

Chapter 1

George was somewhere in the dark. Blaze couldn't see him, but the voice came in loud and clear, rough and a little hoarse. George always sounded as if he had a cold. He'd had an accident when he was a kid. He never said what, but there was a dilly of a scar on his adam's apple.

"Not that one, you dummy, it's got bumper stickers all over it. Get a Chevy or a Ford. Dark blue or green. Two years old. No more, no less. Nobody remembers them. And no stickers."

Blaze passed the little car with the bumper stickers and kept walking. The faint thump of the bass reached him even here, at the far end of the beer joint's parking lot. It was Saturday night and the place was crowded. The air was bitterly cold. He had hitched him a ride into town, but now he had been in the open air for forty minutes and his ears were numb. He had forgotten his hat. He always forgot something. He had started to take his hands out of his jacket pockets and put them over his ears, but George put the kibosh on that. George said his ears could freeze but not his hands. You didn't need your ears to hotwire a car. It was three above zero.

"There," George said. "On your right."

Blaze looked and saw a Saab. With a sticker. It didn't look like the right kind of car at all.

"That's your left," George said. "Your right, dummy. The hand you pick your nose with."

"I'm sorry, George."

Yes, he was being a dummy again. He could pick his nose with either hand, but he knew his right, the hand you write with. He thought of that hand and looked to that side. There was a dark green Ford there.

Blaze walked over to the Ford, elaborately casual. He looked over his shoulder. The beer joint was a college bar called The Bag. That was a stupid name, a bag was what you called your balls. It was a walk-down. There was a band on Friday and Saturday nights. It would be crowded and warm inside, lots of little girls in short skirts dancing up a storm. It would be nice to go inside, just look around—

"What are you supposed to be doing?" George asked. "Walking on Commonwealth Ave? You couldn't fool my old blind granny. Just do it, huh?"

"Okay, I was just—"

"Yeah, I know what you was just. Keep your mind on your business."

"Okay."

"What are you, Blaze?"

He hung his head, snorkled back snot. "I'm a dummy."

George always said there was no shame in this, but it was a fact and you had to recognize it. You couldn't fool anybody into thinking you were smart. They looked at you and saw the truth: the lights were on but nobody was home. If you were a dummy, you had to just do your business and get out. And if you were caught, you owned up to everything except the guys

who were with you, because they'd get everything else out of you in the end, anyway. George said dummies couldn't lie worth shit.

Blaze took his hands out of his pockets and flexed them twice. The knuckles popped in the cold still air.

"You ready, big man?" George asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'm going to get a beer. Take care of it."

Blaze felt panic start. It came up his throat. "Hey, no, I ain't never done this before. I just watched you."

"Well this time you're going to do more than watch."

"But—"

He stopped. There was no sense going on, unless he wanted to shout. He could hear the hard crunch of packed snow as George headed toward the beer joint. Soon his footsteps were lost in the heartbeat of the bass.

"Jesus," Blaze said. "Oh Jesus Christ."

And his fingers were getting cold. At this temperature they'd only be good for five minutes. Maybe less. He went around to the driver's side door, thinking the door would be locked. If the door was locked, this car was no good because he didn't have the Slim Jim, George had the Slim Jim. Only the door was unlocked. He opened the door, reached in, found the hood release, and pulled it. Then he went around front, fiddled around for the second catch, found that one, and lifted the hood.

There was a small Penlite in his pocket. He took it out. He turned it

on and trained the beam on the engine.

Find the ignition wire.

But there was so much spaghetti. Battery cables, hoses, spark-plug wires, the gas-line—

He stood there with sweat running down the sides of his face and freezing on his cheeks. This was no good. This wouldn't never be no good. And all at once he had an idea. It wasn't a very good idea, but he didn't have many and when he had one he had to chase it. He went back to the driver's side and opened the door again. The light came on, but he couldn't help that. If someone saw him fiddling around, they would just think he was having trouble getting started. Sure, cold night like this, that made sense, didn't it? Even George couldn't give him grief on that one. Not much, anyway.

He flipped down the visor over the steering wheel, hoping against hope that a spare key might flop down, sometimes folks kept one up there, but there was nothing there but an old ice scraper. That flopped down. He tried the glove compartment next. It was full of papers. He raked them out onto the floor, kneeling on the seat to do it, his breath puffing. There were papers, and a box of Junior Mints, but no keys.

There, you goddam dummy, he heard George saying, are you satisfied now? Ready to at least try hot-wiring it now?

He supposed he was. He supposed he could at least tear some of the wires loose and touch them together like George did and see what

happened. He closed the door and started toward the front of the Ford again with his head down. Then he stopped. A new idea had struck him. He went back, opened the door, bent down, flipped up the floormat, and there it was. They key didn't say FORD on it, it didn't say anything on it because it was a dupe, but it had the right square head and everything.

Blaze picked it up and kissed the cold metal.

Unlocked car, he thought. Then he thought: Unlocked car and key under the floormat. Then he thought: I ain't the dumbest guy out tonight after all, George.

He got in behind the wheel, slammed the door, slid the key in the ignition slot—it went in nice—then realized he couldn't see the parking lot because the hood was still up. He looked around quick, first one way and then the other, making sure that George hadn't decided to come back and help him out. George would never let him hear the end of it if he saw the hood still up like that. But George wasn't there. No one was there. The parking lot was tundra with cars.

Blaze got out and slammed the hood. Then he got back in and paused in the act of reaching for the door handle. What about George? Should he go in yonder beer-farm and get him? Blaze sat frowning, head down. The dome light cast yellow light on his big hands.

Guess what? he thought, raising his head again at last. Screw him.

“Screw you, George,” he said. George had left him to hitchhike in, just meeting him here, then left him again. Left him to do the dirtywork,

and it was only by the dumbest of dumb luck that Blaze had found a key, so screw George. Let him thumb a ride back in the three-degree cold.

Blaze closed the door, dropped the gear-shift into Drive, and pulled out of the parking space. Once in an actual lane of travel, he stomped down heavily and the Ford leaped, rear end fishtailing on the hard-packed snow. He slammed on the brakes, suddenly stiff with panic. What was he doing? What was he thinking of? Go without George? He'd get picked up before he went five miles. Probably get picked up at the first stop-n-go light. He couldn't go without George.

But George is dead.

That was bullshit. George was just there. He went inside for a beer.

He's dead.

"Oh, George," Blaze moaned. He was hunched over the wheel. "Oh, George, don't be dead."

He sat there awhile. The Ford's engine sounded okay. It wasn't knocking or anything, even though it was cold. The gas gauge said three-quarters. The exhaust rose in the rearview, white and frozen.

George didn't come out of the beer joint. He couldn't come out cause he didn't never went in. George was dead. Had been three months. Blaze started to shake.

After a little bit, he caught hold of himself. He began to drive. No one stopped him at the first traffic light, or the second. No one stopped him all the way out of town. By the time he got to the Apex town line, he was doing

fifty. Sometimes the car slid a little on patches of ice, but this didn't bother him. He just turned with the skid. He had been driving on icy roads since he was sixteen.

Outside of town he pushed the Ford to sixty and let it ride. The high beams poked the road with bright fingers and rebounded brilliantly from the snowbanks on either side. Boy, there was going to be one surprised college kid when he took his college girl back to that empty slot. She'd look at him and say, You are a dummy, I ain't going with you again, not here or nowhere.

"Aren't," Blaze said. "She'll say aren't."

That made him smile. The smile changed his whole face. He turned on the radio. It was tuned to rock. Blaze turned the knob until he found country. By the time he reached the shack, he was singing along with the radio at the top of his voice and he had forgotten all about George.

Chapter 2

But he remembered the next morning.

That was the curse of being a dummy. You were always being surprised by grief, because you could never remember the important things. The only stuff that stuck was dumb stuff. Like that poem Mrs. Selig made them learn way back in the fifth grade: Under the spreading chestnut tree, the village smithy stands. What good was that? What good when you caught yourself peeling potatoes for two and got smacked all over again with knowing you didn't need to peel no two potatoes, because the other guy was never going to eat another spud?

Well, maybe it wasn't grief. Maybe that word wasn't the right word. Not if that meant crying and knocking your head against the wall. You didn't do that for the likes of George. But there was loneliness. There was hurt. And there was fear.

George would say: "Jesus, would you change your fuckin skivvies? Those things are ready to stand up on their own. They're disgusting."

George would say: "You only tied one, dimbulb."

George would say: "Aw, fuck, turn around and I'll tuck it in. Like havin a kid."

When he got up the morning after he stole the Ford, George was sitting in the other room. Blaze couldn't see him but knew he was sitting in the broken-down easy-chair like always, with his head down so his chin

was almost on his chest. The first thing he said was, “You screwed up again, Kong. Congratcha-fuckin-lations.”

Blaze hissed when his feet hit the cold floor. Then he fumbled his shoes on. Naked except for them, he ran and looked out the window. No car. He sighed with relief. It came out in a little puff he could see.

“No, I didn’t. I put it in the shed, just like you told me.”

“You didn’t wipe the goddam tracks, though, did you? Why don’t you put out a sign, Blaze? THIS WAY TO THE HOT CAR. You could charge admission. Why don’t you just do that?”

“Aw, George—”

“‘Aw, George, aw, George.’ Go out and sweep em up.”

“Okay.” He started for the door.

“Blaze?”

“What?”

“Put on your fucking pants first, why don’t you?”

Blaze felt his face burn.

“Like a kid,” George said, sounding resigned. “One who can shave.”

George knew how to stick it in, all right. Only finally he’d gone and stuck it in the wrong guy, too often and too far. That was how you ended up dead, with nothing smart to say. Now George was just dead, and Blaze was making his voice up in his mind, giving him the good lines. George had been dead since that crap game in the warehouse.

I’m crazy for even trying to go through with this, Blaze thought. A

dum-dum like me.

But he pulled on his underwear shorts (checking them carefully for stains first), then a thermal undershirt, then a flannel top shirt and a pair of heavy corduroy pants. His Sears workboots were under the bed. His Army surplus parka was hanging on the doorknob. He hunted for his mittens and finally found them on the shelf over the dilapidated woodstove in the combination kitchen-living room. He got his checkered cap with the earflaps and put it on, careful to give the visor a little good-luck twist to the left. Then he went out and got the broom leaning against the door.

The morning was bright and bitter. The moisture in his nose crackled immediately. A gust of wind drove snow as fine as powdered sugar into his face, making him wince. It was all right for George to give orders. George was inside drinking coffee by the stove. Like last night, taking off for a beer, leaving Blaze to figure out the car. And there he would still be if he hadn't had the dumb luck to find the keys somewhere, either under the floormat or in the glove compartment, he forgot which. Sometimes he didn't think George was a very good friend.

He swept the tracks away with the broom, pausing several minutes to admire them before he started. How the treads stood up and cast shadows, mostly, little perfect things. It was funny how little things could be so perfect and no one ever saw them. He looked at this until he was tired of looking (no George to tell him to hurry up) and then worked his way down the short driveway to the road, brushing the tracks away. The plow

had gone by in the night, pushing back the snow-dunes the wind made across these country roads where there were open fields to one side and t'other, and any other tracks were gone.

Blaze tromped back to the shack. He went inside. Now it felt warm inside. Getting out of bed it had felt cold, but now it felt warm. That was funny, too—how your sense of things could change. He took off his coat and boots and flannel shirt and sat down to the table in his undershirt and cords. He turned on the radio and was surprised when it didn't play the rock George listened to but warmed up right to country. Loretta Lynn was singing that your good girl is gonna go bad. George would laugh and say something like, "That's right, honey—you can go bad all over my face." And Blaze would laugh too, but down deep that song always made him sad. Lots of country songs did.

When the coffee was hot he jumped up and poured two cups. He loaded one with cream and hollered, "George? Here's your coffee, hoss! Don't let it go cold!"

No answer.

He looked down at the white coffee. He didn't drink coffee-with, so what about it? Just what about it? Something come up in his throat then and he almost hucked George's goddam white coffee across the room, but then he didn't. He took it oversink and poured it down instead. That was controlling your temper. When you were a big guy, you had to do that or get in trouble.

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Blaze hung around the shack until after lunch. Then he drove the stolen car out of the shed, stopping by the kitchen steps long enough to get out and throw snowballs at the license plates. That was pretty smart. It would make them hard to read.

"What in the name of God are you doing?" George asked from inside the shed.

"Never mind," Blaze said. "You're only in my head, anyway." He got in the Ford and drove out to the road.

"This isn't very bright," George said. Now he was in the back seat. "You're driving around in a stolen car. No fresh paintjob, no fresh plates, no nothing. Where you going?"

Blaze didn't say anything.

"You ain't going to Ocoma, are you?"

Blaze didn't say anything.

"Oh, fuck, you are," George said. "Fuck me. Isn't the once you have to go enough?"

Blaze didn't say anything. He was dummied up.

"Listen to me, Blaze. Turn around. You get picked up, it's out the window. Everything. The whole deal."

Blaze knew that was right, but wouldn't turn back. Why should George always get to order him around? Even dead, he wouldn't stop giving orders. Sure, it was George's plan, that one big score every small-

timer dreams of. "Only we could really make it happen," he'd say, but usually when he was drunk or high and never like he really believed it.

They had spent most of their time running two-man short cons, and mostly George seemed satisfied with that no matter what he said when he was drunk or getting his smoke on. Maybe the Ocoma Heights score was just a game for George, or what he sometimes called mental masturbation when he saw guys in suits talking about politics on TV. Blaze knew George was smart. It was his guts he had never been sure of.

But now that he was dead, what choice? Blaze was no good by himself. The one time he'd tried running the menswear con after George's death, he'd had to book like a bastard to keep from being picked up. He got the lady's name out of the obituary column just the way George did, had started in on George's spiel, had shown the credit slips (there was a whole bag of them at the shack, and from the best stores). He told her about how sad he was to have to come by at such a sad time, but business was business and was sure she would understand that. She said she did. She invited him to stand in the foyer while she got her pockabook. He never suspected that she had called the police. If she hadn't come back and pointed a gun at him, he probably would have still been standing there waiting when the police ho'd up. His time sense had never been good.

But she came back with a gun and pointed it at him. It was a silver lady's gun with little swoops on the sides and pearl handles. "The police are on their way," she said, "but before they get here, I want you to explain

yourself. I want you to tell me what kind of a lowlife preys on a woman whose husband isn't even cold in his grave yet."

Blaze didn't care what she wanted him to tell her. He turned and ran out the door and across the porch and down the steps to the walk. He could run pretty good once he got going, but he was slow getting going, and panic made him slower that day. If she had pulled the trigger, she might have put a bullet in the back of his big head or shot off an ear or missed him entirely. With a little short-barrel shooter like that, you couldn't tell. But she never fired.

When he got back to the place, he was half-moaning with fear and his stomach was tied in knots. He wasn't afraid of jail or the penitentiary, not even of the police—although he knew they would confuse him with their questions, they always did—but he was afraid of how easy she saw through him. Like it wasn't nothing to her. They had hardly ever seen through George, and when they did, he always knew it was happening and got them out.

And now this. He wasn't going to get away with it, knew it, and kept on anyway. Maybe he wanted to go back inside. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad, now that George was wasted. Let someone else do the thinking and provide the meals.

Maybe he was trying to get caught right now, driving this hot car through the middle of Ocoma Heights. Right past the Gerard house.

In the icebox of New England winter, it looked like an ice palace.

Ocoma Heights was old money (that's what George said), and the houses were really estates. They were surrounded by big lawns in the summertime, but now the lawns were glazed snowfields. It had been a hard winter.

The Gerard house was the best one of all. George called it Early American Hot Shit, but Blaze thought it was beautiful. George said the Gerards had made their money in shipping, that World War I made them rich and World War II made them holy. Snow and sun struck cold fire from the many windows. George said there were over thirty rooms. He had done the preliminary work as a meter-reader from Central Valley Power. That had been in September. Blaze had driven the truck, which was borrowed rather than stolen...although he supposed the police would have called it stolen, if they'd been caught. People were playing croquet on the side lawn. Some were girls, high school girls or maybe college girls, good looking. Blaze watched them and started feeling horny. When George got back in and told him to wheel it, Blaze told him about the good-looking girls, who had gone around to the back by then.

"I saw em," George said. "Think they're better than anybody. Think their shit don't stink."

"Pretty, though."

"Who gives a rat's ass?" George asked moodily, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Don't you ever get horny, George?"

"Over babies like that? You jest. Now shut up and drive."

Now, remembering that, Blaze smiled. George was like the fox who couldn't reach the grapes and told everyone they were sour. Miss Jolison read them that story in the second grade.

It was a big family. There was the old Mr. and Mrs. Gerard—he was eighty and still able to put away a pint of Jack a day, that's what George said. There was the middle Mr. and Mrs. Gerard. And then there was the young Mr. and Mrs. Gerard. The young Mr. Gerard was Joseph Gerard III, and he really was young, just twenty. His wife was a Narmenian. George said that made her a spic. Blaze had thought only Italians could be spics.

He turned around up the street and cruised past the house once more, wondering what it felt like to be married at twenty. He kept on going, heading home. Enough was enough.

The middle Gerards had other kids besides Joseph Gerard III, but they didn't matter. What mattered was the baby. Joseph Gerard IV. Big name for such a little baby. He was only two months old when Blaze and George did their meter-reading bit in September. That made him—um, there were one-two-three-four months between September and January—six months old. He was the original Joe's only great-grandson.

"If you're gonna pull a snatch, you got to snatch a baby," George said. "A baby can't ID you, so you can return it alive. It can't fuck you up by trying to escape or sending out notes or some shit. All a baby can do is lie there. It don't even know it's been snatched."

They had been in the shack, sitting in front of the TV and drinking beer.

"How much do you think they'd be good for?" Blaze asked.

"Enough so you'd never have to spend another winter day freezing your ass off selling fake magazine subscriptions or collecting for the Red Cross," George said. "How's that sound?"

"But how much would you ask?"

"Two million," George said. "One for you and one for me. Why be greedy?"

"Greedies get caught," Blaze said.

"Greedies get caught," George agreed. "That's what I taught you. But what's the workman worthy of, Blaze-a-rino? What'd I teach you about that?"

"His hire," Blaze said.

"That's right," George said, and hit his beer. "The workman's worthy of his fucking hire."

So here he was, driving back to the miserable shack where he and George had been living since drifting north from Boston, actually planning to go through with it. He thought he would be caught, but...two million dollars! You could go someplace and never be cold again. And if they caught you? The worst they could do would be put you in jail for life.

And if that happened, you'd still never be cold again.

When the stolen Ford was back in the shed, he remembered to brush the tracks away. That would make George happy.

He made himself a couple of hamburgers for his lunch.

"You really going through with it?" George asked from the other room.

"You lyin down, George?"

"No, standin on my head and jerkin off. I asked you a question."

"I'm gonna try. Will you help me?"

George sighed. "I guess I'll have to. I'm stuck with you now. But Blaze?"

"What, George?"

"Only ask for a million. Greedies get caught."

"Okay, only a million. You want a hamburger?"

No answer. George was dead again.