



The man on the steel table was mine, my client. I work for the dead. I bring them justice. When someone in prison is murdered, I take the case. I'm a murder cop, detailed from the inner city of Baltimore to the cell blocks of the state penitentiary. That's my beat—the prison, the pen, the house, call it what you like. Just be glad you're not there. You might not live to tell about it.

There are twenty-five hundred full-on felons doing time in here, and only a handful will ever see the light of day. And they'll have cataracts and canes by the time they get back to the world. The rest go out in body bags, black plastic sacks with red toe tags. Tags say natural causes, suicide, or homicide. Prison homicides are raw, bloody, hands on killings. Face to face violence, up close and savage. Torn up bodies in the cells and on the tiers, in the yard and in the mess. A few in the showers, naked and dead. This one in the gym. Fully clothed but missing one eye, courtesy of his killer.

Murders are called Hard Cases. That's what written on each case folder of a murder victim: HARD-CASE. In bold letters. Plus the vic's name. The crime goes down and they come to me, Robert Miller. My friends call me Rob. Suspects call me Sir. Everyone is a suspect until I say otherwise.

Now this case, the murder of Jamal Jordan, was clear cut, at least in the beginning. He'd been murdered by Daunte McFadden, who'd pretty much slaughtered him in front of an army of witnesses one hot summer night in an underground gym filled to the rafters with convicts serving sentences so long they may as well have been buried alive.

'Mr. Jamal Jordan, Case One Oh Two...' The voice, soft and sensual, wrapped in a cultured Italian accent, came floating toward me, impervious to the cool white tiles that covered the floors and walls of the prison hospital basement, a vault, really, doubling now as a morgue, making most speech tinny and strained. '...Here before me,' the throaty, resonant female voice continued, 'is the body of a young man, well nourished and apparently healthy, before the assault that took his life.'

'Well, Dr. Simone, I ...'

'Call me Vittoria, for heaven's sake. And I'll call you Rob. We've had enough cases by now, is that not true?'

Vitoria Simone is the medical examiner who picks up the prison homicide cases and makes a preliminary determination of cause of death. We don't exactly work together but we do work side by side. Not as close as I might like, and I'm not alone in that. Vittoria would turn heads in any setting. In prison, she's a force of nature.

'Okay. Vittoria. Fair enough. He may have been well-fed... '

'Nourished. Well-nourished, Rob. No one in prison is well fed.'

We laugh. Prison food can kill a man, that much we both know.

'But he is definitely dead now, Vittoria, so what does it matter?'

'Very observant, Rob. Really.'

Vitoria stretches out her Rs in a seductive way; always makes me smile.

'Thanks, I can see he's dead. I'm wondering why you always start with comments like Healthy Young Male or Well Fed... uh, Nourished. It seems odd, is all.'

'I like to remind myself that I'm working on a person, or what was until very recently a person, and often a healthy young person with a long life ahead of him. This Jamal Jordan was a young man, a man whose hands were once held by someone who cared about him, whose lips someone once kissed with tenderness...'

'I take your point, Vittoria,' I say, interrupting her, perhaps a little uneasy about the humane sentiments she brings to these cases, sentiments I share deep down but like to keep deep down, out of the picture. It's a grim business, this dying in prison.

'And the eyes,' she continued. 'You wonder – I wonder – what memories lay behind them.'

We both fall silent. Jamal's right eye has been ripped from his head by the force of the attack, evidently with a serrated knife. There is something terribly intimate about this violence.

'What he last saw?' I say. 'That sort of thing? You wonder about his dying memories?'

'Well, here you have to think that his last sights were truly terrible, maybe violence beyond human comprehension. But mostly this wound is such an insult... '

'A violation.'

'Yes, and on many levels. His assailant destroyed his life, then violated his memory along with his body.'

I nod, my face reddening with anger. 'This man was slaughtered and... '

'I see the tragedy, I suppose, Rob,' she said, while gently caressing the victim's hands 'while you see the need for justice.'

'Oh, I know. He's there and he's mine. I work for him. '

'So you say. But you are here and the crime scene is not here, yes?'

'Yes.' I smile. 'The crime scene is not here. You have a point, Vittoria. I'll mosey on down to the crime scene and let you prepare your report.'

'Mosey?'

'Hey, you're from Italy and you don't know from spaghetti westerns?'

I exit with that line, feeling witty and maybe even attractive in a rough, from-the-mean-streets sort of way, grabbing my rumpled, summer weight cotton sports coat from the coat rack by the pitted grey steel door, a relic from the day the prison was something on the order of a dungeon for the dispossessed. I'd heard the heavy foot falls of my escort and was ready to get to work.

The officer detailed to walk me around the pen, the man with the big set of keys, came dressed for battle. He looked like a paratrooper or maybe a special operations goon, and I thought I saw some blood on his sleeve and along the outer leg of his bloused-out pants, the bottoms tucked neatly into his shiny prison-issue boots.

‘Officer?’ I call the man Officer because these guys are called Correctional Officers. That’s their title. But they don’t dress for corrections, whatever that means. They dress for war and believe me, prison is war, at least this prison, at least some of the time. Tonight was one of those times.

‘Detective Robert Miller? I’m Officer James. Richard Kevin James. I’m here to take you to the gym.’

‘The crime scene.’ I’m direct but my tone is soft, or at least not harsh. He’s young, and I see he’s shaken up.

‘Yes, sir. The crime scene. That’s where Jamal Jordan got, well, he got... ’

‘Cut up pretty bad, I understand.’

‘Yeah. Cut up pretty bad. I mean, it was just incredible. His face... ’

‘I understand, son.’ The young man is hurting. You can almost see worry lines traced in the full, pale Celtic face he inherited from his ancestors, a face increasingly out of place in prison these days, when our penal institutions house so many African-American men that they sometimes seem like modern day plantations. ‘Take a deep breath. I take it you witnessed the killing?’

‘Well, I saw the end result, you know? The finished deal. The blood... ’

‘Okay. Then we need to talk. Let’s start while we walk. First the gym... ’

‘Crime scene, sir.’

I smile. ‘Yeah. Crime Scene. Then later the suspect’s cell.’

James seemed relieved to be walking. He opened up pretty quick.

‘You know this place, Mr. Miller, I know you know – you work here, too, but I work in the trenches, day in and day out. It’s hell, man, sheer hell.’

An acrid smell had overtaken us as we moved out into the main prison. Not fire and brimstone, I thought, but fitting for a place everybody called hell at one time or another.

‘Another fire?’ I ask, waving my right hand to clear away a thin trail of smoke lingering in the air around my head. I’m resigned to the problem of fires in prison cells, set by convicts in moments of anger or madness, a problem I didn’t know existed until I worked behind the walls.

‘Yeah, Mr. Miller, a few today. Heat brings it out.’

I puzzled over that for a minute, then asked ‘Why’s that, Officer?’

‘I think it gets the men crazy. Maybe they figure a little fire will get ‘em out of their cells for a bit, you know? A moment of fresh air.’

‘Or fresher air. Not much nature in this house.’

‘I suppose. But then they just get put into another cell, usually with two guys already in residence.’

‘Pretty futile, I suppose. This fire have anything to do with the crime, Officer?’

‘Doubt it. Maybe. Word spreads fast. Anyway, I know some things about this crime you may need to know.’

We moved to the side, instinctively, to let a group of prisoners shuffle past, men in shackles on their way to buses that would ferry them to other cages in other prisons. The bus transport company, a private outfit called Charon Express, used their own shackles, replete with a logo suspiciously reminiscent of a skull and crossbones craved into the metal, a sore spot with the prisoners. Convicts bound for the Express were shackled in pairs – awkward for the men but efficient for the bus company since the prisoners were secured in units of two in each of the bus seats, the seats in turn nestled in their own wire mesh enclosures. A few of the sad creatures passing by looked up at us but mostly the men moved in slow motion, heads down, slouching under the weight of opprobrium, the sheer force of social rejection embodied in the hardware that held them in place in uneasy alliances, constraining their movements to the prison's version of ballet, a noisy pas de deux of short steps on the balls of the foot balanced by cuffed hands swaying from side to side for balance. They were convicts; we were keepers. The bottom line was that we had a life, they didn't. Sour resignation sometimes gave way to raw violence, I knew all too well, but not from men in shackles.

'Need to know?' I asked, after the procession passed us by.

'Yeah. Need to know. Whether you want to know or not.'

I was starting to like this kid. 'Like what?'

'Like the gym, where it went down. I'll take you there, Detective, tell you a little about what was happening when the violence jumped off.'

'I'm listening.' It occurred to me that folks don't listen much to COs. CO is short for Correctional Officer, men and women often long on insight but short on respect from others. A mistake, not to listen to these folks. They know this place almost as well as the convicts, who live here twenty-four seven.

'Well, first you got to know that this was tournament night. A big deal. The gym packed. I mean there must have been a hundred an' some guys stacked up in there. The two teams and the rest mostly fans, really into the game.'

'Mostly fans? Who else was there?'

'The gym is like a hangout, too, Mr. Miller. There's folks who go for haircuts. You know the barbershop is right there, right?'

'Yeah, I've seen it. The vic was a barber, right?'

'Right. He wasn't playing that night, far as I know. He wasn't cutting hair either. Least ways, if he was cutting hair, he must have taken a break 'cause he was out on the gym floor, talking it up with some folks on the sidelines.'

'What do we know about him?'

'Well, Jamal Jordan, he's a player. Or was. Not a ball player so much; a player in the black market. He was probably hanging some but also dealing, doing his business.'

'Bidness, right?'

'That's how they say it, Mr. Miller.'

'Right out in plain view. His prison bidness?'

'No, Mr. Miller, not like that. Some of the hacks are dirty but most of us, we wouldn't stand for that. Too dangerous. Let people deal out in front like that and things can get outahand.'

'So he's trading on the down low?'

'Right. Probably in the barbershop. Officers on gym duty can see into the barbershop from the basket ball court but you can't see everything. People are moving around, shaking hands, trading cigarettes, you know? A lot of transactions.'

'Transactions. You gotta love the language here, don't ya?'

'Yeah. Like this is some sort of commercial zone. Which it is, it's just we can't stop it. Really, we'd have to strip search everybody all day long.'

'Not a pretty picture.'

We laugh. Prisoner hygiene is a sore spot with staff. Nobody likes to search a man you can smell at ten paces and the convicts don't like it much either—the smells or the searches.

'Jamal's a player, like I said,' Officer James continued. 'He deals, is what I hear. And I'm thinking he's dealing from the gym.'

'Makes sense. Take the product where the action is. So Jamal's out on the floor. What else is going down?'

'Mostly the game. I didn't even notice Jamal, not really anyway, until he went down. I was watching the game.'

'Not the action around the game? Not scanning the crowd? This is a hotspot, Officer James.' I try to keep the irritation out of my voice.

'I know, I know. I mean, I blame myself, I do. I'm a fan. Anybody who loves basketball and works in prison lives for the tournaments. That night the Masked Marauders were taking on the Fortunate Felons...'

'Masked Marauders? Fortunate Felons?'

'Hey, these guys got a sense of humor. They're down but they're not out. Last year it was rap names. Like Akon Aces and Fifty...'

'Okay. Got it.' One of my sons put an Akon ring tone on my cell, though I'm careful to keep the phone on Manner Mode when I'm at work. Somehow the strains of Locked Up, Won't Let Me Out don't strike me as good taste, let alone good sense, when I'm in the house. 'So the Masked Marauders were taking on the Fortunate Felons....'

'The gym was rocking. Place packed so tight you couldn't stick your legs out without getting 'em out onto the court, where they'd like as not get run over. And these guys play for keeps. What else they got but pride?'

I nod. What he says is true. This prison, like so many these days, is for lifers. Lifers mostly want a simple life, stay close to home, avoid trouble. But there are a few outlaws in this bunch, folks who live on the raw edge of emotion. Rogues. And with rogue lifers, everything is for keeps.

'I tell my old lady,' Officer James continues, 'Baby, we got men doing life, double life, even life plus the afterlife! Some of these dudes are modern-day desperados, believe it. The game is like a shoot out. The winners are legend, least for a while.'

'Least in their own minds.'

'But the game, man, the games are good. Really good. Some of the black prisoners here call it the NBA—Natural Brothers Association. 'We be the NBA,' that's what the guys say.'

'So you watch. And you pick a team, root for them.'

He pauses. He should just be policing the place and we both know it. 'Yeah, I pick a team, I'm a fan. But I just watch and cheer.'

'Until somebody gets killed...'

'Yeah. 'Cept normally no one gets killed or even hurt. Maybe a game injury but mostly folks behave because they want to stay in the gym, mingle, stay out of their cells.'

'Not tonight, though. Somebody got good and dead tonight.'

'Yeah, not tonight. I was preoccupied. I didn't see it until it was too late. Didn't see it until I heard it.'

'Heard it?'

'The silence. Heard the silence. The place was alive – clapping and hollering and then, boom, silence, dead silence. Then somebody yelled 'Man down.' Down and out, really. By the time Jamal hit the floor he'd been knifed in the eye – way deep into his head, Detective – and slashed across the face. And soon as he hit the floor, Daunte kept working at him...'

'You recognized the assailant?'

'Well, I recognized the man. Didn't know he was Daunte McFadden 'til later, when things settled down and I checked his file.'

'Okay. Go on.'

'So Daunte -you know, the assailant- was cutting Jamal deep in his back and chest and arms. Jamal's hands were cut to shreds...'

'Defensive wounds?'

'That's what I'd say, but he didn't really defend himself; he didn't have a chance. One minute the ball is in play and the next, it's the big time out. Game over.'

'Nobody called out or tried to step in, nothing?'

'Nothing, Mr. Miller. It was so much blood, I think everybody was paralyzed. I know I was paralyzed. It felt like I was frozen there, it was like the air was thick, like it was syrup – thick as blood – and I was suspended in it. It seemed like time stood still, me like a fucking statue on one side of a river of blood, Daunte on the other. It seemed like he was in a trance, too.'

'Take a deep breath,' I said.

'I never seen so much blood, Mr. Miller, never. Jamal took the hit just off center court, along the sidelines, near the toilets. By the time we figured what had happened, there was so much blood we was slippin' and slidin' trying to get out there. Daunte, he was drenched in blood, blood from head to foot.'

I knew enough to know that Jamal had exsanguinated, to quote Vittoria. He'd bled out, right in front of the Officer, his heart pumping wildly at first, pushing torrents of blood through expanded veins, him high on adrenaline and fear. Until the body figured out that the blood was draining off into nowhere. Then Jamal would go into shock, a numb, blessed state of indifference or even, in some cases, relief. Vittoria had told me about this, that people who survived profound assault often reported feeling calm, even tranquil, in the face of what should spark raw terror and flailing efforts at escape. The ones who died of such assaults were reported to look calm, composed, even happy on death's door. 'It is as if they give up on the ghost, Rob,' she had said 'and go quietly into the dark night.' She paused and added 'That's a play on the immortal words of Dylan Thomas, in the case that you are wondering.'

It wasn't the case that I was wondering, but that was my problem. Imagination's never been my long suit. 'Or give up and become a ghost,' I'd replied, trying to be smart but coming off lame. Vittoria ignored me and observed 'It is a matter of evolution. We have evolved to slow down the pumping of the heart and the expansion of the veins and the movement of the limbs under profound assault. Movement, even fast beating of the heart, in these cases is selfdefeating, it hastens death. Better to go into a kind of coma and hope for help.'

'And if help is not available?' I'd asked. 'Then at least you die in the state of peace,' she said 'in a dreamy departure from this life.' And a state of grace, I thought to myself, if you were clear-headed enough to make peace with your Maker.

Later, I'd review the crime scene photos and see a pool of blood spreading out from Jamal's body, forming a giant Rorschach design, oddly like that of a butterfly, though on second glance I thought more like a rat – they grow them big in prisons, and in big numbers. The stain was a dark brown bordering on black, and the blood had congealed, as if it were a species of asphalt laced with angry suppurations.

'Did they exchange words?' I asked the officer, bringing us both back to the matter at hand. 'Any threats, name calling?'

'Nothing. Not that I heard, anyway.'

'How about Daunte, standing there drenched in blood? Did he say anything?'

'No, not a word. Daunte just looked at me. Like he was in shock. Took a few steps back and then stood there, frozen. So I went to Jamal, you know? To help. He's moving and moaning and I get to him and look him in the eye—the eye that ain't cut out of his head—and all I see is death. A blank screen. That's what really did it for me. That man was looking at me but he was looking death in the face and God, I about dropped dead myself.'

'So you're standing there...'

'I'm standing there looking at Jamal. I'm like in a trance or something. And then I hear 'Drop the knife.' From behind me. It was a female CO. 'Drop it now!' She's a woman but she has balls. 'Drop It Now!'

'And he dropped the knife?'

'Not right away. Seemed like forever. Daunte's standing there, dripping blood like from a horror movie and I'm thinking 'Or what. Drop the knife or what?' I mean, nobody wanted to go take it from him. We just stood there. We was on one side of a river of blood, and Daunte was on the other, and ain't nobody moving until Daunte drops the knife.'

'So he did drop it? You didn't have to take it from him?'

'He dropped it. If he didn't, we would've waited for back up. Hey, we're not armed. We don't have batons. We do have mace but you don't want to spray that shit in a confined space.'

We share a tight smile.

'Yeah, a confined space. But that gym, that was a real tight place, tighter than a rat's ass, and you spray mace and all hell would break loose. It'd be a fucking riot.'

'So Daunte drops the knife. Then what?'

'Daunte drops the knife and gets down on one knee, like he's a quarterback or something getting ready to call a play.'

'Or maybe say a prayer?'

'Didn't seem like he was praying, Mr. Miller. But anyway, I move up behind him and cuff him. But it's hard 'cause of the blood and the cuffs getting wet and slippery. He helped me, man. Really, he did. I guess he was spent, no fight left in him.'

'Helped you put the cuffs on?'

'Yeah, I couldn't get a grip. First I put them on upside down, so they woulda been a bitch to get off him.'

'Christ. And risky. You'd practically have to do contortions to get them off without putting your neck on the line.'

'Damn right. Imagine that? Man cuffed and then chokes me when I try to cut him loose later. Somebody'd have a heart attack.'

'More work for the paramedics.' That's a grim thought but I can't help but think that this crime scene could've gotten outahand, to quote this Officer, a man who may be lucky to be alive after his shift in the gym tonight.

We arrived at the cell block that holds the gym, then went down a few steps to the entrance, which is underground. A painted sign, amended by graffiti, was displayed above the gym door in bold letters. Originally, it read House Of Hoops. It had been altered to read House Of The Hopeless. The original sign was in black paint; the editing, as it were, was in bright red. It made an impression.

'House Of The Hopeless?' I turned to engage my escort, who knew a lot about basketball but hadn't bothered to mention this troubling sign.

'Hoops, then Hopelessness,' he replied, in what I can only call a tone of meditation. 'I guess basketball is life but not enough life for the men. Like I said, these guys are doing forever. I don't think one of the guys in the gym tonight will leave the prison alive.'

'Certainly one didn't. So the sign is what, officer? Something from literature? 'Abandon all hope?'

'Beats me. Or maybe they've been abandoned by hope.'

I replied 'I see,' but I'm not sure I did. Until he opened the door. First thing that struck me was the smell, then the army of naked men, clothes at their feet, blood on the floor, a hint of rot in the air. I do crime scenes, that's my job, but this looked like a massacre, like some sort of End Of Days scene from the middle ages.

'Christ, gimme that clipboard.'

Officer James grabbed the clipboard hanging by the door of the gym and handed it to me. It was the gym log. Everybody in the gym was signed in. Nobody would be signed out until I said so. With one exception. Jamal had a pass. He'd been released to the coroner, and his body was in the gentle hands of Vittoria Simone. Something, I thought, some small consideration, though I knew this fleeting pleasure was lost on Jamal.

'Alright, Officer,' I said, forgetting Vittoria and getting my mind back in detective time, 'you've been a big help. Before I start working on these guys, I want to know if you asked Daunte about the crime or if he made any incriminating statements.'

'Well, I didn't interrogate him, if that's what you mean. It's more like I yelled at him, you know? I was pumped up. I said 'Why'd you do this man? You crazy or something?' I didn't know Daunte, 'cept by sight, but I know Jamal. Knew Jamal. This is a small world.'

'And Daunte said?'

'He just stared at me. So I screamed at him, really loud man 'Why'd you do this man? You crazy or something?' I was feeling tight man, ready to explode. And you know what that stupid bastard told me? Daunte said 'I ain't supposed to be here.' Like that's a reason.'

'I ain't supposed to be here,' I repeat. That was original, I had to give Daunte that. I'd heard 'It wasn't me' or 'I wasn't even there,' but 'I ain't supposed to be here'? That was something new.

'Alright, Officer. I'm going to start with the man at the head of the line. When I'm done, I'm going up to McFadden's cell.'

'Right, sir. The first man is...'

Crime scene interviews are an empty ritual in prison. The killing could take place on a raised stage in the prison yard and nobody'd see a thing. But you've got to try. After a series of brief encounters of the uninformative kind with a few heavily tattooed convicts who claimed surprise that a killing had occurred that night – one man went so far as to opine that the blood was from a game-related injury – I talked to a guy named Danny Deleon and started to get somewhere. Deleon was doing life for murder. His third. He didn't want to go into the details of his crimes and I didn't either. He told me he was in the gym office 'Getting cups for the players.' I must have looked interested because he went on to explain 'I'm the main water boy.' I resisted the temptation to ask about subsidiary water boys. I did think that the boy in this gym was long since departed, maybe with his first homicide. I kept that thought to myself.

'Anything at all you can tell me, Mr. Deleon?'

'The word on the street is that it was a hit.'

'Daunte hit Jamal?'

'No man, not like that. Word was that Daunte was going down. Dude called Snake supposed to do it.'

'This Snake have a name?'

'Beats me,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'I just heard Snake. Snake was the man.' Deleon paused, then said, softly

'Hit men don't have real names, Detective.'

That last line sounded like the title of a B movie or the first line of a noire novel but I didn't see much to be gained by saying so. Instead I said 'So nobody knows the hit man called Snake?'

'I didn't say that. But I don't know him. Least not for sure.'

I pressed a bit, figuring Delone knew more than he was saying, but Danny must have figured he'd said enough. 'Thanks for coming in,' I told him, then motioned for the next man.

That man was Darnell Ross, a double lifer sent up for murder and aggravated rape. 'I was getting my hair braided, man,' he told me. I took this in stride. You see a lot of this in prison, like the pen's a beauty school for men who've seen only the ugly side of life. 'Looks good,' I said. He nodded. I was glad he didn't ask, 'Compared to what?' These guys don't scare me much anymore, but I have good sense.

'Ever hear of a dude named Snake? A prison hitter?'

Ross just got up and left. Not so much as a 'Fuck you' on the way out the door. I thought maybe this Snake business might be real. A loose clue, because nobody got killed but Jamal and sure enough he didn't get killed by a hitman; Jamal got killed by Daunte, that much was certain. But I thought I'd look into this Snake character, if I could get some traction on his real name.

Jermaine Wilson swaggered up to my table, which had been set up in the barber shop area, near the general toilet. Accommodations are often crude in prison. I mention Wilson's swagger because he was naked down to his boxers, as were the others after they'd been strip searched. It takes character to walk in your shorts with confidence during a murder investigation in a maximum security prison.

'I use the Fifth,' Wilson said, getting to the point. I didn't bother to make him specify 'The Fifth Amendment' or say anything about self-incrimination. I wasn't asking him to incriminate himself, as far as I knew, but I dropped the matter, since it was clear he'd have nothing to say. I tilted my head to the right, keeping my eyes locked on his. He strode back to the line, looking like he felt vindicated.

The next prisoner spoke to me through gritted teeth, like he was an extra from a Jimmy Cagney movie. 'It was jive hectic,' he told me – a few times, before I heard it right. At first I thought he was saying Eclectic, which made sense, sort of.

'Hectic, huh?'

'Jive Hectic. Crazy.'

'Yeah. Things were crazy in there?'

'Insane, man. Crazy insane.' He spit the words out through clenched teeth, his left lip lifting just enough to let the two syllables find space to bloom.

I wasn't sure what to make of this guy, whose name I couldn't understand but whose face looked familiar. It was a haunted look I'd seen before, and then it came to me. I'd been investigating a killing near his house. This guy lived in a corner cell on the flats, not far from where the body had fallen in a heap, the head crushed, the face smashed beyond recognition. It was awful, he'd explained to me, patiently, enunciating with great care, as if speaking to a child, but not unexpected. This sort thing happened in this neighborhood. He knew a guy who was killed when a jumper from the fifth tier landed on him, flattening him like a pancake. The jumper lived, at least until he could set himself on fire in his cell, which finally did him in. The other guy, heading to chow, never knew what hit him. That was prison. A certain arbitrariness, violent and quick, was a part of the landscape, like asphalt and weeds. Didn't I get that?

'Mister, ah, mister... I didn't get your name. I'm having trouble hearing you. But we've talked before. What gives? What went down, tonight?'

He looked at me with that air that he was the adult, me the child, and slowly extracted a razor blade from his mouth. I noticed it was a safety blade, the business end facing out; he'd clenched it tightly in his mouth, hence the gritted speech.

'Motherfucking crazy in this place. Got to be ready.'

'With a razor?'

'Fuck yes. Good as a shank, maybe better.'

'Don't the guards pick up on this?'

'Man, it's not like we talk casual. They give the orders, I keep my head down, keep moving. I just got to be ready. Plus a lot of guys do this. We don't talk much. Just watch.'

'Ready for the sort of violence that jumped off in there?'

'Don't know shit about tonight. Just know shit happens. And I'm ready.'

'So what can you tell me?'

'Already did. I'm ready. Shit happens and I go for my blade.' After a pause, again looking at me like I'm the child in this deal – 'Learned it from a girl. On the street.'

On that sobering note I thanked him for his time. He put the blade back in his mouth, nodded, and left. I thought about busting him, but one thing was clear tonight, and that was the cons in that gym were on their own.

Danzell King sat down next, gently caressing his hair. Like Ross, he had his hair done that evening some time before the killing. 'I had a cut, then a wash out,' he announced as he settled himself. I wasn't up on the details of the hair care world but I did wonder if perhaps Jamal had cut his hair.

'Who cut your hair? Jamal?'

'Oh, no. I get my hair done by Pony Man.'

'Pony Man?'

'Yeah, I don't know his real name. But he's always shaking his head and he's got this long ma... '

'I get it.' Prison holds a world full of people with oddities, including a few tics and occasional barnyard fantasies. 'Did you know the victim?' No one yet had said they knew Jamal other than to point him out.

'Oh yes, I did know Jamal. We was in the chess club together.'

I didn't even know there was a chess club in the prison. 'Can you tell me something about him? About maybe why this went down?'

'Well all I know is rumors, honey. But Daunte, you know, McFadden, him and Jamal were tight once.'

'Tight?' I felt a lead here. In prison, it seems everything is personal in one way or another.

'Oh yes. Not tight in a love way, honey. No romance. Neither of them was, you know, looking for love, but they did do some drug deals. Daunte was the small man, you know, and Jamal the big supplier. But they got on. That's what I'd heard.'

'So what do you suppose went wrong?'

'Well people in the barber shop do talk, and I can tell you this, word is that Daunte fell behind in his payments?'

'So Daunte kills Jamal?'

'Hold on now, mister. Let me tell the story. Daunte don't pay but then Jamal has to collect. Word was that Jamal put out a contract on Daunte. Now you know what that means? Daunte don't pay, he gets hit.'

'I understand that. But it's Jamal that got hit in the gym. And it's Jamal now cooling in the morgue. Not Daunte.'

'Ain't that interesting? Guess the tables got turned. You know you can make a plan, but it don't make it a permanent thing.'

Permanent Thing. I wondered if this was some sort of hair dressing metaphor, in which case I was out of my depth. My hair is straight and thinning. No permanents for this detective. 'Can you tell me anything more? Did you talk to Jamal or Daunte, tonight?'

'Well no one talked to Daunte. He was like fuckin' Caesar taking over the gym – he came, he saw, he conquered.'

I was impressed by the classical reference but thought it might be condescending to say so. Instead, I said 'Nobody talked to him?'

'No, honey. He came in, sat down, got up to go to the john – at least, that's where he was headed – and next thing you know he's all over Jamal.'

'Did Jamal do anything or did Daunte just take him out?'

'I didn't see Jamal do anything. But he was upset, I know that much.'

'Upset? You saw this?'

'Oh yes. Just before this went down, I heard Jamal talking about legal work and he was mad.'

'Legal work? Jamal was talking about legal work before he got taken out?'

'Heard it clear as day. Said to this dude "Shit man, you need to get on my case."'

'Is that all you heard?'

'Well, the gym is noisy so I didn't hear everything.'

'Anything else?'

'Well, something about "A higher court."'

'A Higher Court?'

'Court of appeals, I suppose. Don't you? Everybody here has something in appeals court. No way out of here except through the appeals court.'

Or the morgue, I thought. Maybe the hit man was a kind of court of last appeal. I pursued Danzell on this hit business, alleged hit business, I reminded myself. He'd heard about the hit supposedly going down; claimed everybody had. But nothing specific.

'Can you identify the man Jamal talked to about his case?'

'I seen him around but I don't know him by name'

'Could you pick him out of a lineup?'

'And then pick out my coffin? No thanks, honey.' He waved as he turned to leave. 'I've said enough.'

The last prisoner, John Gibb, slipped up on me while I was distracted, thinking about what Danzell had said and perhaps a bit irritated about all this Honey business. No matter how many times I hear it, terms of endearment from heavily tattooed men strike me as odd, if not downright bizarre. I guess I lead a sheltered life for a hard-boiled detective. Gibb seemed pretty tame, at least compared to Danzell, who I was already calling Honey Man in my notes. Gibbs sat down as soon as Honey Man had vacated his seat but I hadn't seen him in line or seen him at all until he was right in front of me. It was a little unnerving. I was intrigued, especially later, when I learned that Gibb was Daunte's cell buddy, or former cell buddy.

'I'm John J. Gibb. My friends call me a lot of things. You can call me John. Or Mister Gibb.'

Stripped down to his noticeably faded skivvies and here another prisoner was talking to me like we're sitting together in the park. You had to give them credit.

'Mister Gibb,' I said, speaking with a professional tone, meant to convey respect 'tell me what you saw.'

'I saw whatever everybody saw and then some. But I aint' talking here. Too public.'

'Everybody's stuck here, Mister Gibb. It's not like we can take a stroll down the tier and chit chat.'

'Fuck you, Miller. I'm gonna jump up, make a scene, you get me off to hole. We can talk there.'

I went along with this ruse because this was a man who had something to say and saying it in private was the way things happen in prison. Segregation – what most folks in prison call the hole – was one of the few places one can have a real talk, though now I'm thinking interrogation, not just conversation

'So talk,' I tell him, once he's safely secured in a segregation cell, after putting up a pretty convincing effort to call me every name in the book and throw a few ineffectual punches in my general direction. 'You're a good observer, I take it. Talk to me.'

'You can take it that I had Daunte's back.'

That sounded promising. 'You had Daunte's back? You know him well.'

'We're tight. I'm in the gym watching the game and in come Daunte, a little late, and I know this ain't his game night. I know there's a hit on my man, and I know the hit was put out by Jamal.'

'You know this?'

'Everybody know this.'

'Okay. So you figure Daunte is walking into a trap?'

'I know he's walking into a trap.'

I resist the urge to ask how Mister Gibb knows this; I expect he'll say he knows because he knows or, better, because everybody knows.

'Uh huh,' I say. 'What kind of trap?'

'A deadly trap, man. He is in a public place. There are no guards to speak of and the gym is a madhouse. Anybody could slip up behind him and take him out, just like that.'

'Come from behind?'

'Of from the side, or from the fucking ceiling. He's out there, man, on a limb. This is Jamal's home. Jamal run the barbershop; Jamal deal the drugs here. People know him and like him.'

'Like him?'

'Well, they fear him. And that's better.'

'Better in prison.'

'Better in any place I've known.'

I can't argue that. I figure Mr. Gibb has come up hard and prison is just the end of a trail of bleak places he's called home.

'So Daunte's walking into a box canyon,' he continues 'he's here and he got nowhere to go. So I start to move toward him and then, boom, he and Jamal are into it.'

'Just like that? How'd it jump off?'

'I couldn't see real clear and man, I was shocked. I figured Daunte for trouble the minute he walked into the gym and now, boom, he's got this giant motherfucker down –Jamal is big, man, real big, and little ole Daunte is cutting him up like a piece of meat.'

'Did Daunte just go for him or what?'

'I couldn't see real good, like I said, man. But it looked like Jamal might have made a move toward Daunte, you know? Turned toward him, like he was going to say something to Daunte, chew on him a bit. Or do something. But Daunte got the jump on Jamal, that's for damn sure.'

'Self-defense, do you think?'

'Well yeah. Jamal want Daunte dead; Jamal meet Daunte where he ain't supposed to be, and that place is Jamal's turf; Jamal come up, not looking like he's there to say 'Yo Brother, What's happening?''

I thanked Mr. Gibb for his help, told him I'd check back with him later, after I'd followed up on a few things. Gibb had given me enough to get started, I thought, as I picked up my notebook and told Officer James I was ready to move on.

'You done so quick?' he asked.

'Short work,' I said. 'That jumpy sonofabitch, Gibb, wanted to talk about the game, for Christsake. Guy didn't know shit about the killing.'

I left it like that. I don't want word to get out that Gibb talked. In prison, you play your cards close to the vest.

'I've heard enough for now,' I told Officer James. 'I'll let the regular officers take the rest of the statements. I've got a few leads and I'm going to follow them down. I want to hit Daunte's house. If he planned this, there might be some clues.'

I was mesmerized by the play of light and shadow and the whisper of sound, like the wings of a hummingbird, and the sheer grace of the arc traced across the air above my head. The long, sheer line of string, carrying as its payload a tightly folded note, descended ever so gently to the gray steel floor and finally slid under the door of cell Forty Three, not far from where I was standing.

'Remarkable,' I said to my guide, Officer Tamika Moore. She'd taken over for Officer James, who had to stay on at the gym. I was glad to walk with her, since she'd been in the gym at the time of the crime and in fact had been the one to get Daunte to drop his weapon on her formidable command.

'The trick is in the wrist,' she said, 'the flick of the wrist. I busted one guy – they're not supposed to fish – so he told me the mechanics and I let it slide.'

'You like to fish? I mean, in the world?'

'No. But I like to know how my world works.'

Not a bad idea, I thought. No question this woman was direct and to the point. 'So how do they do that?'

'You take a long line of light thread, like sewing thread, braid it a few times, then throw it out like a lasso, then whip-saw your wrist right, then left, then right, releasing at the last moment. The line sails in the air like it's alive, like it has wings.'

'Wings. A valued commodity in prison.'

'You got that right, Mr. Miller.'

'It's like fly fishing. And that, Officer, is an art.'

'And you're an artist, I take it.'

'I'm a wannabe. I can't fish for shit but guys who can fly fish, gees, it's something to see. A lot of good fishing happens at dusk. The dying light of day makes the line shimmer as the hook and bait ease their way to the target, sinking like a feather in the breeze, finally landing, silently, slipping through the water and into the waiting mouth of a big-ass bass.'

'Seems to me you'd miss as many fish as you catch?'

'You'd think so, Officer. But the shadows on the water cast by the line mesmerize the fish and they follow that hook with open mouths.'

'A little like you a minute ago, Mr. Miller. Just captured by what you saw. Mouth open and everything!'

I felt myself blush. 'That was an amazing sight. Can we retrieve that note?'

'It's gone by now, read and flushed.'

'So all this is... '

'Boys passing notes, Mister Miller, like in school. It's like they're text messaging each other, like my teenage daughters.'

I reflected on this. It was not the first time I'd marveled at the ability of men in cages to communicate with one another.

'So notes are passed all the time?'

'Oh yeah, constantly.'

'From cell to cell?'

'Absolutely. From cell to cell and from different tiers in the same cell house. It takes a little more skill to fish up or down the tiers in a cellblock, but folk do it.'

'Well, let's get on up to Daunte's cell. I'm thinking that there may be some notes—or clues, anyway—worth looking into.'

'What you want is a first class shakedown. A lot shows up, more than you'd think.'

'When's the last time these cells been shaken down, Officer?'

'Oh, months, Mr. Miller, months. We'd have a few Fakedowns, but not enough staff to do the real thing.'

'Fakedowns?'

'Yeah, you go in, toss a few things around, move on to the next cell. Don't do much damage but it keeps the cons on their toes.'

'I like that. We had some Fakedowns in the street. Easy on the clock. Get a man home early.'

'Same deal here. You look too close, you be here a whole shift and more sifting through the weapons and drugs and just plain excess stuff.'

'Daunte's on the top tier, Officer?'

'Check. He's locked down. We got a man outside the door, watching him close, make sure he don't destroy anything you might want to see. Or talk to his neighbors.'

'Is this SOP? I'd have thought... '

'Yeah, yeah. I know. Normally we'd have run his ass down to seg but by the time we got him settled down the hole was full up and we wanted to keep him away from witnesses, people he might try to, you know, tell his story. Besides, we figured you'd have an easier time talking to him in his house.'

'Fair enough. Maybe he'll feel at home, let his guard down.' No sense telling the officer I'd prefer seeing Daunte in a strip cell, where he'd be disoriented, looking for a way to get out and me working that angle to get some talk. She was just doing her job, and I figured I'd better get on with mine.

As I started up toward Daunte's cell Officer Moore put a hand on my shoulder. 'Oh, almost forgot. Here's something you need to look at.' She handed me a letter, addressed to a Mr. Moses Kinley.

'What's this?'

'It's a letter from Daunte to his dad.'

'Mr. Moses Kinley?'

'Checked his file; that's his dad. Daunte must have written it before he headed down to the gym.'

'You took this from his cell?'

'No, the letter came from the night mail pickup.'

'He'd put in the mail? Tonight?'

'Some time this evening, right. We just grabbed it before it got out of the building.'

'Thanks, thanks a lot. And good work.'

I opened the letter, holding it comfortably in front of me, letting my eyes focus. It read Dad, I might have to kill a man tonight. I'm sorry, really sorry.

'Anything?'

'Can't say for sure, Officer. It's only but two lines.' Again I kept the information close, not sure who I want to know what. 'But thanks. It might help.'

I folded the letter and tucked it into my sports coat pocket as I ascended the metal stairs to Daunte's fifth floor perch, at the ass end of the uppermost tier in this huge human warehouse. The place was like a giant cave, with a ceiling that reached to the sky and walls that faded out of sight in the dusky gloom. And noisy. There were industrial fans, loud and insistent, on each tier, radios and televisions in each cell, blaring and echoing and reverberating until the place felt small, even claustrophobic. The susurrations of the summer night offered the hint of a hidden chorus of life amid the din – crickets, cockroaches, katydids, and the flutter of wings of the errant bird, alert for feral cats, who move stealthily, undisputed predators among a colony of prey, one of them, a tabby, moving saucily under foot, as though I were the intruder, this his turf. The prison was a menagerie, human and otherwise, a place pulsating with life and, all too often, violent death.

I walked deliberately, even gingerly, each step echoing faintly against the metal walls and floors and bars. The dim lighting from the long, barred windows that ran along the outer wall of the cellblock added an eerie feel to the place, like you were cooped up, as of course the convicts were, but I felt locked up myself, locked up and making my way deeper and deeper into the inner recesses of a forgotten land. The windows had never been cleaned, as far as I could see. The grime splintered the gray light that fought its way to the tiers, each tier holding some fifty cells in a long row trailing off out of sight into the dark recesses of the cellblock, each tier in turn fenced in by thick wire mesh, cutting grid marks in the muted light. The mesh was put in place to prevent serious trouble. People had jumped to their deaths from the upper tiers; people had been pushed to their deaths from those tiers, too. So the wire mesh was thick for safety reasons but it added to the confined quality of the place, hemming people in, fracturing the little natural light that made its way in muddy rivulets to a man's cell, a six by nine foot cage illuminated in most instances by a sixty watt bulb hanging from the ceiling

I told the officer on duty outside McFadden's house to crack the cell door, that I'd run things from here, then stood back from the cell, taking a minute to catch my breath and compose myself, to remind myself that no matter how strange the prison was, it was normal to people like Daunte. In fact, it was home to Daunte, who'd been raised in one institution or another, a sobering thought. Then I knocked, waiting for permission to enter. I'd read that the staff in English prisons knocked before entering a man's cell. That sounded pretty classy to me. Plus it shows respect, a big thing in the prison world.

'I'm here,' Daunte said from the far end of his cell, shrouded in the shadow of the urine-yellow light that stained the floor and walls of his monastic home. 'Can't be nowhere else.'

'Hard to argue with that,' I said. 'Mind if I come in? I'm Detective Rob Miller, investigating the homicide.'

I said this matter of factly, like it was no big deal, but Daunte was a sight. He stood before me in a rumpled orange jumpsuit, dark in places with the residue of violence, his neck and arms still slick with traces of blood. I thought I saw dried blood crusted along the edges of his forehead, liked he'd wiped his face with bloody hands and couldn't get enough water from the decrepit porcelain sink – or maybe the toilet – to wash himself clean. The cell was steeped in the musky scent of recent death, like a miasma had settled over the place. Here was a man in a desperate situation, but Daunte didn't look desperate so much as he looked spent, like he'd have dropped off to sleep if the world would let him be. If it weren't for the likes of me, I had to think, a man with a lot of questions, a man who'd give him no time to rest. Daunte paused, then said 'Do it matter?' not without a hint of anger.

I thought for a minute he was going to say 'Investigating the homicide? Which one?' A guy had greeted me with that, which had thrown me off my pace. There'd been several bodies I hadn't known about. I'd wanted to play it cool with that character – say something like 'Hey, this is prison, who's counting?' – but had thought better of it. Like now. I just kept a poker face and started talking.

'Well, you don't have to talk to me, but your gonna have to talk to someone sooner or later so it might as well be me.'

'And you can help?'

'Maybe. I have some juice with the DA. Nothing too grand but she'll listen to me.'

'She don't listen to shit. She's the one that put me in here in the first place.'

Daunte had killed a man to get himself to prison, but from where he sat, his crime was his business and his prison term was the DA's business. 'No point in debating, Daunte. But she's the one who can put you on the gurney. You flat out killed an unarmed man in public. It don't look good.'

'And you can help?'

'Can't hurt. I can tell your side of the story, but you gotta talk to me. Or her. But she won't talk to you until you're charged, and then it's pretty much too late. That's the way it works. You deal up front. Just that simple.'

'Like I don't know that?'

'I don't know what you know. But I do know this: Be straight with me and I'll be straight with you.'

Daunte McFadden was not a man with options. I thought he was smart enough to see this but you couldn't always count on convicts to have good sense. I'd met more than a few who'd done crimes so impulsive or just plain stupid I was hard to imagine what they were thinking. One guy, in his early twenties, held up the fast food restaurant in which he worked; in fact, he was reporting for work that night and evidently had a change of heart on the way in the door. So there he was, dressed in his store uniform and positioned directly in the line of fire, so to speak, of the surveillance cameras, cameras that had on earlier occasions been used to prove minor delinquencies on his part. When confronted with this damning evidence, he said 'Couldn't have been me; I was out of town that day.' He said this with a straight face, the detective on the case told me.

'Alright, alright. Here's the deal, Miller. I wasn't supposed to be there—in the gym—and, man, I didn't have a choice. It was him or me. Self-defense, plain and simple.'

'It doesn't look like Jamal Jordan put up much of a fight. I can't see that he started the fight? Nobody...'

'Nobody saw a thing, right? Nobody knows who started it, right?'

'Right. I can't argue with that. But nobody saw a knife on him, Daunte, and that's key. He was unarmed.'

'He ain't unarmed cause nobody saw a weapon. It don't mean nothing happened and don't mean he didn't have a knife.'

I nodded. He had a point.

'But it ain't what you see,' Daunte continued 'it's what folks say. That's what counts.'

'What folks say? You mean, like rumors?'

'I don't mean 'Like rumors.' I mean plain-ass, flat-out, mother-fucking rumors. I got fished one day and the note say 'Jamal want you dead.'

'You got that note?'

'Oh, yeah. I framed it. Got it right here... Miller, what do you take me for? It's in the fuckin' sewer.'

'Alright, alright. The note said Jamal wants you dead?'

'Clear as day, my man. Jamal want you dead. It don't say how I'm supposed to get dead or who's supposed to get me dead. Or when. But the message clear, man, clear as day.'

'So you know it's a hit out on you, put out by Jamal?'

'I know that what folks say. Dude wrote the note just passing that intelligence on to me. And if he believe it, I got to believe it.'

'You've got to believe the rumors?'

'Listen up. Maybe Jamal want to scare me. Maybe he want to take me down and build up his rep. Maybe he farm it out to a hit man. Maybe it's not Jamal but somebody wants to fuck with Jamal so they drop his name, get him in the soup.'

'It gets complicated,' I conceded. 'I can see that. You don't know the facts but you do know the threat is real?'

'Mr. Miller. That's your name, right? Robert Miller.'

'Right. Call me Rob. Only my wife calls me Robert and that's when I'm in trouble.'

'Like we're buddies?'

'Like we got to work together, Daunte.'

'Alright Rob,' Daunte says, laying it on a bit thick but I can see we're getting somewhere 'you got to listen close. If the word is out that I'm a target, then I am a target. Either the word is true and serious bodily harm is about to be set on my ass or the word is false. But if I don't act – take somebody down – people think I'm lame. Then some other motherfucka will take me down 'cause he think I'm an easy score.'

'You can't just walk away?'

'Where I'm walking to, mister... uh, Rob? Where is Daunte McFadden gonna find shelter in this cold world?'

I smiled at this. It's July and we are roasting like pigs in a pan – a steel pan with a corrugated floor as hot as an industrial oven. The night is humid, our skin slick. Brackish streams of sweat are pulled by gravity, pooling at our feet and running to the corners of the cell, our bodily fluids thus robbed seeming almost to hiss as if ready to boil. 'And yet and still,' as my mother would say, 'prison is colder than a witch's tit.'

'You smile, Rob Miller. I smile too. But I got to smile, then watch my back.'

'You're pretty much on your own here?'

'Well, I got my cell buddy; I talk to him, enlist his aid, as you might say.'

I look around and see only one bunk, cast in lines of shadow from the play of the blanching light along the cell bars, an oddly appealing tableau, a gift from a clear night and a full moon. 'I thought you lived alone?' I say, struck by the primitive simplicity of Daunte's little world. 'Isn't this a one-man house?'

'Used to be two; turned the other bunk into a desk.'

'Nice work, Daunte. Very homey. What broke up the family?'

'Yeah. What split the little house on the cell block? Is that the question?'

I nod. He's playing with me but he's talking.

'Well, me and my homey, we had a parting of the ways. Dude drove me a little crazy. That's a story in itself. But he's still my buddy, my back up.'

A golden rule in detective work is to follow any lead and, even more, stick close to home. I wanted to know more about the cell buddy. It occurred to me that Daunte and his buddy may have been in this together, which would change everything.

'So he's still your main man?'

'He is. Once a cell buddy, always a cell buddy. That's the code.'

'But he's gone.'

'Hey, we had some friction. Dude was on the up and up but he was real particular about how he lived. Man started to get on my nerves with his housekeeping.'

'Housekeeping?' Daunte caught me off guard with that. A prison cell may be a man's house but I didn't think that included housekeeping. Daunte set me straight.

'You're sittin' in my house, Miller. John kept the house up good. Too good, really. Washed the floors, the walls, even the fuckin' ceiling. Picked up stuff, dusted. You name it, he cleaned it. Or fixed it.'

'So this John is, uh, fastidious. A neat freak?'

'Yeah. And he's slow and careful about it. Always working on some damn thing.'

It occurred to me that this 'John' may have been Daunte's bitch, another possible twist to this story. The question in the back of my mind was, why throw him out over small stuff? Instead I asked 'This John have a last name?'

'Do you homework, Miller. His name is John Gibb.'

'Gibb... ' I wanted to know more about Gibb, but before I can finish my thought Daunte is talking, warming up to his topic.

'So one day I look up and the dude is working on making a dresser – a dresser with draws, for Christ sake.'

'A dresser? For the cell?'

'Yeah, Miller. Made of cigarette wrappers. All colorful and put together like a machine or something.' Daunte paused, then held my gaze. 'That's when I knew I had to kill him.'

Daunte flashes a smile I can only call impish, if you can imagine an impish smile on a man who had, only hours earlier, destroyed another human being in a crime that can only be called a bloodbath. But I laugh; I can't help myself. He's playing with me and he got me. And the laugh reminds me, if only for a second, that there is a full-blooded human being inside this man, a man who has killed another human being, but still a man with warm blood coursing through his veins and suffusing his face when he smiles. This is the sort of thing I don't want to think about. Human beings inside the convicts, convicts inside the cages, bodies of real people inside the prison morgue, perhaps the loneliest place on the planet.

'You might be alright, Miller. Rob.' That smile again, full face, a moment of connection.

'You had me going, Daunte. Fucking wonderful. 'I had to kill him...' Or tell him to move on,' I say, trying to get the interrogation back on track.

'Absolutely. We stay friends, but keep a little distance.'

'And he's okay with that?'

'Yeah. He's okay with that. We still close. When the note come, I ran it by him. When the call come to go to the gym tonight, I said to myself 'My man is in the gym; I'm covered.' This was his night in the gym. I knew he'd be there watching the game.'

'And watching your back?'

'Yeah. For sure. I saw him when I walked into the gym, knew he'd be in the gym, knew he'd be there for me.'

'Okay. Just to back up for a minute, you get the word fished to you in your cell. Who sent it?'

'Don't matter.'

'Matters to me.'

'I don't know for sure, Rob Miller. And anyway I'm not telling. The word comes, like from on high, and I know I got to ready my self.'

'Sounds almost biblical, Daunte.'

'It's big-screen biblical to me, Miller. This is my life. And I'm on notice that someone wants to end it, situate my ass on a slab.'

'And that someone is Jamal.'

'Yeah, Jamal.'

'The note says that?'

'We been over this, Rob. The note say Jamal. May not be Jamal, but I got to figure it is Jamal. It makes sense. I got a problem with Jamal; now I know Jamal got a problem with me. I owed him some money. I stiffed him. Or he think I stiffed him.'

'Did you? Stiff him?'

'Yes and no.'

'I'd prefer a yes or no, Daunte.'

'Well, listen up. I owed him some money, then got locked down in seg before I could pay. When I'm locked down, Jamal get bent out of shape.'

'Doesn't he get it? In segregation you're off the books. Even the staff know that.'

'Right, my man. I'm off the books. Guess you do know this place.'

'A bit.'

'Anyway, Jamal maybe get some pressure from his homies to show he's tough and he talks big, like 'I'm gonna get that Daunte when get back in the world.' That shits sounds hard.'

'And Jamal was a hard man?'

'He's a dealer. All he got is his rep. He slip and everybody walk all over him.'

'So you both get it. Why couldn't you guys work it out?'

'Cause I was locked down. And by the time I got out, the hit was on.'

'Or the rumor...'

'Right, my man. The deed was in play or the word was out. Either way, there's gonna be trouble. We both know that.'

'And you can't just call a truce and talk?'

'He talk to me after he talk so tough, his rep is gone. I talk to him, I look like a bitch. We're gonna get it on, one way or the other.'

'No way to get around this? Nothing staff...'

'You see how many hacks on duty at the gym? Two COs, a gym full of prisoners, a bunch of 'em armed, a pretty fair number crazy. Hey, man, I'm on my own. That's the way it is.'

'So why tonight?'

'Cause I got the call to go the gym and I wasn't supposed to be there.'

'That's what you said in the gym, right after the killing. 'I wasn't supposed to be here?' Right?'

'Damn right. That's the whole deal. You call me to the gym on a night I'm not supposed to be there and I know something is waiting for me.'

'You know? No doubt?'

'No doubt, Rob Miller. There are no accidents in prison.'

'No...'

'None. We play for keeps. Nobody makes mistakes. Nobody lives if they make mistakes.'

'So you're called to the gym. It's tonight, which is not your gym night. And that's all you need to know.'

'It's enough. I know something's going down. It could be Jamal. It could be his man, the dude who took the contract...'

'If there actually was a contract,' I add.

'It could happen right when I walk in the door or during the game or on the way back to my house.'

'But it is tonight. You know that.'

'I know that. I believe that. And I was right.'

'Well, Daunte. You killed the man. Don't mean he was gonna kill you. I don't have anybody who says he started this?'

'Oh, he started this alright. He walked past me, right as we was heading toward the can, and then turned, twisted, twisted like a man doing a baseball swing...'

'He pivoted? I read about this technique in a book by Jack Abbott, who had made an art form of killing fellow convicts. Whatever Jamal was doing, and he may have simply been turning to face the approaching figure that was Daunte, in the prison world his movements could look threatening.'

'Exactly. He took a step across my path, just a foot ahead of me, then turned sharp – pivoted. I know a knife is coming next.'

'But the only knife they found was yours.'

'Rob, this is prison. Knives everywhere. Knives nowhere. His knife could be in a sewer half the way to the city.'

'You actually see a knife?'

'Do it matter? It was there. I could feel it.'

'So you just walk down to the gym, set yourself, and then get the jump on him?'

'Well, it sound that way after it's a done deal, but it was an ordeal, man, an ordeal from the minute the word come for me to report to the gym.'

I wasn't sure I was ready for an ordeal, but I didn't see any choice in the matter. The story was more complicated than I'd anticipated and I wanted to get to the bottom of it. I sat back, held Daunte's gaze, and forged on.

'Alright, Daunte. Break it down for me. If I'm gonna help you, I gotta put myself in your shoes.'

Dante laughs. 'My shoes, man. That's the key, the real deal.'

I look but I don't smile.

'Alright, my man. I get the word and I get my tool, my shank. You know from shanks, right?'

'Daunte,' I say 'I work here, remember?'

'Thought you might call them Shivs. Lots of staff call them Shivs. No such thing as a Shiv; a Shiv is gay. Sound almost French. There's just a shank, a hard-ass home-made knife. A real weapon.'

'I got that.'

'Okay. So I get my shank and I put it in my shoe, nestle it up under the sole, so I can take it with me through all the security...'

'How'd you get the word, Daunte? How'd you know to go to the gym?'

'The CO came by and said 'McFadden. Daunte McFadden, out to the gym. Game time.'"

'So this set off alarms.'

'Goddam right. Now I'm a player, right? I play for Armed 'n Dangerous, that's my team. I'm a guard, a shooting guard on A 'n D. I bring the ball up, take it in to the hoop when I can, shoot from the perimeter when it feel right, and pass when it don't. I run the team. But see, we don't play on Tuesdays. And this fool CO is telling me to head off to the gym. The hairs on my neck are standing at attention and I just know, man, this ain't right. A civilian might think 'Hey, this is a clerical fucking error. Run with it, get on down to the gym and watch the games.' Thinkin' like 'It is tournament week, right? And if you coulda' been there you woulda' been there. So relax, man. Go with the flow. Check out the game.'"

'But you're not buying.'

'I'm not buying. In prison, there aint' no such thing as an accident or mistake. I told you that. Everything here is planned. Even chillin' in the cell's a risky business. Some fool could fire bomb you and keep on moving, and I've seen it and I've smelled it, so don't look at me like I'm crazy.'

'I don't think your nuts, Daunte. But hell, officers make mistakes here every goddam day. Plenty of 'em. I mean, maybe your looking too close at things, you know? The CO may have just picked up the wrong list.'

'Easy for you to say, Miller. But I don't take nothin' for granted. So I said 'Yo, CO. I'm ready to go.' Sometimes I rap like that. It's not like I'm so happy I sing, like back on the plantation, it's just a way of talking. So he says 'Here's your pass, man. Y'all go and kill 'em on the court, my man.'"

'Kill 'em?'

‘That’s right. I don’t miss a beat but hey, ‘Kill ‘em on the court?’ Is this a sign or what? Hack thinks I’m playing ball tonight, or he thinks I think he thinks that. ‘I’ll knock ‘em dead’ I say ‘just let me get my shoes on and I’m outta here.’”

‘Knock ‘em dead?’ I’m not sure what to make of the language here.

‘Hey, I got a sense of humor. Somebody gonna die tonight, that’s how I’m seeing it, just don’t want it to be me. Now my shoes are ready, been ready since the rumors started. I slip my foot into the left shoe, ease it in slow, move it around a bit, get the shank positioned just right, like it’s some kinda Dr. Shol’s insert. I get it just right, the head of the knife just below my big toe, the blade running along the side of my foot, you know?’

‘The insole.’

‘The insole, the handle firm up against my heel. I’ve packed it in with some cotton in the middle so it bends, kind of, when I walk.’

‘You fit that weapon in your shoe? And walked all the way to the gym without a limp?’

‘I broke the shoe in good. And man, when your life is on the line, a little pain in the foot ain’t shit.’

‘I see your point.’

We both smile, a tight smile, and just for a second.

‘So listen, Miller. I stand, flex my foot, put it down gentle, then say to the CO ‘I’m outta here’ and walk real cool out the door of the my cell and head on down the tier toward the stairwell.’

‘He stayed there and watched you get your shoes on?’

‘Yeah. I didn’t think much of it at the time but maybe he was makin’ sure I wasn’t armed.’

‘Armed and dangerous,’ I say, letting Daunte know I’m listening.

‘So, man, I head out, use a slow pimp roll in my stride to hide the fact that the left shoe is a little rigid – it pinch a bit, man -- so I push off slow and long, dragging the left leg behind me so I don’t put so much pressure on the shoe, you know, the one with the knife.’

‘It’s in your left shoe.’

‘Right. I’m kinda used to this shank-in-the-shoe business. There’s some nights you need your shank and you don’t leave home without it.’

‘Like your Visa?’

‘More like a passport. This is a land where you are armed or you are dead.’

We both think on that for a second. ‘So you head out. You go straight to the gym?’

‘Nowhere else I’m headed, Rob Miller. The gym is like the battlefield and I’m heading into combat. But, you know, I take my time, take in my thoughts, figure this may be, you know, my last walk.’

‘So you want to go slow.’

‘Go slow. And think, man. It’s not like my life flashed before me, but I wanted to, I don’t know, take things in. This is serious shit.’

‘Say goodbye, sort of?’

‘Well I’m not saying goodbye. I fully expect to stay alive. But, I don’t know, I just want to know what’s going on around me. I don’t want to just rush off to this thing.’

'What do you do? Stop and visit along the way?'

'No visits, Miller. I'm in no mood to talk. But I'm thinking and wondering, you know, what has my life come to and why? You know? Why. Why am I walking into what might be a trap...'

'A box canyon.'

'A box canyon. Exactly. Ain't but one way in and out of that gym.'

'So are you laying your plan, playing out your options?'

'No, man. I'm just pondering this fucking place. Is my life going to end in this shithole? Is this what my life's gonna come to? I know it might, man. I'm playing to win but this place is full of losers. I'm thinking as I go down each tier, man, this place heavy on people getting paid back, man, burnt for what they done to others.'

'Burnt?'

'Yeah, well, this place is up in flames in some part or other seems like everyday, but I don't mean burnt by fire. I mean burnt by life. Just about everybody in here has been treated like shit, then they act like shit. When the shit hits the prison, people just soak in it, stew in their misery, man, like this is one big hot pot cookin' the life out of 'em.'

Daunte was getting a little philosophical for my taste, but he was talking and I was listening. I figured he'd get us to the gym in due time.

'Stewing?' I repeated.

'Yeah, stewing, brewing, brooding – about how they got where they got and how they can't get out, can't never get out.'

'And you saw this, or thought this, on the way to the gym?'

'Yeah. I mean first I passed, you know, Rejection Company. That's what that fucking place is all about.'

I nod. Men in Protection Company are the prison's rejects; they're the worst of the worst, at least as prisoners see things.

'You got men who raped kids, Miller, come to prison and then some prison daddy rapes them. That's how they get to Rejection Company. You got wife beaters who get made into somebody's bitch.'

'Poetic justice?'

'What goes around, I suppose. And then the fat cats, you know? The guys who do stuff like Enron. Well, man, they get put on a Jenny Craig and just waste the fuck away.'

'A Jenny Craig?'

'Yeah, or a Weight Watchers. We ain't particular. They get their food taken; they get to be hungry 'cause they can't even stand up for themselves.'

'So you're thinking, on the way to this battle, that people in prison get what they deserve?'

'They get hurt, that's for sure. And I'm wondering if I'm gonna get hurt, and do I deserve it. You know, I killed a man in the streets.'

'I do. But that don't mean...'

'I know that don't mean I got to get killed in here. The place'd be half empty if that was right. But my life could end in here, I could be murdered, and I'm thinkin', or maybe just worrying, that this might be how my life ends, and how some folks might think this was right...'

'And this makes you apprehensive? Angry? Vigilant?'

'It makes me all that and sad, man. Sad. I got family out there. It makes me sad they might have to bury me so soon...'

I think of the letter Daunte had written to his dad. He'd been thinking about these things, final things, the last rights and wrongs of his life. He hadn't just run off to the gym to do violence and mayhem.

'So you're ready – ready to die?'

'If it come to that. But I'm not plannin' on dying. I'm plannin' on killing my enemy and getting on with my life.'

'Okay. You make your way to the gym. You've got lots of thoughts in your head. But now you are there... '

'Ground zero.'

'Ground zero. What happens then?'

'I walk right on in. Female officer pat me down. Don't even look at my shoes. I sit down along the baseline, keep my eyes open, just sit there and think, just psych myself up. This might be it; this might be the end for me. And I'm scared but I'm also up, ready. I'm a warrior and I am ready for battle.'

'But you're just sitting there?'

'Nowhere to go really, until I figure out what's happening. I'm sitting there figuring trouble will come to me, you know, if it's on. So I slip my knife out of shoe and put it in my lap, cover it with my sweatshirt.'

'No one can see it?'

'No way. Dude next to me ask 'How you doing, man' and I say 'Just chillin'. He don't see nothing. I get up to go the toilet, keep my knife up against my leg, covered by my sweatshirt. And that's when it all goes down. Jamal was on the sideline and he starts to move to the toilet... '

'Or the barbershop?'

'Don't matter. Either way we cross paths.'

'And then he pivots... '

'Right, Miller. Exactly. He pivots. I can't see his knife, he can't see mine.'

'If he had a knife... '

'He had a knife, Miller. He ain't about to jump me unarmed. No such thing as a prison fight and no weapons. Told you that. So I move fast, hit him in the stomach, he bend down, I grab him by his dreads, pull him to his knees and then I go for the head. I just keep hitting him and hitting him, man, like I'm in a trance. It's like I can see myself killing this man but I don't feel nothing, like I'm watching a movie and I'm the, I don't know, I'm the star. I can see myself killing this man. Then I hear a funny sound. A squish. Like I hit Jell-O or something. I see the knife is in his head, man. Dead in his head. And that stops me. Stops me cold. I can't believe it. Then it ain't like in the movies. This is raw, man. And there is blood everywhere. Everywhere. On me, on the floor, on him, and the blood is spreading and I'm havin trouble breathing and I look down and I can see the man's face was gray, like a chalky gray, almost white, Miller. And he sure ain't movin'. Not at all. And his good eye was flat and dull, like a marble been used too much. He was gone. I'm not no doctor, but anybody with sense could see he was dead and gone. And then boom, the hacks are there and I'm on my knees, praying like, praying that I'm alive. Thankful, you know? But praying that none of this is real. But it is real. I'm wet from the blood and I can smell it, smell the blood... '

Daunte wipes sweat from his forehead and takes a deep breath. I do the same. We've both been caught up in his story; he took us both to the gym for a few horrible minutes. I know this scene – the knife plunging into Jamal's eye; Daunte a dark shadow above him, arms pumping, teeth bared – will be played and replayed in the killing fields of my dreams. I'll wake up in Jamal's head, or in Daunte's, or both – the scene unfolding like a horror movie and I'm the reluctant producer. I know, too, that Daunte, this man sitting just across from me, this man sweating like I'm sweating, maybe even a little panicky at the animal violence of which he is capable, is nevertheless someone I am coming to feel something for. Right or wrong, Daunte had his back to the prison wall, a wall that could cry rivers of tears for the men trapped in its unforgiving embrace.

'Now where's your back up, your buddy, during all this?'

'He was behind me. Followed me to the toilet without even a signal; like he knew he had to have my back.'

'So you were covered?'

'Yeah. Knew I'd take the big man down or my buddy would do it for me.'

'But you didn't need him...'

'I didn't need him, right. But he had my back. I know that.'

'Alright, Daunte. I'm gonna have to send you to lock up now. I need to think about what you've told me. You may get to see your old cell buddy. He's down there, too. Hole's pretty crowded right now, what with material witnesses and guys with contraband pouring in from the gym.'

'Well, you know, the seg cells are bare, Rob Miller. No problem with housecleaning if we hook up.'

I wonder for a moment if Daunte wouldn't prefer to lock down with Gibb. I've seen this before, the peculiar emotional emptiness of the killer, the man who won the battle but is now so alone he aches for familiar company.

'Daunte,' I say, speaking softly 'I see where you were coming from; I'll see what I can do.' I mean this, but this is prison, and I figure Daunte's story is both true and false, but true enough to pass for self-defense in the world of Daunte McFadden and Jamal Jordan.

'Rob, there was no way you could have prevented this. There was not a thing you could do,' Vittoria said, her soft words softening the hurt, her hand stroking my hand.

'I know. Or at least that's what I want to believe. Shit happens in prison. Murder happens in prison. I can't stop it but I hate to think I let one happen.'

Vittoria and I are standing together, our shoulders almost touching, looking down at the body. It is the body of a young black man, and I can't help but note that he is (or was) well nourished and apparently healthy, marred in life by a few healed-over scars and marked for death by one bright red wound, freshly traced along his throat, a cut so clean it looked almost clinical.

'Vittoria, I was speaking with Daunte just a few hours ago. He was alive and well. And sure, he faced homicide charges, but he did what he had to do to survive in this godforsaken place.'

'He wanted to live,' she said 'and you wanted to help him. You were doing the right thing, yes?'

I said Yes but I wasn't sure I meant it. Or rather, wasn't sure that I believed it. I wanted to believe her, to trust in her, to get solace from her. 'Certainly I tried to do the right thing,' I heard myself saying 'but this time I got it all wrong. I'd jumped to conclusions, and Daunte paid for it.'

I think back to my conversation with Daunte. That's what it was, or what it became, not an interrogation. The bars on his cell now seem like teeth, the prison a beast of prey and Daunte its victim. Am I a casualty, too? I wonder, sitting there amiably chatting it up with a killer, starting to like him, even; when I should be interrogating him hard and acutely aware that he might be in jeopardy himself. In prison, the consequences of killings spread out like ripples on a cesspool.

'So tell me what happened, Rob. How did he come to our morgue, this Daunte, this man smart enough to live in the face of an unknown hitman in a prison full of murderers and rapists and thieves?'

'Trust, I think, was his downfall. And maybe a little myopia in matters of the heart.'

'These are human flaws, Rob. It could be any of us dead in this prison if what you say is true.'

'Daunte trusted his cell buddy. John J. Gibb. Aka Jake. Aka Jake the Snake.'

'It was his cell buddy...'

'Former cell buddy...'

'...who killed him?'

'Yes. And we served Daunte up on a platter. I ordered him to seg. And when Officer Tameka Moore delivered him, she put Daunte in a cell with Gibb.'

'But why?'

'Because the hole was crowded. Because I'd told her Gibb was Daunte's cell buddy and it would be alright. Because Daunte wanted it, too. Said he could kick it with his buddy and not to worry, we'd talk more tomorrow.'

'So this was an accident? The placing of him in the way of harm?'

'In harm's way, yes. An accident. Or maybe fate. It was Jake all along. Jamal put out the hit and Jake took it because he was, well, a jilted suitor.'

'They were lovers?'

'Not exactly. But Jake thought so—or hoped so. He'd worked hard at the Domestic Angle, he told me.'

'Domestic Angle?'

'He thought they were playing house. That's what he said when I talked to him just now, after he killed Daunte.' I suppressed a longing look at Vittoria, feeling for a moment some empathy for the unrequited yearnings of Jake the Snake, our hit man. But only for a moment.

'It was Jake waiting in the gym for Daunte,' I continued. 'Daunte saw him and felt safe, but it was Jake coming up behind Daunte to take him out, to show the prison world that nobody dumped Jake, that if Jake couldn't have Daunte, nobody could.'

'The hitman's actual words again?'

'Yeah. His actual words.' I suppress a smile; somehow Vittoria has made my statement comically precise. 'If I can't have him, nobody can.' Trouble was, Daunte took Jamal down fast and Jake backed off.'

'So Jake waited for his opportunity. In his hole.'

'In the hole, Vittoria. Not that it much matters now.'

'In the hole. Coiled. Is that right? Like a snake is coiled to attack?'

'As it turns out, just like a snake, that sonofabitch. He played me, then played Daunte one last time. I talked to him in the gym. He was real cagey, I see that, looking back. Played me. Talked his way into the hole and I played right along. Knew Daunte would end up there; wanted to get himself there first, to be ready.'

'Could he be so sure he could kill Daunte there, in that hole?'

'Not sure, but it was a good bet. Later he told Officer Moore he'd wait a lifetime if he had to to get Daunte. This was one ploy, an early move, and it worked.'

'He didn't have to wait long because...'

'... we brought Daunte to him.'

'I'm sorry, Rob. You could not have foreseen this.'

'But that's the way it was, really. We brought Daunte right to his killer's cell, for Chrissakes. To his cell! And with smiles all around. 'Jake,' Daunte said, according to Officer Moore 'my buddy.' If I'd been there, I'd have put it together. I didn't know John was Jake, let alone Jake the Snake. But soon as I'd heard Jake, I'd have put it together... '

'But Officer Moore didn't... '

'Couldn't. She didn't know. Only I knew about this Jake the Snake business. I was keeping that lead to myself; I didn't want the word to get out, put the hitman on notice. That sort of thing.'

'That is normal detective work, yes?'

'Yes. But just maybe, Vittoria, just maybe I didn't want anyone else breaking the case. And then I sent Daunte to his death. I was blindsided. Or maybe just blind.'

We look down at the body, a body seemingly robust enough to rise from the steel table in search of revenge, to redress this wrong like I planned to redress this wrong.

'How many doors do you figure closed on a guy like Daunte, how many daily insults and losses ran together to bring him to the prison gate.'

'A gate he could never open, even if he'd lived.'

'And he expected to live. I'm sure of it. His last words, last word, really, was 'Jake?''

'A question?'

'A question. Like he was surprised. That's in the report; guy next door hear it, told Officer Moore. I'm guessing Daunte figured it out in that last instant. And Jake, well, the sonofabitch told me point blank: 'Payback is what prison is all about.'"

'And you know, Vittoria,' I said after a long pause 'he's right.'

'Does this Snake, this man who smiles and kills at one and same time, does he know the truth of this, Rob? This philosophical observation, if that's what it is.'

'Not by half, Vittoria. Not by half.'

I hadn't corrected Vittoria earlier, when she spoke of the hole. Or I hadn't told the whole story. Most folk around here call the segregation unit the hole. That's what Vittoria meant when she was talking about the hole: segregation, the normal punishment unit. Sterile, lonely, a trial in itself, but still a place you can survive. For a while. Before you go a little crazy. A place you can leave, usually, though maybe you can't leave it behind, not really. But the real deal, well, only a few of us know there is an actual hole, carved out of rock from the earliest days of the pen.

'Where he's going is special, Vittoria.'

'Special?'

'Well, let's just say it's wet and it's cold, more like a dungeon, which it was... '

'A dungeon. For heaven's sake, Rob. A dungeon! In this prison!'

'The guards who escort you there are the classic goons, throwbacks to an earlier prison time, some of them so big they look like giants, so mean they act like criminals.'

'I may have seen some of these, these men... I thought they were criminals.'

'Well, don't rule that out, though they don't have rap sheets.'

'Rob, it is like you are speaking in the format of riddles. What is this place called, Rob? It sounds horrible.'

'It is horrible. It's the real hole, Vittoria. Most old joints have them, use them only rarely. I've been there, Vittoria. The first thing that gets you is the musky smell. The air is sharp, pungent. It's hard to breathe. It's like you're drawing in shards of glass when you breath. I know my heart was beating fast after just a few mintues in there.'

'Is it a dirt hole?'

'No, not now. It was at first. Now it's like an underground concrete bunker. The paint is old and chipped; the walls have shifted, maybe from the pressure of the earth, or just from age, and so the place is lopsided, which makes you feel like you might be crushed one day. There's a window but it looks out into dirt, a wall of dirt. The toilet is a hole in the floor. The place smells like a cesspool, which in a way it is. It makes you feel like an animal, so we reserve it for the real animals, animals like Jake.'

'In cases of extremity, like this one?'

'Like this one. Jake the Snake's a menace. He'll slither down into the hole and never see the light of day.'

'Never?'

'Well, let's just say he'll never be the same, Vittoria. Payback, like the man said, is what prison is all about.'

I left work that day feeling like I'd done something, had an impact, made a dent in the violence that sweeps through the prison like a dark wind from below. I knew we couldn't leave Jake in the hole, but we could drop him down there for a spell and put a good scare into him. Who'd know? Who'd believe him? Hardly anyone knows where to find the place, for Christ's sake. Jake'd spend the rest of his days in segregation, the modern, antiseptic one – four bare walls for company and non-stop stereophonic hallucinations for entertainment.

Which can be hell, when you get right down to it.