

9.

IN THE HALL OUTSIDE the interrogation room, you cover your mouth with your hand and tell Arnot King that this is a trick. That they just wanted to get you back down here.

Arnot King comes back to you from whatever stage of grief he's in (bargaining), says, like you're bothering him, "What?"

In the animated version of this running in your head, his pupils are shaped like the horse emblem of his missing Mustang. Like Felson says though, it's got to be close, just because Fin walked in. You're pretty sure she's already sent an officer to the body shop to pick through the tall careless weeds for dead horses, as it were. Or is. After that, it'll just be a matter of finding his tattoo album, his client list, checking all those people's garages and carports and places of employment. An afternoon's work, maybe. He'll be back in Midland by happy hour, on the blue bus to Big Springs inside a week.

You say it again, that this is probably all just a trick to get you here.

Arnot King shrugs yeah, maybe. You're still holding onto the brushed aluminum doorknob of the interrogation room. It feels like the pressure valve for this whole case. For your whole life.

"Sure you don't want me in there?" Arnot King says.

“I don’t want me in there,” you say back, and he hooks his head behind him to the high, narrow door of the viewing room.

“No worries,” he says. “I’ll be with her.”

“Listening?”

“And you say I’m paranoid,” he says, leaning close, his hand on your shoulder, his mouth to your ear. “I’ll drop a stapler if she tries to hear you, okay?”

“It’s soundproof.”

“I’ll drop a bowling ball, then. Throw myself against the glass. Push all the buttons. Turn the lights on.”

Chained to the table in the interrogation room is Anthony Robert Payne. Fin. The guy whose name Felson probably wouldn’t even know if you hadn’t said it. The gentleman your lawyer just gave a series of statements against, statements so precise they probably include sentencing recommendations and cell mates.

If just one of them sticks, he’s going back inside for a long visit, a permanent vacation. Which is where this all stops making anything like sense: why turn himself in? More important, why does he want to talk to you about it?

It has to have something to do with the film. With Gwen. Neither of which you want to talk about, really. Not at a police station.

For different reasons, Felson agrees, doesn’t want you talking either. Her argument is that if Gwen keeps saying all she ever did was tutor Fin, then you’ll be a potential witness for the prosecution. Meaning you shouldn’t be near the suspect now, even if he spontaneously confesses to you. Or especially if he confesses. It sounded good to you, perfect. You even smiled on accident—the law was keeping you out, keeping you safe—but then your lawyer shook his head no, asked just which imaginary

jury was Felson talking about here? One that's going to buy the "expert" testimony of a derelict ex-detective who smells like stale beer, lives in a storage shed, and's a suspect for the same crime himself?

He's worth every penny you're not paying him.

You step into the white room, cut a thin smile to Anthony Robert Payne.

He smiles back, lifts his wrists to show he's handcuffed to his own waist, shackled to the table legs.

"Fire hazard, wouldn't you say?" he says.

"They don't allow smoking in here." You pull your chair out, settle into it, take him in in pieces: bald head, solid chin, thick chest. Tattoos all over him that could be Polynesian, you guess, if you even knew what Polynesian was. To the prison guard in Big Springs, he's that big-ass tattoo guy in D-block. To your lawyer, he's a Nazi linebacker, a shaved Bigfoot. They're both right: even slouched down in his chair, he towers, probably goes six and a half feet in county-issue flip-flops.

The one thing you know just from being in the room with him now is that he didn't need a shotgun for Rory Gates.

"They're here too?" he says, tipping his head to the two-way glass, the ceiling, all the microphones and videotape he suspects.

You shake your head no.

He sits back. "All the same to me, detective. I don't got nothing to hide."

The way he hits hide, you know he's talking about the film.

You don't take the bait. "That why you turned yourself in? Couldn't handle the guilt?"

"I turned myself in because I tried it the other way once. Cost me eight years." He tips his head to the viewing room. "Cost them some, too, as I recall."

“You’re from Stanton?”

“Cops in general, detective.”

You watch his eyes, lean back as far as you can, stretch your legs so that your body’s a plank. It makes room in your pocket for your hand, for a flash. Just long enough to hit the pause button on the microcassette recorder Felson insisted you take in with you.

Fin hears it, isn’t stupid enough to look down.

“We probably have ninety seconds here,” you say. “Maybe two minutes, if my lawyer can fake a seizure better than I give him credit for.”

He smiles with one side of his face. “I could like you, you know?”

“Get in line.” You lean forward, on a schedule now. “At the storage units. You were looking for me there, I take it?”

He nods.

“Needed some storage?”

He hisses a laugh through his teeth. “That your real name?” he says. “Aardvark?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Bruiseman...” he says, breathing it in, tasting it. “Bruised man...”

“Clever,” you tell him. “All my time in Midland, nobody ever came up with that one. Elementary, even. But then”—you can’t help smiling—“I grew up with idiots, pretty much, I guess.”

“And now you’re back where you belong?” Fin says.

“This is how you want to use our time?”

He stares back, not blinking once, then shakes his head no. “You’re right. I wasn’t there for a storage space, detective.”

“I’m not a detective.”

“I know,” he says. “More like a—like a rat. Or a bird. That’s it. Jailbird. No, I mean songbird.” This is all very funny to him. He shakes his head no again. “Pig, that’s it. Yeah. Pigs squeal, right? When they’re stuck? Like in jail?”

“I know you’re saying something here,” you tell him.

“Let me say it so even you can get it,” he says then. “They came to my trailer, man. When they had to let you go. Guess I was next on the list or something, yeah?” He leans forward, his palms open on the table, the chain strained between them. “Coincidence, right?”

“Stanton PD,” you say. “They always get their man.”

He laughs a disgusted laugh. Can’t look at you all of the sudden. “You’re the only one who could have turned them onto me.”

“Sure about that?”

He comes back to you for that too fast. “I’d say that means you owe me now.”

You tell him you’ll give him five dollars off on a storage unit if he pays a year in advance.

In return, he asks you how you’ve managed to stay alive so long.

“Fiberglass boats,” you say, and look at the mirror in the wall, see the two of you sitting across from each other.

“More like cameras.”

You stare at a spot on the table. “So where is it?”

“More like what is it?” Then, with a smile on the left side of his face, “Or, what’s it worth? That’s what these things always come down to, right?”

You take out all the cash in your wallet: one hundred and forty three dollars, some change.

Fin shakes his head no.

You pull out Betsy Simms' one-ninety, still in the white envelope.

Still, no.

"What then?" you say, and the "Thirty seconds..." from the speaker nearly drowns you out.

Fin stares at the money, tracks over to the corner of the table, the floor maybe. "I ran when they pulled up," he says. "Came the long way around, out by the gin. To your—the big Aardvark in the sky."

"And my attorney was present."

"That who he was?" Fin says, shaking his wide head in disbelief, looking at his right hand like he should have already washed it.

You nod, agree with that.

"...and your shark was there," Fin goes on, incorporating Arnot King. "And—you saw the rest."

"Not while you were there, I didn't."

He pulls his top lip into his mouth some, stretching the skin tight under his nose. "I knew you were the only person in town who could help me."

You look to the mirror in disbelief, then back to the tabletop. "You wanted to hire me?"

Fin doesn't deny this.

"Why?" you say.

"Because the cavalry was coming, man. Think I want to do another tour through hell?"

You wonder what exactly counts as a tour through hell. And whether this qualifies. And why hasn't Felson stormed in yet?

"But I'm the—I'm almost a witness against you," you tell him, leaning close to show him how earnest you're being. "You're the person Rory hired me to find. The one Gwen hired

me to find too. The famous backdoor man from—”

You stop, the heads of the microcassette squealing a little like they’re winding back up, the pause button about to pop.

Fin hears it too. Narrows his eyes for better words.

“A week ago,” he says. “One week ago I could have hired you for the same thing.”

You shake your head no, say, rubbing your leg to try to mask your voice on tape, “It’s a betrayal, sure, but technically it’s not cheating if she’s doing it with her husband, I don’t think. Church might even approve.”

“The mistake you’re making, I think, is that you—”

What stops him is your fingers on the tabletop, trying to make something like thunder on the recording. Fin smiles about it, covers his mouth. “The oversimplification you’re guilty of, sir, is assuming that the person they’d both come to see you about was me.”

It takes you a few seconds, but finally you nod, say through a series of painfully staged coughs, “She was cheating on the postman with the newspaper boy?”

It isn’t as funny to Fin as it is to you. He nods anyway.

“Busy girl,” you say.

“She knows what she likes,” Fin says back. “And how.”

“And what’s that?”

Fin smiles, leans back. Shakes his head as if it’s obvious. “Dead presidents, man. Real history buff, that one.”

Money.

“Thought she taught English?” you say, flashing your eyes to the two-way mirror again, setting your fingertips to the table, like to push off, leave.

But then Fin bites his upper lip in ever so lightly. On a woman, it would mean possibility—how they say maybe

without words—but on him it's more like he's reminding himself where he is. That he can't be handling things in the usual way. In his natural way.

“So...we have anything here?” he says.

You stand, lean over. “Conflict of interests, I'm afraid.”

“Because you think I was framing you somehow, right?”

Yes.

“I know how you feel, detective. Exactly, you could say.”

You close your eyes, don't sit down.

“Not too busy this week, are you?” he says, through a grin it sounds like.

“I—” you start, but he's right. One of your clients is dead, the other in mourning.

“I'm not what you'd call licensed,” you tell him, talking for the microphone. “Or—or interested, really.”

Fin waits for you to look up to him again, says, his voice clear, loud, for the tape too, “Can't help you much with the first part, I guess, but the second part, well,” and then he says the rest just with a smile at the outside corners of his eyes: the film.

“Where is it?” you say, no lips again, barely any sound.

“First things first.” He nods down to his forearm, the intricate Polynesian scrollwork there. “You should have seen it when it was new, detective. Best work I've ever done, I think.”

He's not talking about the tattoo, you know.

That doesn't mean you get it, either.