist."

J.D. nodded. "Somebody from th' Parsons School in New York, ah take it?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Yes. Not...the sort of thing I'd expect a private detective to know. You are an interesting person, Mr. Breckenridge."

"An Miss Aubrey picked the artist, an th' pose. Not John Senior."

"Right again," She said. "But John liked it, as much as he liked anything."

He thought for a long moment. She sat, clearly expecting questions. She looked up at him, the slight movement of her head suggesting carefully concealed anxiety. Her lips, quivered slightly, parted slightly suggested that she wanted to say something.

He decided, as he often did, that frank honesty was the best method of getting answers.

"Y' care what happened t' John-John."

"Of course." She stiffened slightly.

"Then it's important that y' tell me as much of the truth as y' can stand. Ah'm not fond of interrogating the greivin', and ah'm sure y'd rather we not spend a lot a time dancin' around it."

She tensed a bit more.

"Ah will make y' a promise, Miss Adkins. Ah'll do m' dead level best t' find out what happened to your son. Ah'm not paid, nor inclined t' judge anythin' that may've happened in this house, 'cept as it throws

light on what happened to John Early Styles. Ah'm not a preacher or a gossip. If y' answer m' questions best you can, we might get quite a bit closer t' knowing what y' want to know."

She lowered her head. "I'll do my best," she said.

He turned toward the fierce pig's head. "Usually," he said, "ah'd expect t' find 'nother portrait here. Only one member of t' family's missin'. John David. Maybe his father got angry, an' had it taken down. But puttin' this...critter in his place seems a bit..."

She laughed hollowly. "You are a detective. You're right, John did have his son's portrait taken down after one of their...animated discussions. Smashed it, in fact."

"Ah noticed a blank spot in what y' called th' 'hall o' horrors.' Th' pig?"

"Yes. John laughed when Aubrey had it put there."

J.D. nodded. He indicated the portrait of Miss Adkins and her son. "An interestin' portrait, that. Cain't see Mr. Styles bein' too fond of it, though."

"It was a compromise," she said. I'd wear that...dress, and all the jewelry, but he had to let his son be in the picture with me. He...disliked the idea, but I had ways of getting what I wanted, even from him."

"He liked makin' you wear things that...showed y' off."

"Yes." She looked at him, attempting a defiant glare, but finding nothing to defy in J.D.'s expression, she looked away. "The relationship was...in a way...transactional."

"He treated y' as an orn'ment. Somethin' t' show that he...could...pardon me Ma'am...own a woman. An that choker. "JJS." Made y' wear it all the time, I expect.

She nodded.

"An y' took it off th' day he died."

"Yes."

He glanced at the her portrait. "Ah noticed y' weren't wearin' any jewelry t'day. Awful lot in that portrait."

"John's preference. I...don't have it, don't want it anymore."

"And John Early's here, in the fam'ly gallery. How'd your husband feel 'bout that?"

"He was family. John's son. I insisted."

J.D. came over to the chairs and sat down, not directly across from her, nor beside her. He was silent a long moment. "Ah cain't imagine. It must've been difficult."

She stared down at the table. She spoke, her voice drawn thin. "I shouldn't complain. He was generous, at least with money, clothes, jewelry, John-John's medical bills, and a roof over our heads."

J.D. looked up. "Quite a roof. Mus' be like livin' in a bunker."

She smiled weakly. "I...I know he was using me. I was using him. There was nothing dishonest in it. Of course, Mrs. Styles didn't see it that way." She looked up at him.

"Ah'm not a priest, Miss Adkins. It's not my place t' preach on sin, or t' grant abs'lution. Ah haven't lived y' life, an' I don' know what ah'd do diff'rent. An' it doesn't matter now. Mrs. Styles is dead an' gone, and John Styles is under that big ol' black rock out in the graveyard. What matters t' you, an' t' me is what happened t' John Early."

"That rock," she said, shaking her head. "An obsession with him. About two years before he died he started pestering people all over the world. Had to find one, solid rock of stone. It had to be massive, and it had to be black. I have no idea how much he spent on that. They had to bring a crane into the graveyard."

J.D.'s face suddenly changed. It was as if a mild electric shock had caused him to suddenly tense his face.

"Miss Adkins, who was th' undertaker?"

"Grassley and Sons. Why?"

"He picked up his hat. "If you'll 'scuse me, Ma'am."

"Of course," she said, visibly relaxing. Glenda appeared at the door, unbidden. J.D. suppressed a grin. No matter how strange the household, the help always listens at the keyholes. He turned to go.

"Mr. Breckenridge," Jeanette Adkins said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You're not at all what I expected...from a detective, I mean."

"How so?"

"Well, I sort of expected an interrogation. Browbeating. You know, the hot lamp and the snarling demand. You're intimidating enough for that."

"Not when y' get t' know me, Ma'am. Ah'm not th' type to bully a grievin' woman."

She smiled and shook her head. "But still, I came in here determined to tell you very little. And I pretty much gave away the store. What's your secret?"

“Ancient, long forgotten detective secret, Ma'am. But ah'll clue y' in.”

“Do tell.”

“Respect. Honesty. A listnin' ear. Patience. Thas' all. Better'n' all the good cop, bad cop in t' world.”

Glenda led him back through the hall, into the foyer. She handed him his hat. He took good care of his Panama hat, but somehow, she had handed it back to him cleaner than when he had given it to her.

“Thank y' Ma'am,” he said, “An' ah'm sorry for y' loss.”

She attempted a smile, a gesture which clearly did not come easily to her. She walked to the door, and out onto the front driveway.

She suddenly stopped short. “Oh, my.” She said, and this time the smile was unrestrained. “Oh my!” she said again.

J.D. smiled. She was looking at his car. “1955 Super 88 Ragtop, Ma'am.”

“Yes,” she said. “303 Rocket,” she said, her voice full of wonder. “King of the Stock Cars for a generation.” She looked at him, “It's beautiful!”

The cherry red and glossy white car gleamed in the afternoon sun. It was all curves and angles and impractical chrome, as much an industrial sculpture as it was a machine.

He smiled wider. “Ah do m' best t' take care of her.”

“And well you should...may I...look more closely?”

“Course. She don't mind bein' looked at.”

Glenda approached the car as if it were an altar – reverently. She looked down the fenders, walked slowly around it, stood in front of the hood, contemplating. She hadn't said another word.

Finally, she sighed, and walked back to J.D. “Thank you, Mr. Breckenridge,” she said. “I thought I'd never see another of those.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” he said, “Not too many of 'em to be seen. An' since both of us's car nuts, I suppose y' should call me “J.D.””

She smiled again. It did not seem to pain her now. “Very well, J.D...” she glanced back toward the house, as if about to impart a secret she did not want overheard, “I'm Gigi.”

J.D. did his best to hide his surprise. “Gigi” did not seem like a name for a stern, middle-aged servant in such an austere household.

She noticed, and smiled again, clearly amused. “Glenda was my mother's name. John Senior would

have never tolerated calling me “Gigi.”

“But John Early an' Miss Aubrey did, ah'm guessin'. An John David didn'.”

She looked down for a moment. “Yes. It was our little secret.”

“An Aubrey looked up t' you. I suppose t' was you who gave her those shoes she wore for her portrait.”

She looked at him, a bit guardedly. “J.D., I'd forgotten for a moment that you are a detective.”

“Well,” he said, “Ah'm done detectin' for th' day. N'more questions, Gigi. Let's go for a ride.”

She almost giggled. She made for the passenger door with an almost undignified haste.

“Wait a minnit, Gigi. Ah'm tired from all this detectin'.” He tossed the keys to her. “How 'bout you drive?”

There was no need to repeat the invitation. By the time J.D. was at the passenger door, she had already started the engine rumbling.

V.

They bolted down the long, curved driveway. By the time they had reached the highway, any concern that J.D. had about their speed was gone. He was impressed with how smoothly she took the curves, accelerating, braking and steering a line through them worthy of an experienced race car driver.

She glanced at him and smiled. “Too Fast for you, J.D.?” she yelled over the rushing wind. He smiled back. “Maybe a lil' faster, Gigi! Who wants t' live forever?”

As the car gained speed, it seemed to J.D. that the years fell away from her face. Joy radiated from her face, her smile, her eyes. Her severe hairstyle began to yield to the wind, and she was suddenly the young woman who loved cars, and drove them as if there was a prize at the end of the run.

They roared down the road, laughing.

They blew past a police car parked behind a stand of trees. The officer standing outside his cruiser with his radar gun pointed it straight at them. She waved to him, and honked the horn. The officer didn't even make a move back toward his car. J.D. watched him as he pointed his radar gun back up the road, away from them.

A school bus stopped at a railroad crossing finally forced them to slow down. A train rolled by slowly. Both of them were smiling so wide, that the children waved at them from the back windows. She tapped the horn, and waved back.

“Y' sure can drive, Gigi,” J.D. said. “How long's it been?”

She looked pensive for a moment. “Too long,” she said.

“Why? Ah'm sure that y' can afford a good rod,” J.D. said. “I cain't think that John J. Styles was a cheapskate.”

“He wasn't, when he was alive, at least,” she said. “But he didn't make any provision in the will for anyone but Aubrey, John David and John-John.”

“How'd y' know that? Th' Will was sent to th' courthouse, I expect. Nobody does public readin's anymore.”

“He told us,” she said. About a week before he died. He told me, and Marcus – he's the driver and security guard you met at the door, and Miss Adkins that he was going to die soon, and he wasn't leaving any of us a cent. Told us we'd have to vacate our quarters within a month. No “thanks for your service,” Not even “goodbye.” Marcus tried to tell him he hoped Mr. Styles would get better, and John Styles told him that if he ever spoke again on his property without permission, he'd be fired instantly.”

J.D. shook his head. “Piece o' work, John Styles.” He paused. “Nuthin' for Ms. Adkins?”

“Not a dime. And he made sure she knew that all the jewelry he had “loaned” her was registered property of the estate.”

J.D. whistled soft and low.

She continued. “As long as you were useful to him, John Styles did his best to buy loyalty. If you weren't useful, you were dead to him. And Jeanette Adkins, well, a dead man has no use for his...well, anyway, she was included in the thirty day eviction notice.”

“Ah doubt she minds that much.” He said. “Ah think we can change th' subject, Gigi. We didn' ride out for me t' work. Ah do have one more question, if y' don't mind too much. Not so much about John Early, but about you.”

“Okay,” she said, her voice betraying a hint of uncertainty.

“Why did y' sell your car after John Styles died?”

She looked at him suddenly, her eyes wide, her mouth open slightly.

He smiled. “You're too good t' be outa practice entirely. An' there's little tan patches on th' back of your hands. String-back driving gloves an' a convertible. But y' just 'bout jumped outa your skin when I offered t' let y' drive. Hasn't been that long since John Styles died, but y' dealt with havin' to work for that mean old man, an watchin' him hurt John Early by tearin' up the road for years. That cop didn' even bother t' chase, once he knew who y' were. He's prolly learned y' got enough clout as John Styles chief o' staff to beat a speedin' ticket.

He sat back and sighed. “Some folks drink, some folks take drugs r' gamble, some folks work it all out in gasoline and burnin' rubber. Not th' worst way t' cope.”

He turned to face her. “But not lately,” he said. “Y’ drove like a bat outa bell tower. A lotta pent up somethin’, Gigi. An’ that means y’ sold your stress reliever. Why?”

She looked at him warily. “Well played, J.D.,” she said. “Or should I go back to calling you “Detective?” Did we come out here just so you could get some answers?”

“Naw. Not t’ all. In fact, ah’ ain’t asking ’nother question t’day. Not t’ you, not t’ anybody.” He pulled out his pocket watch. “But ah’ll tell you what, if y’ can get us back t’ th’ Stylesbunker in twenty minutes or less, y’ can ask me any question y’ want, an’ ah’ll tell y’ the truth of it, best ah know it.”

“I don’t think I have any questions for you J.D.” she looked down. “Not any more.”

There was a moment’s silence.

J.D. turned to her. “Gigi,” he said, “ah’d put an awful big bet, m’ pink slip, an’ m’ last cigar against the thought that y’ might be...a bad sport.”

She stared at him. Her eyes flashed anger for a moment, then narrowed.

She put the car into gear. “Strap in, you big, nosy ape. You haven’t seen anything yet.” The tires screamed, the engine roared, the children cheered.

Eighteen minutes, forty seconds later, they skidded to a stop in front of the gray cube of the Styles residence.

J.D. smiled. “Whoo! Th’ way out was impressive, th’ way in, well, why you ain’t won at Daytona yet, ah couldn’t say.”

She gave him a wry look. “Flattery will not get you out of paying off the bet, J.D.. I intend to ask my question...but not yet.”

“One honest an’ser, on account,” he said, bowing slightly. “Ah’m as good as my word.”

They got out of the car, and he walked her back to the door. Marcus opened the huge door, and stood silently, waiting.

She looked up at him. “This was fun, J.D.. But I’m going to have a hard time believing that you weren’t playing me for information.”

He smiled, and shook his head. “Ah swear, Gigi, ah didn’t plan t’...”

“Sure,” she said, but she smiled. “See you around?”

“Ah think so. Got work t’ do here. An’ t’ be honest, ah enjoyed y’ comp’ny too.”

She went inside. J.D. got back into his car, and drove away at a sedate, unhurried pace.

VI.

J.D. sat on the bed in his hotel room. The curtains were thin, and the room illuminated every time a car came or went from the parking lot. He did not turn on the lights, the television was dark and silent. He opened a small bag, pulled out a bottle of bourbon, half empty, and carefully unwrapped a crystal glass. He pulled out a cigar from his inside jacket pocket, and a cigar cutter from his jacket pocket. He clipped a thin layer of tobacco from the cap. A silver lighter, an old, engraved Zippo came from his outer jacket pocket, looking small in his large, heavy hand. He flicked the top open with a practiced turn of his wrist, and struck the flint wheel. A dim yellow light filled the room for a moment as the flame lit his cigar. He turned the cigar carefully, until the entire front surface was lit.

He closed the lighter, and the room was dark again, save only for the cherry-red glow of his cigar. Another car pulled in, and the room was suddenly bright with the bluish glow of headlights. He noticed the worn spots in the carpet, the faded wallpaper, the rings on the table where wet containers had been set. There was a metal no smoking sign high up on a wall. Someone had scratched "FUCK YOU" on it, probably with the tip of a knife. And when he had looked into the room before checking in, there was a small, glass ash tray on the table.

This was the town he lived in. His small, but comfortable apartment was a little more than twenty minutes away. But when he was working, he had learned that being in a too predictable place wasn't wise. Too easy to find him, too many distractions.

The advance he had been given would have allowed him to check into one of the nicer hotels in town, but they required identification, credit card numbers, and other questions he preferred not to answer. A small gratuity to the night clerk here allowed him to avoid all that. And he could be reasonably sure that the clerk wouldn't be in the habit of answering too many questions.

J.D. was always aware that he was being hunted. There were a lot of people, some of them with badges, more of them with guns. His unique talent made him a commodity to be sought by all sorts of people. And in his experience, they weren't good at taking "no" for an answer.

He began to feel a little cramped in the small room. He got to his feet, put his holster back in the waistband of his pants with its large, black revolver, and put his jacket and his hat back on. He poured the glass half-full of bourbon, and picked up his cigar. He stepped out onto the concrete sidewalk outside. It was old concrete, sparkling faintly in the dim light. He leaned back against the door of his room and blew out a cloud of cigar smoke. It smelled of leather and wood smoke, with a tiny hint of spice. To J.D. Breckenridge, life was far too short, and too uncertain, for cheap cigars.

He heard a door open, several rooms down. A woman emerged, dressed only in a t-shirt that barely covered her. He guessed she was about eighteen, with curly red hair, small, with a slight limp. She smiled as she walked toward him.

"Gotta smoke, big fella?"

"Yes, Ma'am, but it's onea these," he said, indicating the large, dark cigar.

She stood too close, "I like big ones." She said. "You lonely out here?"

He sighed. “No Ma'am. An' ah ain't inclined t'...well...rent any comp'ny.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. But you don't get something like this every day.” She pulled up her skirt, revealing her crotch. “Carpet matches the drapes.” She said, “pure fire.”

“Ah don' doubt it,” he said, giving her a wry smile. “But ah don' gen'rally...”

She stopped suddenly, and stepped back. “Oh shit.” she said, “You're a cop. Or a queer. Or a queer cop.”

He chuckled. “Neither an' none,” he said. “Y' noticed that ah'm packin' a pistol? Cain't see that'd be unusual 'round here.”

“It isn't,” She said. “But you're...polite. Most people aren't when they know...what I do.”

“This ain't what you do on th' regular though, is it? More an' impulse an' a now an' then. Y'saw me out here, an' wondered if ah'd be int'rested in...your services.”

“How would you know that?”

“Y' stand too close. Experienced...workers stand outa arm's reach 'til they know who they're dealin' with.”

“You seem to know a lot about whores, for someone who,” she mimicked his accent “don' gen'rally...”

He nodded. “Ah said ah'm not a cop. But ah do know how things go. Had t' learn. Lotta years on th'...” He stopped, knowing that his sleeplessness was making him careless. Telling a random stranger any details of his biography was unwise, at least.

She nodded, shrugged again. “Suit yourself, big man. What handle do you go by?”

“Ed Kranepool, Ma'am. Pleased t' meet y’.”

“I'm FireStar. And you're right. I don't often...or, I guess, usually...I'm a dancer at Huz C's, across the highway.”

He nodded. “Those heels y' wearin at work are hard on y'. Y' haven't danced in awhile, twisted ankle I 'spect. Thas' why y...came t' me.”

She looked puzzled. “How would you know that? And why would you bother to notice?” She narrowed her eyes. “I still think you might be a cop.”

“No ma'am. More like a private investigator, sorta. An nobody's payin' me t' bother y', so y' needn't worry. Ah'm never nosy f' free.”

She smiled at that. “And my time ain't free either, Mr. Kranepool. So I'll get back to bed. She looked at

him, up and down. “Too bad, Mister. We might have had a good time.”

“Isn't it lovely t' think so.” He said, tipping his hat as she walked away.

He waited until she had walked down the hall, and waved at him. After a few seconds, he silently moved down the row until he stood behind her door. He could hear her voice, softly, but still audible through the cheap, hollow core door.

“Yeah. I'm sure. It's the guy you told me to watch for. Remember what you said you'd...right.” He heard the faint beep of her phone call disconnecting.

He went back to his room, picked up his small bag, and stepped into the bathroom doorway, a first, middle and last name repeating in his mind. He pictured a name, displayed on a liquor license. Melvin Harris Stein.

He stepped out of a storeroom. A man nearby, mop in hand, looked up at him.

“J.D.! What were you doing in the storeroom?”

He smiled, wiping a trickle of blood from his nose with his hankercchief. “Lookin' for you, a'course, Mel. Ah still owe y' a drink over that bet I lost.”

Mel smiled. “I love the Mets, but I never bet on 'em.” He straightened his worn ball cap with its faded orange NY on the front.

“Have y' sold m' car yet?”

Mel comically pretended offense. “I would *never*...unless the price was right.”

They both laughed. They went to the bar. “Chuckie,” he said to the bartender, a young man with a severe crew cut, and thin arms covered with tattoos, “two bourbons. Top shelf. This big galoot is payin'.”

The oversize shots appeared almost instantly. J.D. put down the cash, and dropped a bill in the tip jar. Chuckie nodded.

J.D. looked around the bar. There wasn't a single patron. No regulars, squeezing the last of the evening for all it was worth. No negotiations for companionship in the corner booths. The tables were already clean, no bottles or glasses remained.

“Looks awful slow t'night, Mel,” he said.

“Well,” Mel said, “Closin' time.”

“Never seen it this empty, tho.” J.D. said, sipping at his drink.

Mel shrugged. “Cops came by about an hour ago, askin' a lot of questions.”

“Wasn't cops,” Chuckie said, wiping down the bar.

“They had badges,” Mel said.

“Phony.” Chuckie said. “Good, but phony.”

“What'd they want?” J.D. asked.

Mel said, “I could get in a lot of trouble, J.D. If they found out I told you they had a picture of someone looked a lot like you, 'course I'd never tell you that, bein' a law abiding citizen with a liquor license to protect. They could make trouble for me, y' know.”

He handed J.D. his car keys. “She's out locked up in the garage. I don't expect you'll need the key to open it.”

J.D. nodded. “Thanks, Mel.” He nodded to Chuckie, who nodded back.

On the way to the garage, J.D. took out his phone, and tried to access the cameras that watched his apartment. They were offline. All five of them.

He dropped the phone and crushed it under his boot heel. He looked out at the garage, where his '55 waited, beautiful, shining, but very distinctive. He sighed, turned away, and walked back toward the road. “Nevah own any'thin',” he said softly to the night, “that y' cain't walk away from when y' feel the heat 'round th' corner.”

VII.

J.D. sat in a too-high, too narrow chair at a too small table. A cup of coffee sat in front of him, untouched. He scowled at it, as if it had spoken to insult him. Sprite came to the table.

“Y' hair is...differnt.”

“Yeah. I'm surprised you noticed.” She smiled and did a mocking impersonation of a model's runway turn.

“Ah notice things. Thas more r' less what ah...anyhow, it's gone, mostly.”

“Yeah.” Sprite's hair had been cut down to a crew cut on one side, left long on the other. The whole had been dyed a brilliant white, with the long side braided into tight cornrows. Each braid ended with a spiked chrome bead.

“Don' nod,” J.D. said. “Like t' beat y' brains out.”

“My brains,” she said, sniffing, “are my business. And they're what you're paying for, after all. I got new ink, too.”

“Any place y' didn' have “ink” b'fore prolly isn' someplace a gentleman oughta look,” J.D. said.

She ignored this. “I got everything you asked for, Not-So-Jolly-Green. And a lot more.”

He looked. She didn't appear to be carrying a folder, or anything else.

“Whar?” he asked. “Or do ah not wanna know?”

She produced a thumb drive, and put it on the table between them. He sighed.

“Whatsamatta? Don't know how to use that?” She smiled.

“That thar,” J.D. said, “izza secure thumb drive, prolly encrypted. Truecrypt?”

She sniffed again. “I'll forgive the insult, since your giant, sausage fingers probably handicap you in using tech properly. The encryption is my own. All's you'll need to know is the password.”

“Which is?”

“BigDumbApeWithTooMuchMoney,” she said. “00636. First letter of each word caps, no spaces.”

He sighed, and put the drive in his pocket.

She cocked her head, sending the beads swaying. “You O.K., J.D.? Yore ac'cent's thicker'n granny's mollasses t'day, ah do delclay-a.”

He managed half a smile. “Nice detectin' Sprite.” She smiled.

“Ah'm jus' tired. Didn' get much shut-eye las' night.” He pushed an envelope over to her. She opened it.

“Cash?” She almost yelped. “What kind of dinosaur are you? Every hear of crypto?”

“Paranoia-saurus. Y' say that ever' time. Ah don' like leavin' too much record of m' work.”

“The blockchain is at least as secure as...”

“Sprite, yer vexin' me. Ah've been up all night, Ah ain't had m' coffee, an...”

She glanced at the cup in front of him.

“Ah tried. Ah really did. But they put sumpthin' innit. Some sorta...milk. Tastes like it was made a acorns.”

“Ah. You should have said you wanted an Americano.”

“Ah said ah wanted coffee.”

“You need to be a little more specific, Cowboy. This isn't the Wild West. The baristas are artists. They get a little creative sometimes.”

She went to the counter. A few moments later she returned with two steaming mugs. “Here ya go. An Americano. No oat, rice, almond or soy milk, no sugar, just espresso and water, just like the Neanderthals made in the cave.”

He tasted it. “Better. This what y' call a “pour-over?” he asked.

“No, why?”

“Cause it tastes like they poured it over a burnt car tire,” he said.

“You're welcome,” she said. “Anyway, drink your burnt car tire. I wouldn't want you to look at what's on that drive while going through caffeine withdrawal.”

“What all y' git?”

“Everything. Medical records for the whole Styles tribe, business records, legal, SEC compliance, travel, property, taxes, background on everyone involved. Pretty dull reading for the most part. But I'm sure there's something in there that you're looking for.”

“Mos' likely.” He took another sip. His nose wrinkled slightly.

“See ya' around, Gargantua.” She slugged down her drink, and got up to leave. “A pleasure doing business with you. It's like talking to my grandpa again.”

“Thanks, Sprite. 'Preciate it.”

She stopped. “Feel better soon, will 'ya?”

“Ah'll do m' best.”

VIII.

After a few stops at tech stores, and checking into another roadside motel, he pulled a small laptop, and a tool kit from his bag. He removed the battery and the wifi/bluetooth card.

“Sausage fingers, eh?” He smiled.

He replaced the battery, booted up the laptop, reconfigured the BIOS, and changed several settings.

Finally, he plugged in the thumb drive, entered the password, and winced as Charlton Heston's voice shouted at him through the speakers, “Take your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty ape!” followed by Sprite's giggling laughter.

For all that, the information provided was more than comprehensive. He paged through document after

document. Completely absorbed, he did not realize that the day had slipped away, and night had come before he looked up, his eyes dry and aching.

He poured himself a bourbon, and lit a cigar.

John J. Styles, whose middle name did not appear in any record, evidently removed from his birth certificate at some point, was wealthier than he even appeared. Over thirty years he had worked tirelessly, on almost every continent to increase his wealth. It appeared to J.D. that he had screwed everyone he ever worked with, pumped and stripped every concern he had ever owned or had control of, and given the vulture treatment to so many firms that he began to run out of suckers. But that didn't matter. The kind of money he had amassed made money sitting still, and he had made the most of it. He was a billionaire several times over, and still, he was striving for more.

Not bad for a kid whose father was an oil worker that did ten years for manslaughter.

His household accounts showed a startling frugality, and his staff, while well paid, was minimal. He had only employed three servants: Marcus Juan Jarmillo, Gigi Anne Stewart, and Presley Alan Moore. The records showed that Mr. Moore had once been the chief of the small household staff. He had been terminated abruptly, and there was no record shown of any sort of severance pay.

A few line items stood out. The first was the building of what J.D. was now calling the “Stylesbunker,” the brutalist mansion that served as his sanctuary. An article from an architectural digest was attached, titled “The Ugliest Fifty Million Dollar Home You'll Ever See.” There were no interior pictures, and no interview with John Styles. The attached documents showed that the article had underestimated the cost, as John Styles had apparently fired four architects, forfeiting their substantial retainers, during the design.

In fact, there was little media mention of John J. Styles at all. No profile, no fawning bio, no mention in the lists of the ultra-rich that magazines catering to strivers and fantasizers carried every year. There was a record of the purchase of one magazine, the “Leach Report.” It had published an article headlined “John J. Styles, World's Richest Miser?” A week later, John Styles had purchased the magazine, fired everyone working there, and paid each of them to sign a non-disclosure agreement. He intended to send a message to the media, and it had apparently worked wonders.

Another item was the huge black stone that now sat on John Styles' grave. It was, according to the financial and shipping records, eight square feet of Noir Belge marble, weighing over twenty five tons. The cost of the stone was over ten million dollars, and shipping and placing it was several millions more.

For a man who had once reprimanded his staff, in writing, for spending too much on groceries, this seemed to J.D. to be ridiculously out of character. He bought it two years before his death, and it was placed over his grave three days after his burial. He noted that the contract for its delivery specified that it would be placed on the day of his internment. That had not been done, and it cost the contractor half of his very high fee. There were no legal records indicating that the contractor had tried to contest this expensive penalty.

John J. Styles' greatest personal indulgence was hunting. Purchases of eight hundred thousand dollar

rifles – J.D. had to read that several times to be sure he read it right - countless payments to hunting guides, lodges, taxidermists and trophy fees.

Two weeks before his death, John Styles had purchased over eleven million in gold bullion. About 500 pounds worth. J.D. did a quick calculation. That would be about eighteen standard bars. Wouldn't take up a lot of room, a large suitcase could hold it, but the weight was another matter.

One other purchase stood out – jewelry, over six million dollars worth, all in one purchase. The bill of sale was made out to John J. Styles.

J.D. moved on to the medical records. John Styles had been dying for years. His medical records showed the slow, but inexorable advance of extensive bone cancer. He'd managed to survive well beyond the five-year mark, probably because of his fanatical approach to personal fitness. By sheer force of stubbornness, J.D. supposed. But John Styles must have known when the time was near.

He had rewritten his will a year before he died. There was no copy of the former will. The will in force did exactly what he had been told, dividing the extensive assets evenly among John David, Aubrey Lynn, and John Early Styles. Jeanette Adkins had been expressly written out.

There were meticulously kept records of the expensive treatments required to keep John Early Styles from Death's door. The medications he had to take daily came to tens of thousands of dollars a month. And Jeanette Adkins had signed a receipt on every one. John Styles wanted her to know about every dime he spent on keeping their son alive.

The records of the finances of John David Styles and Aubrey Lynn Styles were in stark contrast to each other. Each of them had started businesses about the time of their twenty first birthdays. John David started a financial consulting firm. Aubrey Lynn had founded a fashion house. Each had received a ten million dollar loan, at substantial interest, from John Styles as seed money.

John David's firm had not done well. By now, the loan capital was almost gone. Increasingly expensive loans had been keeping the doors open. And a steady drain of legal fees, fighting several expensive fines from regulators was making the situation worse.

Aubrey Lynn's fashion house had been far more successful. After the first two years, she had consistently turned a substantial profit. But she shared her father's ruthlessness, buying up smaller concerns, stripping them of their talent and assets, and dumping the stripped companies as soon as a buyer could be found.

J.D. was pretty sure that Daddy would have approved.

He closed the laptop. “Jus' a bit more, John Early,” he muttered. “Jus' a bit more.”

IX.

“Howdy, Mister Garvey,” J.D. said. “Sorry t' interrupt, but ah need t' ask y' a few questions.”

Garvey put down the clippers with which he had been trimming a hedge. He shook his head, and

smiled. "Didn't think you were just another rubbernecker. Cop?"

"No," J.D. said. "Somebody's payin' me. Int'rested party. Jus' like somebody paid you, th' night after John Styles was buried."

Garvey looked startled, then composed his face to lie. "Look, I don't..."

"Don' bother, Mr. Garvey. Ah give you m' word that no grief is gonna come t' you over it. Y' not th' grave-robbin' type, an ah know that somebody paid y' to take a long break that night."

"How do you know that, Mister...what was it?"

"Breckenridge. An since we're gonna collaborate a bit, call me J.D." He produced a hundred dollar bill, and put it in Mr. Garvey's hand. Aubrey Styles' money was going a long way.

Garvey pocketed the bill. He sighed. "I'm going to regret this," he said.

"Naw," J.D. said. "Y' really haven't done anythin' wrong, 'cept busy y'self with other duties for awhile." Now who came t' you that night, an' what did they tell y'?"

He sighed again. "It was the older boy. He said that since the graveside service was such a cluster, he needed to be alone at his father's grave for awhile."

"Y' didn' believe him, though," J.D. said.

"Doesn't much matter if I believed him or not. Not with what he paid me. You're a cheapskate by comparison. No offense."

"None taken," J.D. said. "An what did you do while John David was...grievin'?"

"Not a thing," Garvey said. "None of my business. I didn't go back there til the big rock showed up."

"An y' knew better than t' set y'self up for an accessory charge, or t' have anythin' worth tellin' th' cops."

"Or any nosey detectives, either," Garvey said. "Now if you don't mind, I've got work to do."

"A'course." J.D. tipped his hat, but Garvey had already returned to his hedge trimming.

X.

Jeanette Adkins looked up with surprise as J.D. Breckenridge stepped out of the changing stall next to her. "Wh...what? This is a women's..."

"Sorry for th' intrusion, Ma'am, but ah think we have some more talkin' t' do."

She was carrying several clothing items, none of them blue. A few shopping bags were in her hands. All expensive boutiques. One bag contained shoe boxes. He smiled. "Cain't blame y', Miss Adkins. An'

you're far too smart t' let John Styles' parsim'nous ways keep y' from havin' some cash stashed away."

She frowned. "Yes. He wasn't as smart, or as careful as he thought he was."

"Jus' a coupla questions. Then ah kin let y' be. Ah'm close t' knowin' what ah need to. Very close."

She sighed. "All right, Mr. Breckenridge. But..."

He nodded. "First, what was th' row at th' graveside about?"

"How did you know about...never mind. That's what you do, isn't it? Pry into people's private affairs?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said.

"John David was sure that someone had stolen the jewelry that John had "loaned," she said the word with obvious venom, "to me. Of course he was sure that I had taken it. I hadn't. I gave it right back to him. Threw it at him, to be more precise. He wouldn't even touch it. He made Marcus pick it up."

"That it?" J.D. asked.

"No. Aubrey was concerned that John-John wasn't there. John David said that he had been at John-John's house the day before, and he had said he wouldn't be attending. That's a lie. I know it's a lie. John-John would have wanted to be there. He wouldn't leave me alone with those...people. Not at a time like that."

Suddenly, she looked very tired. J.D. nodded. "Ah'm gonna go have a word with John David. Anythin' y' wanna tell him that doesn' make me use bad words?"

"John David killed my son. I can't prove it. But I know it's true. Who else? I can't imagine him killing his brother. I...I don't know. He used to come and comfort John-John after John...I can't."

She was on the verge of tears now. J.D. said, "Soon, ah promise, ah'll tell Aubrey what ah know. Ah think she'll be willin' t' tell y'. Now, ah'll leave y' be. Sorry for y' loss, Ma'am."

"So he really is dead. He's not just...hiding somewhere."

"No Ma'am. That much ah know for sure. Ah'm sorry."

She said nothing more. Tears fell silently from her perfect blue eyes. He left.

XI.

John David Styles' sat in his ornate, expensive office, alone. The phone was not ringing. There were no appointments. He sat, staring. His assistant knocked tentatively, then came in. He glared at her.

"I'm not to be disturbed," he said to her. "I told you that."

She nodded. "There's a man here who wants to see you. He's a potential investor."

"Investor? What does he..." Investors had been non-existent since word had broken of the many SEC investigations that swirled around his failing firm.

"He says he has six million in...jewelry, and ten million in gold bullion."

The color drained away from John David's face. "Show him in. And leave us alone. We are not to be disturbed. I mean it."

J.D. Breckenridge entered. The secretary left hurriedly. "Howdy," he said. "Pleased t' meet y' Mr. Styles." He sat in the chair opposite the desk without invitation.

"What do you want?" John David Styles said.

"I want t' know what happened to six million in jewelry, an' ten million in gold."

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

"Y' do," J.D. said.

He reached under his desk. J.D. shook his head. "Ah wouldn't. If that's gun y' reachin' for, an I don' think it is, you'd be a dead man b'fore it cleared th' desk. Ah figgur y' callin' security t' have me thrown out. Thas' not th' smart play. All's y' have to do is ask me t' leave, an ah will. But after ah have a word with th' police, they'd be here pretty quick."

He put his hand back on his desk. "And why are you so sure of that, Mister..."

"Breckenridge. Ah'm sure a that, because y' were th' last person t' see John Early Styles alive."

He sat up straight.

"Who hired you?" He demanded, his cracking voice undercutting the affect he was attempting. "What... what do you want?"

"Ah sup'ose y' can figgur out who hired me. An' ah already told y' what ah want."

He looked down at his desk, his brow clouded over. "I don't know. I don't...actually know."

"Ah do," J.D. said. "An' y' will know, soon enough." He got up to leave.

"Wait. What do you..."

"Y' already asked that, Mister Styles. An y' already tol' me ever'thin' ah need t' know."

XII.

The Grassley Funeral home was an impressive place. Tall columns and a marble front framed the building. An attendant met him at the door.

“Can I help you, Sir?” A slight young man in a black suit and square, horn rimmed glasses looked up at him.

“Ah hope so. Can I speak t' Mr. Grassley, please?”

“And what is the nature of your call, if I may ask?”

J.D. bowed his head. He removed his hat and held it in his hands. “Well, it's hard t' say. Haven't done much a this sorta...I need t' bury my Momma. She said this was where she wanted...”

“Please come in, Mister...”

“McGraw. Frank McGraw,” J.D. said.

He was shown into a parlor and to a tufted couch. The room smelled of chrysanthemums. A marble topped coffee table was in front of him, with a box of tissues, and an expensive looking leather portfolio. There was an inscription in gold: “Grassley. For your priceless memories.” Looking around the room at the pricey furniture, extensive gilding and immaculate carpeting, J.D. surmised that the memories made here were far from priceless.

After a few moments, a man entered the room. He was in his sixties, and almost as tall as J.D., but very thin. His expensive, charcoal gray suit was carefully tailored, and his hairpiece was expensive enough - real human hair and tailored enough to avoid being obvious. He walked toward him with a slight, sympathetic stoop, and a soft smile that might have been reflected in the brilliant shine of his expensive shoes.

“Welcome, Mr. McGraw,” he said, his voice soft, and laden with sympathy. “I'm Arthur Grassley. I am sorry to meet you under such...tragic circumstances. He sat down in an armchair, next to the couch. “I'm sure this is a very difficult time for you, but we are here to help you in any way we can.”

“Thank y', Sir. Ah...”

“Call me Arthur, if you like, Mr. McGraw.”

J.D. looked at the table. “Mamma's brother was named Arthur. He passed last year. Had a nice send-off. Mamma said she almost wouldn't mind goin' if she could go like he did.”

The sympathy on Arthur Grassley's face increased incrementally. He nodded slowly. “And we won't disappoint either of you, Mr. McGraw. Where was his service held?”

J.D. suppressed a smile. Where someone went to church, or where their services were held was often a signal of their socio-economic status. Something in which Arthur Grassley was no doubt very interested.

“Back home. In Alabama. She moved up here t' be near th' grandkids after Daddy passed. Uncle Art's service was held in th' Episc'pal Cathedral in Birmingham. Th' bishop gave a nice talk, all about how gen'rous th' family had been t' the community.”

The light that glittered behind Arthur Grassley's eyes contrasted with the soft frown and inclined head that bent toward J.D.

“We're a long way f'm home, Arthur,” J.D. said. “Only been here 'bout a year. Momma never really got back t' church after Daddy died. Ah suppose we'll need a place...”

“We have several beautiful chapels here, Mr. McGraw. And we have wonderful relationships with the religious institutions in our community. We can make arrangements that you and your family will find very appropriate.”

“Thas' good t' hear.”

“Would you like to discuss other details now? I know this is difficult.”

“Well, ah suppose we'll need...a casket, an a plot. She didn' wanna be sent back t' Alabama.” He sagged his shoulders, and sighed deeply. “She didn' wanna be buried...aside m' Daddy. Ah mean...”

“It's all right, Mr. McGraw. Families are often...complicated in their grief. We can provide all those details when you're ready.”

“Ah suppose ah should get on with it. This isn' gonna get any easier.”

“Yes,” he nodded slowly. “Well, I can show you caskets whenever you're ready.”

J.D. nodded. Arthur Grassley stood up. J.D. stood up with him, a little unsteadily.

They walked through a large chapel, modern in design, with cream colored walls, gold carpeting, and heavily padded seating for over two-hundred mourners. Egg shaped chandeliers hung from the ceiling. J.D. decided instantly that he hated it. It seemed more like an upscale shopping mall than a chapel.

Arthur Grassley noticed J.D.'s interest in the chapel, and misread it. “Isn't this peaceful?” he said. “The design suggests peace and space, and the modern lines are very popular with our younger clients, and with those who prefer a less somber tone for their memorial. We have three other chapels, each of a different theme. Would you like to see them?”

“In a bit,” J.D. said. “Ah'd like t' get the...casket thing...b'hind me.”

“Of course.”

They continued through a side door into a room with all four walls lined with caskets. More caskets were arranged in aisles down the center of the room.

“We have all of these, and more in our Memory Makers' Book,” Grassley said, “but when you're

making such an important decision, we believe you should see, and touch, if you like, the vessel where your mother's remains will spend eternity.”

Arthur Grassley walked past the wooden caskets and the plainer caskets, and into a central area with four caskets, gleaming with brass and gilt fixtures. Two were open, showing white, tufted interiors full of ruffles, satin and gold embroidery.

“Now this,” indicating a bronze casket with golden chromed handles and brass fittings, “is a casket that any family would be proud to remember. It has been purchased by some of our most prestigious clients. It's body is solid bronze, and can be expected to protect your Mother's remains for hundreds of years.”

“Ah...” J.D. said. “It's sure pretty...ah mean, for a casket.”

“That it is,” Arthur Grassley said.

“But, ah...it's a bit...small.”

“Oh?”

J.D. nodded. “We're big folk, y' see. Mamma is...” he hesitated, “was...well...larger n' most.”

“I see,” Grassley said. “And if I may inquire, how large was your mother?”

“Bout five hun'nerd pounds. Mebbe a bit...more.”

Grassley nodded. “Well then. Not to worry. We can help. We offer custom caskets as well. We can certainly make certain that your Mother's dignity, and your families memories can be accommodated.” He smiled, comfortingly.

“Have y' done this b'fore? Ah mean recently? Ah'd feel better knowin' that this'd be...handled.”

Grassley nodded. “Certainly. We recently interred a very large casket, for a prestigious client whose taste was absolutely exquisite. I can't, of course, reveal the name of the family, but they are quite well known here in Port Davis.”

“D'ya have a picture of it?” J.D. asked.

“Certainly. Wait here a moment.” Grassley left him there.

J.D. looked around. The room reminded him of a car showroom.

Grassley returned with a photograph of a casket. It was black, massive, and substantially larger than any of the other caskets. It was heavily built. Grassley stood beside it in the photo, with a larger than appropriate smile, full of pride, as if he were showing a new car to a prospective client.

“This was our custom model made to our client's specific request and specifications.”

J.D. looked at the picture thoughtfully. “Does it come in pink? She lov'd pink.”

Grassley did not succeed entirely in suppressing a wince. “Surely,” he said. “Not that you are worried about the cost where your Mother is concerned, but, of course, there is a...small premium for custom manufacture. We can have it done in three days, in time for the funeral.”

J.D. nodded again. “Ah think she'd a liked it. It's like her...solid an big. An' pink.”

“Yes, well.”

J.D. looked at the picture. “Ah'd like t' keep a copy a' that, t' show m' kin. T' know they'd approve.”

“Of course,” Grassley said.

“An'...um...you're sure it'll handle...all of her?”

“Yes, quite sure. In fact, that casket can handle over a thousand pounds in...accommodation.”

“Whoever he was, fella musta been...goodly sized.”

“Well...” Grassley said, “We provide for the needs of our clients' families, no matter how...challenging.”

“Ah sup'ose we'll need some extra pallbearers...”

“In the case of such custom and premium caskets, we provide a vehicle that can transport the vessel directly to the graveside, and place it within the vault.

J.D. sagged a bit. “Oh, Mister McGraw,” Grassley said, his voice full of concern. “Would you like to sit down?”

He nodded. Grassley led him to an office, well-appointed, full of dark wood, with pastel landscapes on the walls. He took a seat behind the desk. “Would you like something to drink? Coffee, perhaps?” He turned on the computer on his desk.

“Jus' some water, ah think.” Grassley pushed a button on his desk phone. “Mister Jones, would you be so kind as to bring a bottle of water to the counseling room?”

A moment later, the young man with the horn rimmed glasses appeared, with a bottle of mineral water, and a crystal glass on a mahogany tray. Mister Jones poured, as Grassley continued.

“Now, we can handle the arrangements, including bringing your mother here, the memorial service, the plot here in a lovely spot beside the fountain, in the nicest part of our own memorial garden. Of course, you'll want a headstone, I'd suggest our “Eternal Remembrance” package. The vault, which is required by state law, will have to be...accommodating, of course.” He began to type numbers into the computer.

There were a bewildering number of options and permutations, each of which had a “recommended” level of complexity, and, J.D. assumed, expense. Two options were always presented, with one of them

described as “most dignified,” and “memorable for your family and friends.” Price was never mentioned.

J.D. nodded at each of the most “recommended” options. At the end, Grassley asked, “Now, how would you like to make the financial arrangements? Bank transfers are available, as are major credit cards.”

J.D. looked at him. Arthur Grassley could not quite hide his anticipation at closing what was, no doubt a lucrative transaction.

“Ah'd like t' know the...total, if y' please. Ah do need t' speak with m' folks about...”

“Of course, Mr. McGraw.” There followed a lengthy reiteration of the dignified and memorable virtues of each detail; the custom, premium casket, the elegance of the “preparation package,” the scenic plot, the custom vault, the memorial service, the exquisite headstone, the site of family gatherings to come, the state-of-the art hearse...

“Thank y' Mr. Grassley. Now ah'll need t' make some arrangements at the bank, an' have a talk w' the family.”

Grassley's face fell ever so slightly. He could feel that the big fish might be slipping off the hook. But he nodded, his head weighed down with sympathy. “Of course. And if you'd like to bring them by to see our facility, or to ask questions of us, we'll be more than happy to help. But...do be aware that we do need a bit of lead time to prepare for such a memorable and custom set of services. Where is your Mother now?”

“At th' hospital.”

“Ah. Well, I don't want to add to your worries, but you are aware that...storage there is quite costly. And not...of the quality that your mother might deserve. The sooner we can complete arrangements, the sooner we can transport her here, and prepare her memorial.” He handed J.D. a large envelope and a folder, with color pictures of all the premium options that had been pressed upon him.

J.D. stood up. “Thank y' Arthur. Y've been most helpful.”

Grassley walked him to the door. J.D. took his thin hand in his large, muscular one. He reflected that Grassley's hand was soft, and a bit moist. He shook it, and looked him in the eye.

“I look forward to meeting your family soon, and helping you to celebrate your mother's life in an elegant, and dignified way you can cherish.”

J.D. smiled. “Not likely, y' goddamned ghoul,” he said, and walked away.

XIII.

Stepping out of the taxi, J.D. was struck by the plainness of the little house. This did not appear to be where the son of a billionaire would live. Nor was the neighborhood, full of used cars and low priced family sedans where you would expect to find him. But according to the records, this small, white

house was the last residence of John Early Styles.

The yard, and the small shrubs around the foot of the house were trimmed and even. Work that probably would have been too taxing for John Early Styles, if J.D. could trust his impressions. He knocked on the door.

No answer. There was a doorbell. He rang it. Still no sound from within.

There were no security cameras, no alarm system. J.D. reached into his vest pocket and produced two slim metal tools. In a moment, he had opened the lock, and quickly stepped inside.

There was a woman there. She looked up, startled.

“Gigi.” J.D. said.

“Oh, God, J.D.! What are you...”

“Workin’.” he said. “So r’ you.” He nodded toward the mop in her hand.

“J.D., I know that this looks...”

“Ah woundn’ worry, Gigi,” he said. “Ah figgur you’re gettin’ the house ready t’ sell.”

“That...that’s right,” she said.

“How long had John Early lived here?”

“A few months.”

“Ah figgur, about t’ time y’ knew for sure that John Senior was dyin’.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me why, Gigi.”

“Why, what?” she said, her shock subsiding and hardening into defiance.

“Why y’ sold your convertible, nice ‘n too, t’ buy this house f’ John-John.”

She looked shocked again. “Never mind how you figured that out,” her voice settling into resentment. She looked away from him. “I’m done being impressed with how talented you are in exploiting other people’s grief.”

J.D. said nothing. He walked to the kitchen cabinet, got a coffee mug, and poured a substantial shot from his flask. He slid it across the formica topped table to her. She looked at it as if she thought it would bite her.

“Y' don't drink,” he said. “Least not n'more. Didn't take Hercule Poirot t' figgur out why.”

“No,” she said, “I suppose it didn't. One look at the police record and you'd know everything you needed to know, right?”

“Not quite, Gigi. Ah still don' know why, after y' killed that family drivin' drunk, y' ended up workin' for John J. Styles.”

“That's an easy one. My family has been, as we say, “in service” for three generations. When I killed my employer's wife and daughters in the crash...” she paused, looked at the mug again, “and they found...what was in my system...I wasn't employable. Anywhere. I survived the crash because God is a bastard.”

“An nobody wanted t' work for John J. Styles. Nobody wanted t' hire you. Match made. An' he could depend on loyalty, since y' had nowhere t' go. He had secrets he wanted kept. An' you kept 'em. But thet still don' explain t' house.”

“You don't know the lives they were living in that house,” she said, her voice brittle with pain. “When he was home from his business trips, and his hunting trips, he was horrible to John-John. Once he was convinced that John David didn't have what it took to be his heir, he practically ran him out of the house.”

“But not Aubrey,” J.D. said. “Why?”

“She worked at it, that's for sure. Daddy's girl. When he screamed at John-John, or brutalized John David in that torture chamber he called a gym, she was right there. Telling their father that he was right, that they needed to toughen up. That he wasn't a monstrous abuser, screaming at children and belittling them, he was preparing them.”

“Th' portrait of Aubrey. Who painted it?” J.D. asked.

“You found out about that, too. You really a talented jackal.” She smiled grimly. “You probably found out about Presley, and Aubrey.”

J.D. said nothing. “John Styles fired him when he found out, of course. Paid him off to sign a nondisclosure agreement. Last I heard he was at art school up in New York, of all things.”

“Paid you t' sign one, too, I 'spect. But y' violatin' it now. Why?”

She was silent.

“He's dead, Gigi. An' trust me, th' kids are gonna be in no shape t' go after y' for tellin' th' truth now. Why did y' buy this house?”

She looked up suddenly. “When John Styles knew he was dying, that his so-called “immaculate will” wasn't going to save him, he got worse. Much worse. I had to get John-John out of there.”

“Ah'd think that Miss Adkins would be tryin' t' protect John-John, at least.”

Gigi curled her lips, showing a grimace. “Jeanette was interested in what she could get, but she wanted to get something for John-John, too. But she couldn't – or wouldn't risk her “position” to protect him from John's rages. She probably thought she had something coming in the will. Joke was on her, I guess. Spent years as his pet, his trophy, and didn't even get to keep the jewelry.”

“Ah take it y' don't have a lot a' sympathy for Ms. Adkins.”

“You take it right. A whore provides a service, Detective Breckenridge. She's not entitled to anything else. But I'll say one thing for her, she did stand up to him about the will. Told him she'd walk away and give an interview to every magazine she could find that would...well, you can imagine unless he gave John-John his full share of the estate. He was his son. It was only right.”

“An' thas how th' new will came t' be.”

“It was.”

“Ah'm pretty sure that didn' help John Style's mood much.”

“No, it didn't. But he changed the will, and never said another word about it.”

“Tell me 'bout the row that drove John David outa th' house.”

“It wasn't just one. It was many. But the last night was...memorable. John told John David, in the coldest voice I can remember him ever using, that he was a failure, unworthy, a disgrace to the name. That he was going to write John David out, and leave him to the Feds. He told him that he was leaving everything to Aubrey, who had proven herself. John David left, angrier than I'd seen him.

As soon as he was out the door, Aubrey went to the trophy hall, and made Marcus take down the pig's head. John had smashed John David's portrait, and Aubrey had Marcus put up the pig's head in it's place. John Styles laughed at that. Called her his “good girl.”

J.D. nodded. “But John David ended up back in th' will. Wonder how that happened?”

“They reconciled, in a way. They'd done that before, many times. But his father got his pound of flesh. Wanted to humble John David. He told him that at least John-John had an excuse, being a “cripple,” and told Marcus to have John David deliver John-John's medication every week. Said that being a fetch servant for a “cripple” might teach him what weakness looks like.”

“So how'd John David take that?”

“Better than you'd expect. He showed up every week, and took the medication from Marcus, and delivered it here. He'd never treated John-John like a brother, but he hadn't hated him like his father had. I was here a few times when he came. John David was actually kind to him. He said he was glad to see him safe.”

“When did y' last see John-John?”

“I came by four days before his father died. He looked terrible. John-John said that he was just sad about his father being so sick. He could barely get out of bed. Some days were worse than others for him, but I was very, very worried. He told me not to make a fuss, that his brother would be by in a couple of days to give him his meds, and that no one in the family needed something else to worry about.”

“Did y' call anybody 'bout it? Bein' s' worried?”

She looked down. “No. He asked me not to. I did call John David and suggested that maybe he should go by, but he said he was busy with his father's condition.”

“Ah see. An when did John David go by?”

“He went to John-John's to tell him that his father had passed. He didn't find him there, and he called Aubrey, who called me. We came to the house. His clothes and things were still there. His medicine was gone, but nothing else was missing. Even his wallet was on the nightstand.”

“So y' called th' police.”

“Well, John David did. He went down the next day to give a statement, but he said the police weren't helpful, that they just assumed that he'd gone off somewhere. He explained about the medication, and John-John's illness, but as he had apparently take the medicine with him, there was nothing to worry about.

I knew that was wrong. I knew that something had happened, but what could I do?”

“Y' suspected som'thin', or somebody.”

“Yes. John David. You know he's got legal troubles, that his business is failing.”

J.D. nodded, “Sure, but ah imagine sev'ral hundred million could go a long way toward fixin' all that. An John David was already in line f' that.”

Gigi began to cry. “I raised them. I can't bear the thought that one of them would hurt another over money. I can't bear the thought...”

“Ah have one more thing t' do, Gigi, then ah kin tell you ever'thin'. Just a lil longer. Y'need t' leave here, right away. An don' go back t' Styles' place. Ah'll come find y'.

XIV.

J.D. sat in his usual booth at the Double Cup Diner. He made three phone calls, and lingered over a cup of coffee. When enough time had passed, he paid up, and left, and walked down the street toward the waterfront, collecting his thoughts, preparing for what must come next.

He knew what had happened to John Early Styles, and who was responsible. He knew how to prove it. But there were still decisions to be made.

They weren't as clever as they thought. He heard their footsteps well before they spoke.

“Hello, Breckenridge.”

He turned. Two men stood there. They were large men, dressed in suits. He could see their faces, even in the partial darkness. One of them had a thin, twisted smile. One of them held a device, gun-like, but not a gun, pointed directly at him.

“You weren't easy to find,” the smiling man said. “But you didn't think it would take forever, did you?” He showed him a badge.

“Phony,” J.D. said. “Good, but phony.”

The smiling man said, “It's time for you to come back and be Uncle Sam's Secret Hound again. If you're smart, you'll come quietly, get in the car, and take a little nap. You'll wake up in your new kennel. It won't be as...comfortable as the last one, since you're a bad doggie who likes to run away. But you'll get used to it.”

“Ah really wish y' hadn't done this. Y' going t' regret it. But not f' long.”

The smiling man laughed, but there was no sound. “Yeah, well, we know all about your little magic trick. You'll notice that there are no doorways nearby for you to pull your “Hound-ini” escape.” He smiled even wider at his own joke.

J.D. said, softly, “Y've always been int'rested in what ah kin do. But y' never learned what ah am. Ah'm sorry for what's 'bout t' happen.”

“Enough tough guy talk. Give him a taste.”

The gun made a coughing noise. Two needles, attached to electric coils shot out at J.D., and hit him in the stomach. There was a crackling pop, then an angry buzz ripped through the night air.

J.D. stared at them, unmoving.

The smile disappeared. The man with the device stood, wide-eyed, horror creeping over his features.

The smiling man, his voice suddenly high and trembling, murmured, “H...his eyes! What the f...”

The police report could not fully describe what was found on that lonely street corner. Too much blood splattered on the building walls and covering the sidewalk, scraps of something that might have been human flesh. Hard to tell how many people had died here.

Witnesses saw nothing, but they heard something. Something loud, something between a roar and a scream. Not like anything they'd heard before.

They said they'd never forget it. And they wouldn't.

XV.

Three people sat at the Formica table in John-John's kitchen: John David, Jeanette Adkins, and Aubrey Styles. They did not speak to each other.

J.D. Breckenridge stepped into the room through the pantry door.

“Wh...what were you doing in there? How long have you...” Aubrey said.

John David curled his lip, and hunched his shoulders. “I don't give a shit,” he snarled. “What I want to know is why you brought me here. And with,” he indicated the two women with a wave of his hand, “them.”

Jeanette Adkins looked at the table. “It's not...the company I would choose either, John. But I think there's a...”

“Ah called each of y' sep'rately b'cause ah knew y' wouldn't come if ah shared th' guest list. But each of y' did come, in th' middle of the night, t' a neighborhood that I doubt y' ever cared t' see. To a dead man's house. Because it was in y' interest to know what ah know.”

“You kept us waiting long enough,” John David said. “Nice new suit, by the way. Aubrey must be paying you well to be her attack dog.”

“Hadta change. An occasion, y'know. The other'n wasn't...presentable.”

He turned to John David. “A'course, y' been here before. Plenty in t' past month. Been here t' bring John Early his medicine. Medicine y' knew he needed t' stay alive.”

“And I brought it!” he snapped. “I brought it every damn time!”

“Ah'm sure y' did. An' y' took it away, too, last time y' came. 'Long with sum'thin' else.”

John David Styles said nothing. J.D. took note of the way his expensive jacket's pocket bulged as he hunched over the table.

“I don't know whether to say, “I knew it,” or “I can't believe it,” Aubrey Styles said. “I can't believe you'd do that to...”

“Les' not get ahead of th' story. There's a lot more t' know.”

He turned to Aubrey Styles. “First, les' clear th' air. You knew that John Early was dead when y' first met me. Y'knew that 'cause John-John wouldna left without speakin' t' his dear sister. An' y' suspected John David. He an' y' Daddy was on the outs, an' you, his fav'rite, figgured that was all t' your good. But John Styles died b'fore y' had a chance t' talk him inta changin' the will. So y' figgured that seein'

him go down for his brother's murder was all t' the good.”

She said nothing.

He turned to Jeanette Adkins. “Y’ve learned t’ survive by doin’ whatever folks like John Styles told y’. T’ smile, and do...whatever, while takin’ what y’ could. But John-John’s birth, an’ John Style’s hatred of y’ boy changed all that. Y’ stood up t’ him when it meant protecting a sick child. An’ he cut y’ out, jus’ like he did anyone else that stood up t’ him. Treated y’ worse. Treated John Early worse. He changed th’ will, jus’ like y’ demanded. An he knew he didn’ have time t’ change it back without y’ knowin’.

“Oh, Jeanette knew how to get what she wanted from Dad,” John David smirked. “and from any man who doesn’t mind fucking an money grubbing, homewrecking whore.”

She looked up suddenly, her eyes wide, her teeth bared. Her perfect composed features transformed to an animal rage. She stared at John David, cold fury in here eyes. “You killed my son.” She whispered, “And I will fuck every hit man from here to Chicago until I find one that will make you die...screaming.”

J.D. shook his head. “John David didn’ kill John-John.” he said flatly.

“I did nothing wrong.” John David said, his head down, his fists balled up on the table.

“Oh, y’ did plenty wrong. But not killin’ John Early. It takes mor’n money t’ get the Fed off th’ sorta scent they’s caught from y’. Takes power. Power, y’ Daddy had. An’ you don’t. But ah’m not hired t’ make more trouble for y’. Y’ got plenty already.”

“Now, tell m’ this, John David Styles: why’d y’ take John-John’s medication away?”

He looked up. “I didn’t...I swear I didn’t. Not until...”

“Not ‘til y found him dead.” J.D. said. “Time t’ tell th’ truth. The lie won’t hold no more.”

John David Styles twisted in his chair. He tried to speak, but his voice seemed to catch in his throat.

J.D. said, “Well, ah guess y’ pretty upset. How ‘bout ah tell it, an y’ tell me if ah get any’tin’ wrong.”

He said nothing.

“Marcus Jaramillo gave y’ th’ meds t’ deliver, like usual, ever week. Y’ been noticin’ that John Early was getting’ sicker, but he’d been sicker b’fore, and y’ had your Daddy on your mind. B’sides, ah imagine John Early asked y’ not t’ bother anyone ‘bout it, with what was goin’ on.”

John David Styles nodded.

“Then, y’ came t’ get him t’ take him t’ your Daddy’s service, such as it was. An he was dead. Y’ couldn’t know how, but y’ knew you’d be a fine suspect. Y’ even suspected that the medicine was poisoned, that’s why y’ took it when y’ left. Ever’body knew you’d been sent over with it. You prolly got it hid

somewheres now. Hidin' things is somethin' y' been doin' a lot of, lately.”

John David looked up at him. “What choice did I have?” he said, softly. “I didn't want to...”

“Didn't want to *what*?” Jeanette Adkins demanded.

“John David took th' body. He doesn' understan' murder investigations ver' well, but he did know that without a body, th' police don't tend t' act until one turns up.”

“Where is he, John,” Aubrey said, softly. “Where's our brother?”

“Where is my son?” Jeanette screamed.

J.D. interrupted. “Seems t' me that y' kinda overlookin' a more important question. That bein', why is John Early dead?”

“I thought we knew,” Aubrey said. “Marcus poisoned him. But why?”

J.D. shook his head. “T'was never a need t' poison John Early. All's that's needful's t' make sure he doesn' get his medication for a coupla weeks. He jus' gets sicker n' sicker an' dies of a disease he already had. Nothin' to detect, nothin' t' draw suspicion.”

He turned to John David. “Ah'm pretty sure that if y' have that medicine your hidin' tested, you'll find it's not poisoned. Prolly sugar water, or some such.”

“Why would Marcus do that?” Aubrey said. But the strain in her voice, and the fluttering of her eyes told J.D. that the truth was beginning to dawn on her.

“Ah don' know how much Marcus knew, or what he felt 'bout John Early. But there was som'body wanted him dead a lot more.”

He turned to Aubrey Styles. “Y' Daddy loved you. Prolly never loved anybody else in his whole, selfish, mean life. He even doted on y' enough t' allow y' lover, Presley, t' paint y' portrait. Thought y' were the heir to what he'd built. Y' even pretended t' hate what he hated, puttin' up that pig head in John David's place. But in his eyes, y' had one, solitary flaw.”

She looked up. Tears were welling in her eyes. She wiped them back harshly.

“Y' weren't like him in one way, an he was gonna fix that b'fore he died. Y' didn't despise th' weak enough t' suit him.

Y' cared f' John-John when he was sick. Comforted him when y' Daddy punished him. An t' your Daddy, he would hold y' back. Not t' mention that he didn' want one penny a' his t' go to a weakling, that in his eyes, shoulda died years b'fore. Prolly thought there was some sorta twisted justice in John-John dyin' of his own weakness.”

He turned to John David. “The old man set you up. Figgur'd you for a failure who deserved nothin'. He

couldn't cut you out, you'd least get 'lective share bein' his nat'ral heir. Unless y' in prison for murderin' y' brother. He proolly smiled, thinkin' ya might get the needle in prison. He knew that medicine you's deliverin' was useless. An' he didn' think y' smart enough t' squirm outa it. He knew, with the money tied up with a murder investigation goin' on, that y' didn't have enough liquid cash t' make it go 'way, or even t' hire a decent lawyer."

"Why....why would he..." John David said, his voice nearing a sob.

J.D. looked at their stunned faces. "Ever one a y' made the same mistake. Y' didn' understan' how vile, how deep John J. Styles could hate. An' what he hated, mor'n anythin' was weakness."

He turned to Aubrey Styles. "John J. Styles had been a good while dyin', but he knew it was comin', an soon. He wanted you t' have it all – once he'd rid you of what he saw as a parasite. An cut your brother out the only way he could. By framin' him for murder."

Silence settled on the room.

He stood behind John David. "One last question for y'. What happened t' six million dollars in jewelry, an ten million in gold bullion. Y' knew the old man had it, and y' were desp'rate t' get it. What happened to it?"

"I already told you, I don't know."

"But y' looked for it, didn' y'?"

"Yes."

"An it was gone. Not where y' expected it."

"No."

"I figgure John Early's body was still in th' trunk when y' drove up t' the cemetery that night. Not many good places t' hide a body. But ah cain't see a man like you doin' shovel work. Marcus with y'?"

"Yes."

"No. You couldn't..." Aubrey whispered.

"Th' big black rock wasn't there yet. So y' dug up that big, ugly coffin, or rather Marcus did, an' pried it open. An' inside was..."

"Nothing!" John David, exploded. "Nothing but his filthy corpse! His withered little corpse in that great big casket!"

"What happened to the jewelry, an th' gold, John David?" J.D. repeated.

"I don't know, I said! It was gone!"

“Naow, think, John-David. Who'd y' think Daddy woulda trusted t' put all that in his casket? An t' pay off that ghoul Grassley t' leave him alone t' do it?”

“Marcus,” Aubrey whispered. “And I imagine he's long gone by now.”

J.D. smiled. “If by long gone, y' mean, in th' County lock up, then sure. He couldn't skip town right away, that'd looked suspicious if'n he's caught. An it takes a little time t' find someone who can fence that sorta goods without drawin' a lotta heat. He tried t' get outa town last night, but some fella dropped a little call t' the police that a fella had a buncha jewelry that didn' belong t' him, an' was headed t' the airport. Ah imagine, with th' charges that's fallin' on him, he'll tell what he knows soon 'nuff.”

J.D. faced John David. “But he's got a plenty good reason t' say that y' poisoned John Early. A dead murderer's no good t' the prosecutor, a live one, though, can git y' a deal. 'Specially if that fella's already on the law's bad list. Y' got *one* way a' provin' that y' didn't poison y' brother. Where is he, John David?”

John David sat silently. He looked to his sister, whose face was a marble study in contempt.

“Ah figgure,” J.D. said, “That y' came t' y' Daddy's grave t' make a withdrawal. But y' made a deposit, instead.”

He leaned in to John David's face. “Cain't get a court t' open that grave without a sworn statement. Usually from family. D'you really wanna end up strapped down onna gurney in th' state prison with a needle in y' arm? D'you wanna give your Daddy jus' what he wanted f' you?”

John David Styles took a deep shuddering breath. He could not meet his sister's stare. He spoke. “Yes. I put him in there. With...Dad.” Tears were flowing freely now. He laughed, his voice brittle. “You know, I thought there was...a certain...poetry in it. He hated John-John. Now he'd have to...spend a little time with him, not able to...say a word.”

Jeanette Adkins stood up. “I will...John David Styles...I will...” she left.

“Ah'd sleep awful light from now on, John David,” J.D. said. “She means it, ah think.”

J.D. gave a large envelope to Aubrey. “Here's all 'y need.”

She held the envelope, and looked up at him. “I hope you won't mind if I don't say I'm grateful.”

“No Ma'am. I 'spect not.”

“But I'm as good as my word. You'll be paid for your time.” She took out her checkbook, and wrote him a far larger fee than he had expected. She handed it to him. “I expect your silence, Mr. Breckenridge.

“Like father like daughter,” J.D. thought, silently. He took the check.

“Any parting words, Detective?”

“Jus' this. If ah was you, ah'd get your brother's corpse outa...there, an then leave John David alone. Leave 'im to Heaven. An the Feds. An Jeanette Adkins.”

She said nothing.

XVI.

“Howdy, Gigi.”

She started. “Where the Hell did you come from, J.D.? How did you even know...”

He smiled, and sat down across from her. The hotel room was nice, but not too nice. Gigi was apparently watching her expenses.

“You're safe now, Gigi. It's over.”

“J.D..” she said. You owe me something, remember? The time trial bet?”

“Ah do. An ah keep m' promises.”

“What happened to John-John?”

“Y' sure? Y' might be happier not knowin'. Gonna be plenty in the papers 'bout it, anyway.”

“Yes. I'm sure.”

J.D. told her everything. He had to pause to bring her a glass of water. Then, in another few minutes, a glass of whiskey. By the end, she was quietly crying.

“Them tears aren't just for John-John, ah reckon.”

“No. For all three of them. For what he did to them.” She sat down on the bed, composing herself.

J.D. nodded. “An evil man, f'sure. But those two's grown up now. Up t' them what comes next.”

“One thing I can't figure,” Gigi said. “He had all that jewelry and gold buried with him. Why would he do that? It's crazy. You'd have thought he'd want his daughter...”

“Surest way t' go crazy is t' try t' figgur out crazy,” J.D. said. “But a fella like John J. Styles prolly didn't wanna go out empty handed. Mebbe he figgured there was an afterlife, an he thought he could buy his way outa what he had comin'.”

There was a long silence.

“J.D.,” she said, “What can I do? After this breaks, I'll have to go...I don't know where.”

“Mebbe not,” J.D. said, “But ah do know how.” He handed her an envelope. “Th' title t' the 88's in there. Y' kin find her at a bar called the “Shea.” There's a letter t' the owner, Mel, an' th' keys. It's a bit hot, mind you, y'need to repaint her, and get her numbers changed, there's some phony cops lookin' for it. But she's yours now. Try not t' run th' wheels off her too quick.”

She held the letter. “So you're leaving.”

“Fraid so. Ah'm hotter than th' car. An my former client's likely t' get visitors with a lotta questions.”

“Maybe, one more ride, J.D.?” She said, her smile changing to something very different, her eyes softening. “I don't really want to be alone.”

J.D. sighed. “Thas' th' finest invite I've had in a long time, Gigi. An ah bet you're a dab hand at that sorta...drivin' too.” She smiled.

“But,” he said, ah...well...ah...”

She laughed. “You don't need an excuse, J.D. Really. It's been quite a day. But find me when the heat blows over. You'll need a place to land someday.”

“Ah don't think this sorta heat's ever gonna...but ah'm grateful. Really am.”

He left. Staying was not a risk he could take for either of them, no matter how badly he wanted to.

XVII.

J.D. Breckenridge kept an eye on the Port Davis Examiner's website as he kept moving for the next several months, never staying in one place, seldom sleeping under the same roof twice. Not much appeared about the Styles family, and the ownership of the news outlet had changed to one Aubrey Lynn Styles.

One mention did appear. John David Styles pled guilty to various securities fraud charges, and one count of unlawfully concealing a corpse. He received several enormous fines, but he would never pay them. He received a short prison stay in a minimum security facility where he was stabbed to death by a fellow inmate. Some fellow from Chicago.

END: “John-John's Lonely Grave.”

First Story of “The Secret Hound: The Case Files of J.D. Breckenridge”

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