

The Weekender

The night went bad fast.

I looked in the rearview mirror and didn't see any lights but I knew they were after us and it was only a matter of time till I'd see the flashers.

Toth started to talk but I told him to shut up and got the Buick up to eighty. The road was empty, nothing but pine trees for miles around.

"Oh, brother," Toth muttered. I felt his eyes on me but I didn't even want to look at him, I was so mad.

They were never easy, drugstores.

Because, just watch sometime, when cops make their rounds they cruise drugstores more often than anyplace else. Because of the perco and Valium and the other drugs. You know.

You'd think they'd stake out convenience stores. But those're a joke and with the closed-circuit TV you're going to get your picture took, you just are. So nobody who knows the business, I mean really *knows* it, hits them. And banks, forget banks. Even ATMs. I mean, how much can you clear? Three, four hundred tops? And around here the "Fast Cash" button gives you twenty only. Which tells you something. So why even bother?

No. We wanted cash and that meant a drugstore, even though they can be tricky. Ardmore Drugs. Which is a big store in a little town. Liggett Falls. Sixty miles from Albany and a hundred or so from where Toth and me lived, farther west into the mountains. Liggett

Falls's a poor place. You'd think it wouldn't make sense to hit a store there. But that's exactly why — because like everywhere else, people there need medicine and hair spray and makeup, only they don't have credit cards. Except maybe a Sears or Penney. So they pay cash.

"Oh, brother," Toth whispered again. "Look."

And he made me even madder, him saying that. I wanted to shout look at what, you son of a bitch? But then I could see what he was talking about and I didn't say anything. Up ahead. It was like just before dawn, light on the horizon. Only this was red and the light wasn't steady. It was like it was pulsing and I knew that they'd got the roadblock up already. This was the only road to the interstate from Liggett Falls. So I should've guessed.

"I got an idea," Toth said. Which I didn't want to hear but I also wasn't going to go through another shootout. Surely not at a roadblock, where they was ready for us.

"What?" I snapped.

"There's a town over there. See those lights? I know a road'll take us there."

Toth's a big guy and he looks calm. Only he isn't really. He gets shook easy and he now kept turning around, skittish, looking in the backseat. I wanted to slap him and tell him to chill.

"Where's it?" I asked. "This town?"

"About four, five miles. The turnoff, it ain't marked. But I know it."

This was that lousy upstate area where everything's green. But dirty green, you know. And all the buildings're gray. These gross little shacks, pickups on blocks. Little towns without even a 7-Eleven. And full of hills they call mountains but aren't.

took the Smith & Wesson and looked at it for a minute then went and put it on the kitchen table. I came back with the Buck and cut his feet free. Then I figured if I was going to do it I oughta go all the way. So I cut his hands free too. Weller seemed surprised I did that. But he smiled like he knew I was playing the game. I pulled him to his feet and held the blade to his neck and took him to the door.

"You're doing a good thing," he said.

I was thinking: Oh, man. I can't believe this. It's crazy. Part of me said, Cut him now, cut his throat. Do it!

But I didn't. I opened the door and smelled cold fall air and wood smoke and pine and I heard the wind in the rocks and trees above our head.

"Go on," I told him.

Weller started off and he didn't look back to check on me, see if I went to get the gun... faith, I guess. He kept walking real slow down toward the road.

I felt funny, I'll tell you, and a couple times when he went past some real shadowy places in the driveway and could disappear I was like, Oh, man, this is all messed up. I'm crazy.

I almost panicked a few times and bolted for the Smitty but I didn't. When Weller got down near the sidewalk I was actually holding my breath. I expected him to go, I really did. I was looking for that moment — when people tense up, when they're gonna swing or draw down on you or bolt. It's like their bodies're shouting what they're going to be doing before they do it. Only Weller wasn't doing none of that. He walked down to the sidewalk real casual. And he turned and looked up at the face of the Lookout, like he was just another weekender.

Then he turned around. He nodded at me.

Toth cranked down the window and let this cold air in and looked up at the sky. "They can find us with those, you know, satellite things."

"What're you talking about?"

"You know, they can see you from miles up. I saw it in a movie."

"You think the state cops do that? Are you nuts?"

This guy, I don't know why I work with him. And after what happened at the drugstore, I won't again.

He pointed out where to turn and I did. He said the town was at the base of the Lookout. Well, I remembered passing that on the way to Liggett Falls this afternoon. It was this huge rock a couple hundred feet high. Which if you looked at it right looked like a man's head, like a profile, squinting. It'd been some kind of big deal to the Indians around here. Blah, blah, blah. He told me but I didn't pay no attention. It was spooky, that weird face, and I looked once and kept on driving. I didn't like it. I'm not really superstitious but sometimes I am.

"Winchester," he said now, meaning what the name of the town was. Five, six thousand people. We could find an empty house, stash the car in a garage and just wait out the search. Wait till tomorrow afternoon — Sunday — when all the weekenders were driving back to Boston and New York and we'd be lost in the crowd.

I could see the Lookout up ahead, not really a shape, mostly this blackness where the stars weren't. And then the guy on the floor in the back started to moan all of a sudden and just about give me a heart attack.

"You. Shut up back there." I slapped the seat and the guy in the back went quiet.

What a night...

We'd got to the drugstore fifteen minutes before it closed. Like you ought to do. 'Cause mosta the customers're gone and a lot've the clerks've left and people're tired and when you push a Glock or Smitty into their faces they'll do just about anything you ask.

Except tonight.

We had our masks down and walked in slow, Toth getting the manager out of his little office, a fat guy who started crying and that made me mad, a grown man doing that. Toth kept a gun on the customers and the clerks and I was telling the cashier, this kid, to open the tills and, Jesus, he had an attitude. Like he'd seen all of those Steven Segal movies or something. A little kiss on the cheek with the Smitty and he changed his mind and started moving. Cussing me out but he was moving. I was counting the bucks as we were going along from one till to the next and sure enough we were up to about three thousand when I heard this noise and turned around and, what it was, Toth was knocking over a rack of chips. I mean, Jesus. He's getting Doritos!

I look away from the kid for just a second and what's he do? He pitches this bottle. Only not at me. Out the window. Bang, it breaks. There's no alarm I can hear but half of them are silent anyway and I'm really pissed. I could've killed him. Right there.

Only I didn't. Toth did.

He shoots the kid, bang, bang... Shit. And everybody else is scattering and he turns around and shoots another one of the clerks and a customer, just blam, not thinking or nothing. Just for no reason. Hit this girl clerk in the leg but this guy, this customer, well, he was dead. You could see. And I'm going, "What're you doing, what're you doing?" And he's going, "Shut up, shut up, shut up..." And we're like we're swearing at each other when we figured out we hadta get outa there.

tell them. Or don't do it fast enough. But, naw, he just nodded. "Okay, Jack. You thought about it. That's a good thing. You're not ready yet. I respect that." He sipped a little more scotch, looking at the glass. And that was the end of it.

Then all of a sudden these searchlights started up. They was some ways away but I still got spooked and backed away from the window. Pulled my gun out. Only then I saw that it wasn't nothing to do with the robbery. It was just a couple big spotlights shining on the Lookout. They must've gone on every night, this time.

I looked up at it. From here it didn't look like a face at all. It was just a rock. Gray and brown and these funny pine trees growing sideways out of cracks.

Watching it for a minute or two. Looking out over the town. And something that guy was saying went into my head. Not the words, really. Just the *thought*. And I was thinking about everybody in that town. Leading normal lives. There was a church steeple and the roofs of small houses. A lot of little yellow lights in town. You could just make out the hills in the distance. And I wished for a minute I was in one of them houses. Sitting there. Watching TV with a wife next to me.

I turned back from the window and I said, "You'd just walk down to the road and back? That's it?"

"That's all. I won't run off, you don't go get your gun. We trust each other. What could be simpler?"

Listening to the wind. Not strong but a steady hiss that was comforting in a funny way even though any other time I'da thought it sounded cold and raw. It was like I heard a voice. I don't know. Something in me said I oughta do this.

I didn't say nothing else 'cause I was right on the edge and I was afraid he'd say something that'd make me change my mind. I just

not going to take a single one down with you. You're going to die and die painfully 'cause of a few lousy bucks. But, but, but..." He held up his hands and stopped me from saying anything. "You gotta understand, faith means risk."

"That's stupid."

"I think it's just the opposite. It'd be the smartest thing you'd ever do in your life."

I tossed back another scotch and had to think about this.

Weller said, "I can see it there already. Some of that faith. It's there. Not a lot. But some."

And yeah, maybe there was a little. 'Cause I was thinking about how mad I got at Toth and the way he ruined everything. I didn't want anybody to get killed tonight. I *was* sick of it. Sick of the way my life had gone. Sometimes it was good, being alone and all. Not answering to anybody. But sometimes it was real bad. And this guy Weller, it was like he was showing me something different.

"So," I said. "You just want me to put the gun down?"

He looked around. "Put it in the kitchen. You stand in the doorway or window. All I'm gonna do is walk down to the street and walk back."

I looked out the window. It was maybe fifty feet down the driveway. There were these bushes on either side of it. He could just take off and I'd never find him.

All through the sky I could see police-car lights flickering.

"Naw, I ain't gonna. You're nuts."

I expected begging or something. Or him getting pissed off more likely — which is what happens to me when people don't do what I

So we left. Only what happens is, there's a cop outside. That's why the kid threw the bottle, to get his attention. And he's outa his car. So we grab another customer, this guy by the door, and we use him like a shield and get outside. And there's the cop, he's holding his gun up, looking at the customer we've got, and the cop, he's saying, It's okay, it's okay, just take it easy.

And I couldn't believe it, Toth shot him too. I don't know whether he killed him but there was blood so he wasn't wearing a vest, it didn't look like, and I could've killed Toth there on the spot. Because why'd he do that? He didn't have to.

We threw the guy, the customer, into the backseat and tied him up with tape. I kicked out the taillights and burned rubber outa there. We made it out of Liggett Falls.

That was all just a half hour ago but it seemed like weeks.

And now we were driving down this highway through a million pine trees. Heading right for the Lookout.



Winchester was dark.

I don't get why weekenders come to places like this. I mean, my old man took me hunting a long time ago. A couple times and I liked it. But coming to places like this just to look at leaves and buy furniture they call antiques but's really just busted-up crap... I don't know.

We found a house a block off Main Street with a bunch of newspapers in front and I pulled into the drive and put the Buick behind the place just in time. Two state police cars went shooting by. They'd been behind us not more than a half mile, without the lightbars going. Only they hadn't seen us 'causa the broke tail-lights and they went by in a flash and were gone, going to downtown.

Toth got into the house and he wasn't very clean about it, breaking a window in the back. It was a vacation place, pretty empty, and the refrigerator was shut off and the phone too, which was a good sign — there wasn't anybody coming back soon. Also, it smelled pretty musty and had stacks of old books and magazines from the summer.

We brought the guy inside and Toth started to take the hood off this guy's head and I said, "What the hell're you doing?"

"He hasn't said anything. Maybe he can't breathe."

This was a man talking who'd just laid a cap on three people back there and he was worried about this guy *breathing*? Man. I just laughed. Disgusted laughing, I mean. "Like maybe we don't want him to *see* us?" I said.

"You think of that?" See, we weren't wearing our ski masks anymore.

It's scary when you have to remind people of stuff like that. I was thinking Toth knew better. But you never know.

I went to the window and saw another squad car go past. They were going slower now. They do that. After like the first shock, after the rush, they get smart and start cruising slow, really looking for what's funny — what's *different*, you know? That's why I didn't take the papers up from the front yard. Which would've been different than how the yard looked that morning. Cops really do that Colombo stuff. I could write a book about cops.

"Why'dyoudoit?"

It was the guy we took.

"Why?" he whispered again.

"That's the faith part. You don't know. No guarantees."

"Well, I guess I don't have any faith."

"Then *I'm* dead. And *your* life's never gonna change. End of story." He sat back and shrugged.

That silence again but it was like it was really this roar all around us. "You just want... What do you want?"

He drank more scotch. "Here's a proposal. Let me walk outside."

"Oh, right. Just let you stroll out for some fresh air or something?"

"Let me walk outside and I promise you I'll walk right back in again."

"Like a test?"

He thought about this for a second. "Yeah. A test."

"Where's this faith you're talking about? You walk outside, you try to run and I'd shoot you in the back."

"No, what you do is you put the gun someplace in the house. The kitchen or someplace. Somewhere you couldn't get it if I ran. You stand at the window, where we can see each other. And I'll tell you up front I can run like the wind. I was lettered track and field in college and I still jog every day of the year."

"You know if you run and bring the cops back it's all gonna get bloody. I'll kill the first five troopers come through that door. Nothing'll stop me and that blood'll be on your hands."

"Of course I know that," he said. "But if this's going to work you can't think that way. You've got to assume the worst is going to happen. That if I run I'll tell the cops everything. Where you are and that there're no hostages here and that you've only got one or two guns. And they're going to come in and blow you to hell. And you're

"And you? What about you?"

"Well, I'll tell you about me. Maybe you're the good deed in *my* life. I've spent years thinking only about making money. Take a look at my wallet. There. In the back."

I pulled it open. There were a half dozen of these little cards, like certificates. *Randall Weller — Salesman of the Year. Exceeded Target Two Years Straight. Best Salesman of 1992.*

Weller kept going. "There are plenty of others back in my office. And trophies too. And in order for me to win those I've had to neglect people. My family and friends. People who could maybe use my help. And that's not right. Maybe you kidnapping me, it's one of those signs to make me turn my life around."

The funny thing was, this made sense. Oh, it was hard to imagine not doing heists. And I couldn't see myself, if it came down to a fight, not going for my Buck or my Smitty to take the other guy out. That turning the other cheek stuff, that's only for losers. But maybe I *could* see a day when my life'd be just straight time. Living with some woman, maybe a wife, and not treating her the way I'd treated Sandra, living in a house. Doing what my father and mother, whatever she was like, never did.

"If I was to let you go," I said, "you'd have to tell 'em something."

He shrugged. "I'll say you locked me in the trunk and then tossed me out somewhere near here. I wandered around, looking for a house or something, and got lost. It could take me a day to find somebody. That's believable."

"Or you could flag down a car in an hour."

"I could. But I won't."

"You keep saying that. But how do I *know*?"

The customer. He had a low voice and it sounded pretty calm, I mean considering. I'll tell you, the first time I was in a shootout I was totally freaked for a day afterwards. And I had a gun.

I looked him over. He was wearing a plaid shirt and jeans. But he wasn't a local. I could tell because of the shoes. They were rich-boy shoes, the kind you see all the Yuppies wear. I couldn't see his face because of the mask but I pretty much remembered it. He wasn't young. Maybe in his forties. Kind of wrinkled skin. And he was skinny too. Skinnier'n me and I'm one of those people can eat what I want and I don't get fat. I don't know why. It just works that way.

"Quiet," I said. There was another car going by.

He laughed. Soft. Like he was saying, What? You think they can hear me all the way outside?

Kind of laughing *at* me, you know? I didn't like that at all.

And, sure, I guess you *couldn't* hear anything out there but I didn't like him giving me any crap so I said, "Just shut up. I don't want to hear your voice."

He did for a minute and just sat back in the chair where Toth put him. But then he said again, "Why'd you shoot them? You didn't have to."

"Quiet!"

"Just tell me why."

I took out my knife and snapped that sucker open then threw it down so it stuck in a tabletop. Sort of a *thunk* sound. "You hear that? That was a eight-inch Buck knife. Carbon-tempered. With a locking blade. It'd cut clean through a metal bolt. So you be quiet. Or I'll use it on you."

And he gave this laugh again. Maybe. Or it was just a snort of air. But I was thinking it was a laugh. I wanted to ask him what he meant by it but I didn't.

"You got any money on you?" Toth asked and pulled the wallet out of the guy's back pocket. "Lookit." He pulled out what must've been five or six hundred. Man.

Another squad car went past, moving slow. It had a spotlight and the cop turned it on the driveway but he just kept going. I heard a siren across town. And another one too. It was a weird feeling, knowing those people were out there looking for us.

I took the wallet from Toth and looked through it.

Randall C. Weller, Jr. He lived in Connecticut. A weekender. Just like I thought. He had a bunch of business cards that said he was vice president of this big computer company. One that was in the news, trying to take over IBM or something. All of a sudden I had this thought. We could hold him for ransom. I mean, why not? Make a half million. Maybe more.

"My wife and kids'll be sick, worrying," Weller said. It spooked me, hearing that. 'Cause there I was, looking right at a picture in his wallet. And what was it of? His wife and kids.

"I ain't letting you go. Now, just shut up. I may need you."

"Like a hostage, you mean? That's only in the movies. They'll shoot you when you walk out and they'll shoot me too if they have to. That's the way the cops do it in real life. Just give yourself up. At least you'll save your life."

"Shut up!" I shouted.

"Let me go and I'll tell them you treated me fine. That the shooting was a mistake. It wasn't your fault."

"Because life's hard and people're cruel. I told you I'm a churchgoer. A lot of the Bible's crazy. But some of it I believe. And one of the things I believe is that sometimes we're put in these situations to make a difference. I think that's what happened tonight. That's why you and I both happened to be at the drugstore at the same time. You've felt that, haven't you? Like an omen? Like something happens and is telling you you ought to do this or shouldn't do that."

Which was weird 'cause the whole time we were driving up to Liggett Falls, I kept thinking something funny's going on. I don't know what it is but this job's gonna be different.

"What if," he said, "everything tonight happened for a purpose? My wife had a cold so I went to buy NyQuil. I went to that drugstore instead of 7-Eleven to save a buck or two. You happened to hit that store at just that time. You happened to have your buddy" — he nodded toward Toth's body "with you. The cop car just happened by at that particular moment. And the clerk behind the counter just happened to see him. That's a lot of coincidences. Don't you think?"

And then — this sent a damn chill right down my spine — he said, "Here we are in the shadow of that big rock, that face."

Which is one hundred percent what I was thinking. *Exactly* the same — about the Lookout, I mean. I don't know why I was. But I happened to be looking out the window and thinking about it at that exact same instant. I tossed back the scotch and had another and, oh, man, I was pretty freaked out.

"Like he's looking at us, waiting for you to make a decision. Oh, don't think it was just you, though. Maybe the purpose was to affect everybody's life there. That customer at the counter your friend shot? Maybe it was just his time to go — fast, you know, before he got cancer or had a stroke. Maybe that girl, the clerk, had to get shot in the leg so she'd get her life together, maybe get off drugs or give up drinking."

Like everybody else. They all betrayed me. My father — even after he went blind, the son of a bitch turned me in. My first PO, the judges. Sandra. My boss, the one I knifed.

"No, I won't," Weller said. "We're talking about an agreement. I don't break deals. I promised I won't tell a soul about you, Jack. Not even my wife." He leaned forward, cupping the booze between his hands. "You let me go, it'll mean all the difference in the world to *you*. It'll mean that you're not hopeless. I guarantee your life'll be different. That one act — letting me go — it'll change you forever. Oh, maybe not this year. Or for five years. But you'll come around. You'll give up all this, everything that happened back there in Liggett Falls. All the crime, the killing. You'll come around. I know you will."

"You just expect me to believe you won't tell anybody?"

"Ah," Weller said and lifted his bound-up hands to drink more scotch. "Now we get down to the big issue."

Again, that silence and finally I said, "And what's that?"

"Faith."

There was this burst of siren outside, real near, and I told him to shut up and pushed the gun against his head. His hands were shaking but he didn't do anything stupid and a few minutes later, after I sat back, he started talking again. "Faith. That's what I'm talking about. A man who has faith is somebody who can be saved."

"Well, I don't have any goddamn faith," I told him.

But he kept right on talking. "If you believe in another human being you have faith."

"Why the hell do you care whether I'm saved or not?"

I leaned forward and pushed the knife against his throat, not the blade 'cause that's real sharp but the blunt edge, and I told him to be quiet.

Another car went past, no light this time but it was going slower, and all of a sudden I got to thinking what if they do a door-to-door search?

"Why did he do it? Why'd he kill them?"

And funny, the way he said *he* made me feel a little better 'cause it was like he didn't blame me for it. I mean, it *was* Toth's fault. Not mine.

Weller kept going. "I don't get it. That man by the counter? The tall one. He was just standing there. He didn't do anything. He just shot him down."

But neither of us said nothing. Probably Toth, because he didn't know why he'd shot them. And me, because I didn't owe this guy any answers. I had him in my hand. Completely, and I had to let him know that. I didn't *have* to talk to him.

But the guy, Weller, he didn't say anything else. And I got this weird feeling. Like this pressure building up. You know, because nobody was answering his damn, stupid question. I felt this urge to say something. Anything. And that was the last thing I wanted to do. So I said, "I'm gonna move the car into the garage." And I went outside to do it.

I looked around the garage to see if there was anything worth taking and there wasn't except a Snapper lawn mower but how do you fence one of those? So I drove the Buick inside and closed the door. And went back into the house.

And then I couldn't believe what happened. I mean, Jesus. When I walked into the living room the first thing I heard was Toth saying,

"No way, man. I'm not snitching on Jack Prescott."

I just stood there. And you should've seen the look on his face. He knew he'd blown it big.

Now this Weller guy knew my name.

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. Toth started talking real fast and nervous. "He said he'd pay me some big bucks to let him go." Trying to turn it around, make it Weller's fault. "I mean I wasn't going to. I wasn't even thinking 'bout it, man. I told him forget it."

"But what's with tellin' him my name?"

"I don't know, man. He confused me. I wasn't thinking."

I'll say he wasn't. He hadn't been thinking all night.

I sighed to let him know I wasn't happy but I just clapped him on the shoulder. "Okay," I said. "S'been a long night. These things happen."

"I'm sorry, man. Really."

"Yeah. Maybe you better go spend the night in the garage or something. Or upstairs. I don't want to see you around for a while."

Sure.

And the funny thing was, just then, Weller gave this little snicker or something. Like he knew what was coming. How'd he know that? I wondered.

Toth went to pick up a couple magazines and the knapsack with his gun in it and extra rounds.

Normally, killing somebody with a knife is a hard thing to do. I say *normally* even though I've only done it one other time. But I

He kept going. "Oh, there're reasons to steal and there're reasons to kill. But on the whole, don't you really think it's better not to? Just think about it: Why do we put people in jail if it's all right for them to murder? Not just us but all societies."

"So, what? Ooooo, I'm gonna give up my evil ways?"

And he just lifted his eyebrow and said, "Maybe. Tell me, Jack, how'd you feel when your buddy — what's his name?"

"Joe Roy Toth."

"Toth. When he shot that customer by the counter? How'd you feel?"

"I don't know."

"He just turned around and shot him. For no reason. You knew that wasn't right, didn't you?" And I started to say something. But he said, "No, don't answer me. You'd be inclined to lie. And that's all right. It's an instinct in your line of work. But I don't want you *believing* any lies you tell me. Okay? I want you to look into your heart and tell me if you didn't think something was real wrong about what Toth did. Think about that, Jack. You knew something wasn't right."

All right, I did. But who wouldn't? Toth screwed everything up. Everything went sour. And it was all his fault.

"It dug at you, right, Jack? You wished he hadn't done it."

I didn't say nothing but just drank some more scotch and looked out the window and watched the flashing lights around the town. Sometimes they seemed close and sometimes they seemed far away.

"If I let you go you'll tell 'em about me."

"Well, if I got a soul it's taken the fast lane to hell." Which was this line I heard in this movie and I tried to laugh but it sounded flat. Like Weller was saying something deep and I was just kidding around. It made me feel cheap. I stopped smiling and looked down at Toth, lying there in the corner, those dead eyes of his just staring, staring, and I wanted to stab him again I was so mad.

"We're talking about your soul."

I snickered and sipped the liquor. "Oh, yeah, I'll bet you're the sort that reads those angel books they got all over the place now."

"I go to church but, no, I'm not talking about all that silly crap. I don't mean magic. I mean your conscience. What Jack Prescott's all about."

I could tell him about social workers and youth counselors and all those guys who don't know nothing about the way life works. They think they do. But it's the words they use. You can tell they don't know a thing. Some counselors or somebody'll talk to me and they say, Oh, you're maladjusted, you're denying your anger, things like that. When I hear that, I know they don't know nothing about souls or spirits.

"Not the afterlife," Weller was going on. "Not morality. I'm talking about life here on earth that's important. Oh, sure, you look skeptical. But listen to me. I really believe if you have a connection with somebody, if you trust them, if you have faith in them, then there's hope for you."

"Hope? What's that mean? Hope for what?"

"That you'll become a real human being. Lead a real life."

Real... I didn't know what he meant but he said it like what he was saying was so clear that I'd have to be an idiot to miss it. So I didn't say nothing.

remember it and it was messy and hard work. But tonight, I don't know, I was all filled up with this... *feeling* from the drugstore. Mad. I mean, really. Crazy too a little. And as soon as Toth turned his back I got him around the neck and went to work and it wasn't three minutes later it was over. I drug his body behind the couch and then — why not — pulled Weller's hood off. He already knew my name. He might as well see my face. He was a dead man. We both knew it.



"You were thinking of holding me for ransom, right?"

I stood at the window and looked out. Another cop car went past and there were more flashing lights bouncing off the low clouds and off the face of the Lookout, right over our heads.

Weller had a thin face and short hair, cut real neat. He looked like every ass-kissing businessman I ever met. His eyes were dark and calm like his voice and it made me even madder he wasn't shook up looking at that big bloodstain on the rug and floor.

"No," I told him.

He looked at the pile of all the stuff I'd taken from his wallet and kept going like I hadn't said anything. "It won't work. A kidnapping. I don't have a lot of money and if you saw my business card and're thinking I'm an executive at the company, they have about five hundred vice presidents. They won't pay diddly for me. And you see those kids in the picture? It was taken twelve years ago. They're both in college now. I'm paying major tuition."

"Where," I asked, sneering. "Harvard?"

"One's at Harvard," he said, like he was snapping at me. "And one's at Northwestern. So the house's mortgaged to the hilt. Besides, kidnapping somebody by yourself? No, you couldn't bring that off."

He saw the way I looked at him and he said, "I don't mean you personally, Jack. I mean somebody by himself. You'd need partners."

And I figured he was right.

That silence again. Nobody saying nothing and it was like the room was filling up with cold water. I walked to the window and the floors creaked under my feet and that only made things worse. I remember one time my dad said that a house had a voice of its own and some houses were laughing houses and some were forlorn. Well, this was a forlorn house. Yeah, it was modern and clean and the *National Geographics* were all in order but it was still forlorn.

Just when I felt like shouting because of the tension Weller said, "I don't want you to kill me."

"Who said I was going to kill you?"

He gave me his funny little smile. "I've been a salesman for twenty-five years. I've sold pets and Cadillacs and typesetters and lately I've been selling mainframe computers. I know when I'm being handed a line. You're going to kill me. It was the first thing you thought of when you heard him" — nodding toward Toth — "say your name."

I just laughed at him. "Well, that's a damn handy thing to be, sorta a walking lie detector," I said and I was being sarcastic.

But he just said, "Damn handy," like he was agreeing with me.

"I don't want to kill you."

"Oh, I know you don't *want* to. You didn't want your friend to kill anybody back there at the drugstore either. I could see that. But people *got* killed and that ups the stakes. Right?"

And those eyes of his, they just dug into me and I couldn't say anything.

to go, in case he tried something. But it didn't look like he was going to do anything. He read over the scotch bottle, kind of disappointed it was cheap. And I agreed with him there. One thing I learned a long time ago, you going to rob, rob rich.

I sat back where I could keep an eye on him.

"The last reason. Okay, I'll tell you. I'm going to *prove* to you that you should let me go."

"You are?"

"All those other reasons — the practical ones, the humanitarian ones... I'll concede you don't care much about those — you don't look very convinced. All right? Then let's look at the one reason you should let me go."

I figured this was going to be more crap. But what he said was something I never would've expected.

"You should let me go for your own sake."

"For me? What're you talking about?"

"See, Jack, I don't think you're lost."

"Whatta you mean, lost?"

"I don't think your soul's beyond redemption."

I laughed at this, laughed out loud, because I just *had* to. I expected a hell of a lot better from a hotshot vice-president salesman like him. "Soul? You think I got a soul?"

"Well, everybody has a soul," he said, and what was crazy was he said it like he was surprised that I didn't think so. It was like I'd said wait a minute, you mean the earth ain't flat? Or something.

"I don't know. I never thought about it."

"Lose a leg? Go deaf? Lose all your money? Go blind?... Hey, that looked like it hit a nerve. Going blind?"

"Yeah, I guess. That'd be the worst thing I could think of."

That *was* a pretty damn scary thing and I'd thought on it before. 'Cause that was what happened to my old man. And it wasn't not seeing anymore that got to me. No, it was that I'd have to depend on somebody else for... Christ, for everything, I guess.

"Okay, think about this," he said. "The way you feel about going blind's the way my family'd feel if they lost me. It'd be that bad for them. You don't want to cause them that kind of pain, do you?" I didn't want to, no. But I knew I *had* to. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I asked him, "So what's this last reason you're telling me about?"

"The last reason," he said, kind of whispering. But he didn't go on. He looked around the room, you know, like his mind was someplace else.

"Yeah?" I asked. I was pretty curious. "Tell me."

But he just asked, "You think these people, they have a bar?"

And I'd just been thinking I could use a drink too. I went into the kitchen and of course they didn't have any beer in the fridge on account of the house being all closed up and the power off. But they did have scotch and that'd be my first choice anyway.

I got a couple glasses and took the bottle back to the living room. Thinking this was a good idea. When it came time to do it it'd be easier for him and for me both if we were kinda tanked. I shoved my Smitty into his neck and cut the tape his hands were tied with then taped them in front of him. I sat back and kept my knife near, ready

"But," he said, "I'm going to talk you out of it."

He sounded real certain and that made me feel better. 'Cause I'd rather kill a cocky son of a bitch than a pathetic one. And so I laughed. "Talk me out of it?"

"I'm going to try."

"Yeah? How you gonna do that?"

Weller cleared his throat a little. "First, let's get everything on the table. I've seen your face and I know your name. Jack Prescott. Right? You're, what? About five-nine, a hundred fifty pounds, black hair. So you've got to assume I can identify you. I'm not going to play any games and say I didn't see you clearly or hear who you were. Or anything like that. We all squared away on that, Jack?"

I nodded, rolling my eyes like this was all a load of crap. But I gotta admit I was kinda curious what he had to say.

"My promise," he said, "is that I won't turn you in. Not under any circumstances. The police'll never learn your name from me. Or your description. I'll never testify against you."

Sounding honest as a priest. Real slick delivery. Well, he *was* a salesman and I wasn't going to buy it. But he didn't know I was on to him. Let him give me his pitch, let him think I was going along. When it came down to it, after we'd got away and were somewhere in the woods upstate, I'd want him relaxed. No screaming, no hassles. Just a couple fast cuts or shots and that'd be it.

"You understand what I'm saying?"

I tried to look serious and said, "Sure. You're thinking you can talk me out of killing you. You've got reasons why I shouldn't?"

"Oh, I've got reasons, you bet. One in particular. One that you can't argue with."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I'll get to it in a minute. Let me tell you some of the practical reasons you should let me go. First, you think you've got to kill me because I know who you are, right? Well, how long you think your identity's going to be a secret? Your buddy shot a cop back there. I don't know police stuff except what I see in the movies. But they're going to be looking at tire tracks and witnesses who saw plates and makes of cars and gas stations you might've stopped at on the way here."

He was just blowing smoke. The Buick was stolen. I mean, I'm not stupid.

But he went on, looking at me real coy. "Even if your car was stolen they're going to check down every lead. Every shoe print around where you or your friend stole it, talk to everybody in the area around the time it vanished."

I kept smiling like it was nuts what he was saying. But this was true, the shooting-the-cop part. You do that and you're in big trouble. Trouble that sticks with you. They don't stop looking till they find you.

"And when they identify your buddy," he nodded toward the couch where Toth's body was lying, "they're going to make some connection to you."

"I don't know him that good. We just hung around together the past few months."

Weller jumped on this. "Where? A bar? A restaurant? Anybody *ever* see you in public?"

I got mad and I shouted, "So? What're you saying? They gonna bust me anyway then I'll just take you out with me. How's *that* for an argument?"

Calm as could be he said, "I'm simply telling you that one of the reasons you want to kill me doesn't make sense. And think about this — the shooting at the drugstore? It wasn't premeditated. It was, what do they call it? Heat of passion. But you kill me, that'll be first-degree. You'll get the death penalty when they find you."

When they find you. Right, I laughed to myself. Oh, what he said made sense but the fact is, killing isn't a making-sense kind of thing. Hell, it *never* makes sense but sometimes you just have to do it. But I was kind of having fun now. I wanted to argue back. "Yeah, well, I killed Toth. That wasn't heat of passion. I'm going to get the needle anyway for that."

"But nobody gives a damn about him," he came right back. "They don't care if he killed *himself* or got hit by a car. You can take that piece of garbage out of the equation altogether. They care if you kill me. I'm the Innocent Bystander' in the headlines. I'm the 'Father of Two.' You kill me you're as good as dead."

I started to say something but he kept going.

"Now here's another reason I'm not going to say anything about you. Because you know my name and you know where I live. You know I have a family and you know how important they are to me. If I turn you in you could come after us. I'd never jeopardize my family that way. Now, let me ask you something. What's the worst thing that could happen to you?"

"Keep listening to you spout on and on."

Weller laughed at that. I could see he was surprised I had a sense of humor. After a minute he said, "Seriously. The worst thing."