Shiners

The First Seven Chapters

by

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A sample of the first seven chapters of Book One in the Shiners Series

A Shiners book
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Chapter 1

"Why is he like that daddy?" I can remember asking this question to my father about my uncle, Pete.

"Some people, well, they live a lot of life in a short time and it makes things tough for them. Your uncle Pete, he's like that."

I didn't understand when he told me that, but after living a lot of my own life in a very short time, I had a better idea of what he meant. My Uncle Pete died young, he got a severe case of lead poisoning; double ought buck from a self-inflicted wound to the head. Dad was gone too, along with ma and my oldest sister, all I had left were an assortment of aunts and cousins. And my grandfather, that old man wouldn't die, at a hundred and one he said he would outlive me. From the way I live my life, old gramps might be right.

"Give it up, Shiv, we got you," I called out to the rather dangerous man standing between me and the ninth story window of the CMEA building downtown. 'Shiv' was a killer, a man I was contracted to find and turn over to the authorities by the family of his last victim. He had the shine too. His powers ran more towards violence, strength, and stamina; mine run more towards low intellect, finding things and the ability to take a hit. 'Trouble' though; it came free as a side dish to my 'shine' dinner. Finding things made me without peer in the world, ever wonder how good guys find the bad ones? Face it, an ordinary guy runs into trouble a few times in his life, a law enforcement officer probably more, but me? I could find trouble by closing my eyes. Even better if I knew an area well, I could pinpoint where a major problem was going to present itself. I was still working on the 'when' aspect of it, but typically by parking my ass in the impending location trouble would follow within three hours. It's hard to make a living off of that kind of ability.

I knew Shiv would be more trouble than I could handle. So I had given the local 'do-gooder,' who went by the handle 'Flying-Hawk,' a call and asked him to help me pin this meat-head down. Flying-Hawk had spotted Shiv going into the half-constructed office high-rise after I had more or less found the guy using my abilities.

Now the question in my mind was, "Will he jump?" Some shiners could take a nine-story fall. I'd never tested those waters, but I'd known men who could do it. Boomer, for one, but he's dead; falling damage is different from grenade damage and he fell on one of those in Afghanistan to save his squad. I hear he's being considered for a Medal of Honor. Shiv turned to face me; I guess jumping through the open window was off the menu.

"Who are you?" he demanded. An absolutely legitimate question. My shine was useful, but not particularly famous. Sure all the older shiners know who I am, but these young pups? No one studies history anymore.

"Alice's family sent me." I like to keep things short.

"Too bad for you then." Shiv started forward and shook out his hands, blades like those of a favorite horror movie villain sprang from his fingertips.

I held up a finger. "Wait, Shiv. Do you think I came alone?" Flying-Hawk landed softly behind him, gliding through the empty window pane.

Shiv glanced back and snorted, "Him? Now I know about him. He's a pacifist, he won't get involved."

Fuck me. Did everybody know? Flying-Hawk should have changed his name to 'Peace-Dove' after his conversion to Buddhism three years ago.

"He'll still rat you out to the authorities."

Another snort and a look of contempt as Shiv stalked forward "Let him. I can relocate. You have an easy choice dick; get out of the way or die." Shiv lunged forward as I backpedaled to the open doorway while reaching for my Taser.

The reports of the gun were loud and the smell of gunpowder quickly mixed with the metallic tang of blood. Shiv half turned to look at the man who shot him, a look of surprise on his face. A look wiped off of it by another shot from the ugly looking revolver Flying-Hawk was pointing at him.

"Geezus, Hawk!" I yelled, "You didn't… I thought you were…"

"I'm getting old, Billy. I'm tired of wrestling with every new shiner that comes along and wants to piss on my turf. I started that rumor about Buddhism myself." Flying-Hawk said. He stepped forward and kicked the body. Fast healing was a relatively common power, but, apparently, not one that Shiv possessed.

I nodded at him and looked at the mess. "He's still dead, and you shot him. Word will get out now."

"No, I didn't shoot him; you did." Hawk tossed the gun to my feet, it was a cheap revolver, the kind you used to be able to buy in a pawn shop after you've been mugged one too many times.

"What?"

"He turned on me, you shot him to save my life, but he kept coming, spinning at you and you had to put him down before he killed you. Self-defense. I saw the whole thing. I'll light an incense stick tonight while I meditate for him. I hope that his next incarnation is something of a more peaceful nature."

It could work, I'd be dragged through the mud, but like Hawk said, he was getting old. I owed him too, though, but from what just happened, I was having a hard time figuring out who would be in whose debt after tonight. Instead, I nodded and picked up the gun. I emptied it and then reloaded after putting my prints all over the bullet casings. Flying-Hawk nodded in approval. Cops check those sorts of things.

"You got the gun off a street punk who tried to mug you."

"I remember the attempt clearly, it happened last Thursday, and I forgot to take the gun out of my pocket after looking it over."

"Lucky for us, it turns out."

I nodded agreement, "Yeah, lucky for us."

Flying-Hawk had that look about him, the guy was maybe ten years older than I was, but I aged well, or he aged poorly. "Old, huh?" I asked him.

"I'm thinking of getting out. What about you, Billy? You ready to hang up the gumshoe hat and retire?"

I laughed, I couldn't help it, to his puzzled face I said, "I don't know what you're making, but my job doesn't come with a retirement plan. I'll be doing this until they tell me my Social Security won't be there for me, and then I'll keep doing it until I die."

He shook his head, "All the old ones get killed off, Billy. I don't want to be one of them."

The sirens were wailing a few blocks away. Funny how gunfire always brings the police.

"If you're out, who's left? Boomer is dead, Skeet is MIA, no one has seen Sapphire in two years, and the Castigator still has another seven years for that murder two charge. That's assuming he gets paroled." All the heroes were disappearing, but guys like Shiv, they were popping up in droves lately.

"Someone will step up. The poor fool." Heroing was a thankless job, most were prone to being vigilantes so they could avoid the numerous lawsuits that always dogged them as they rounded up the bad guys. Flying-Hawk looked me over closely, "Maybe you."

"Me? My abilities don't quite equal the challenges we're seeing on the streets these days. I'm good in a support role, but.."

"You'd have taken care of him tonight. You didn't need my help. You're only what? 35?"

I nodded.

"That's a good age, you're at the peak of your abilities and mature enough to not make rash decisions that will get you killed. You aren't worn out yet either, I can tell. You could keep a lid on things until Cast gets out."

"Not me brother! I ain't got the chops for it."

"That's just because you do it wrong, Billy. None of us is clean in this business, none of us. Come by sometime after this mess blows over. I'll confess to you and set you straight. What good is retirement if I can't walk down the street to buy a liter of milk?"

'None of us is clean in this business?' What the hell was he talking about? The boys in blue came in just after that, and things took more than a few days to blow over, by then I'd almost forgotten what he'd said. Almost, but not quite. The world is full of surprises, shiners, beasts, corrupt heroes and fake Buddhists, what was next? Standing outside of Flying-Hawk's door I knocked politely. The door swung open at my first touch, the place was dark, cold and smelled of decay.

II

"Shit." I fumbled in my duster until my hand tightened on the revolver I knew was there; this one had been given to me by one of the police officers who questioned me about Shiv's shooting. The cop said I couldn't be too careful, the streets were meaner now and he appreciated what I'd done to get Shiv off the streets. He wasn't condoning anything…but "The guy had friends" he confided in me. We also knew that I was going to be all over the papers…with a shrug, he had handed me the revolver and a box of cartridges.

"It's not marked." He said casually, "I got a guy. If you need another one look me up."

If I needed another unmarked gun, it meant I had used this one. What was the world coming to when law enforcement agents handed out untraceable guns?

I didn't bother calling Flying-Hawk's name, I knew the trouble inside was already long over, and my nose was telling me my friend didn't have to worry about retirement anymore either. Pushing the door open with my foot, the revolver clutched in one hand, but still in the jacket, I moved into Hawk's house.

I found him in the kitchen. There had been a struggle, a very long, hard struggle from the looks of it. I didn't see a cabinet in the place that still had a door on it, including the refrigerator. The light from the fridge was casting a dim glow over the whole, messy scene. Sometime during the fight the table had been flipped over; it was a dark, hardwood, sort of thing. Expensive beyond my means and Flying-Hawk's too. Impaled on one of the legs, sans costume, was the man himself.

I knew I should call the cops, but I didn't. This wasn't just a civilian death; this wasn't a home invasion gone wrong that resulted in a killing; this was a hit. I'd passed by Hawk's living room as I came to the back. A quick peek now told me his electronics were all still there; his laptop, his television, a book reader. Hell, even the guy's wallet was sitting in an ugly clay ashtray on top of the table on one side of the front door.

Whoever it was that did this didn't get off easy, not that that meant anything anymore, healing, like I said, is a pretty common shine. Bruises or even broken limbs from something like this might be healed already. Skeet could take a shot, I'd seen him absorb the fixings from a double barrel shotgun blast at point blank range, that's how he got his name. There was more of him on the outside than in and he lived through it, was even up and fighting before the last of the bad guys went down. Skeet was…impressive. And missing. Hadn't been seen for months. Rumor had it that there weren't any rumors about it at all.

I knelt down in the kitchen by my friend's side and noticed how the table leg came up through the left breast of his chest; like what you would do to a vampire if you were aiming for his heart and not his center mass. Both arms were stretched back and lying on the ground, the fingers of his off-hand were coated in blood, like finger paint. His good hand was clenched into a fist.

"Oh Hawk, who did this to you?" I was careful not to touch the pool of blood. It looked, well not completely dry, more like a day old bit of ice cream on a sidewalk; coagulated and dehydrated. I knew it would be sticky to the touch. Looking at his splayed hand, which was resting inside the lip of the upturned table I saw a series of blood spots and splatters that his fingers had made. No doubt as he bled to death right after being shish-ka-bobbed on his own table leg.

Standing I looked around at the damage to the kitchen, trying to find a trace of a claw or a tuft of hair, anything that might have provided a clue as to who had done this. It didn't look to me like there had been any effort made to clean up the mess, no wipe downs of the shattered cabinetry or mopping up of blood flecks from the perpetrator. Just a mess. I didn't find anything useful on the woodwork either. There was some blood on the broken out glass on the crisper drawer of the refrigerator. It might be the perps, probably was. Hawk could heal fast, he was no Skeet, but the guy didn't bleed much. I crouched down over Flying-Hawk again to see if I could discern any tell-tale marks on his body.

Death had left him with livid bruises, something I had never seen on him before. Either his body shut down from the massive amount of damage done to him by the table leg or he had just been beaten to a pulp so severely before his death that it couldn't keep up with making things right.

I would call the cops, just not right away. First I needed to scope the place out, see if anything was missing, then I would call them. After that, I was going to call in some other talent, if I could find any, us good guys were getting a little thin on the ground. First, I headed upstairs to Hawk's office.

The office was untouched or appeared to be. I had been in it briefly a few times in the past and while my own filing style ran towards 'Bless this mess,' Hawk's ran closer to 'OCD.' There was a traditional desktop there, still powered up and spinning softly. An honest to God wired phone sat just off the blotter beside the computer. The desk had many drawers all of them had locks, but none of them actually were locked. Inside the desk were reams of paperwork, a cursory glance proved them to be old cases he had been involved with. Each case file had a summary of what had happened on the job, along with some notes on what he had learned and a few scathing remarks about those he worked with or the authorities. How is that for anal retentive?

The man had run his shiner career like a business with a summary of what had happened, a summary he didn't get paid to write and, so far as I knew, he hadn't ever shared with anyone. The single paper sheets summarized each incident, some referenced past run-ins with the same perp and often they didn't take up more than half a page. A few files had two or three pages stapled together. Overall there were hundreds of pages in the desk drawer. Closing it, I noticed the outside of the file drawer had a label on it, 'Recent Cases.'

Recent Cases? Spinning on the stool, Flying-Hawk had wings, and there were few chairs in his house sporting seats with back, I found myself facing a long three drawer cabinet. The helpful tabs on the drawers were labeled 'Old Cases' and further subdivided into three alphabetical groups. The cabinet was almost full. Tens of thousands of cases. These couldn't all be his, true Hawk was in his early sixties, but he would have had to work a case a day to for forty years to accumulate this much data. As tempted as I was to look up some infamous prior crimes to see if he was involved with them, I restrained myself and kept at the task at hand. The picture of Hawk's father seemed to be glaring down at me from above the cabinet.

"Sorry, your honor, but your boy is dead. I need to see if he left me a clue as to who did this to him. I wouldn't go nosing in his business any more than I have to." I stood up and examined the painting closer. It was exceptionally life-like. The artist was listed as 'Hoyle.' Holy shit. Hoyle had the shine too, it expressed itself in his unearthly paintings, which were said to capture the essence of the subject's soul. I wasn't sure if that were true, but if this were genuine, it was worth millions. The stuff sitting on top of the file cabinet was uneven. Everything to the right of the painting was tall, everything to the left was short. I glanced around the office, which had a particular 'Feng Shui' about it. Yep, everything was in its place, except the stuff atop the cabinet was unbalanced. To the right of the picture were several big pictures, an award of some sort and narrow vase that reached halfway to the ceiling. The most prominent picture was the one of Hawk with Mayor Elby, it looked like it was taken just before the mayor had been shot to death in '89. The vase had two dried roses inside of it, looking oddly forlorn as they lorded over the room. In front of the Hoyle, all of the items were shorter, obviously to give his father an unobstructed view of the chamber. I glanced to the left again, taking in the short items, which were also well below the bottom frame of the picture.

"Wall safe?" I asked myself as I gave a tug on the right side of the picture. It held steady for a moment before giving way to reveal a rectangle, long end up with a numeric keypad and a small screen. I knew better than to guess at the numbers. My shine could help me find things, even things as obscure as a PIN for an ATM card or a wall safe, but there was a quirky catch to the ability. I had to be on the job for someone else. I couldn't use it to find things unless someone struck a bargain with me. All it would take was something simple like "I'll give you five bucks to find my dog." and it kicked right in. In fact, that very statement is what gave my shine away for the first time. I found the lady's dog in about ten minutes; she never paid me either but did thank me profusely. People are like that sometimes. I couldn't pay myself to make it work. Believe me, as an adolescent I tried that angle to get what I wanted more than once: "I'll pay myself ten bucks to find three hundred dollars." Or "Here is a quarter to find a woman who will have sex with me right now." Kids. Those were simple days.

I had managed to keep a lid on that part of my talent, the payment part, Hawk wasn't even 'in the know' either. From his perspective I just took contracts with the police and was exceptionally good at tracking who they were looking for down. The police department kept me on retainer because I was reliable. They didn't question my asking about the usual rate of pay every single time they called for my help, but I had to have the words to do the job. No one was going to pay me to find Hawk's safe combination.

I went back downstairs to stare at Hawk in the kitchen. Crouching down I looked at both hands again. His offhand had touched the inside lip of the table, not randomly as I had first thought. No, it was five distinct groups, the first had 3 dots, the second 3, the third 10, the fourth 6 and the final group had 9. 33069. Back upstairs the safe opened flawlessly to those numbers. Sitting at the front of the safe, resting against a stack of hundreds was an envelope with my name on it.

I eased it open and read the short printed page within, "Billy, I have a job for you. Find who killed me, the pay is non-negotiable: take the stack of money this envelope is resting against. Bring them to justice. Find out who is killing the shiners. Recent Cases – your name."

It was signed only "Your Friend, Flying-Hawk."

So he too had figured me out. It shouldn't have surprised me; he was a smart one. He must have figured it out in the decade we had known each other. I nodded, accepting the deal was part of the shine, and the pathway to his murderer opened up before me.

III

There were twelve straps of 100's behind the letter, stacked six high and two deep. Hawk was paying me 120 large to bring his killers to justice. Technically I might have to find who was killing the shiners too. Generally, twofers don't count, like I said, I've lived with this power a long time, and I've had some of the best try to weasel deals out of me before I learned to keep my mouth shut. I went into his recent cases and pulled out the folder with my name on it, the contents were bundled inside a thick letter sized envelope. I pulled the money out of the safe wiped my prints off of the keypad, the safe door, and the picture frame. After that, I retraced my steps downstairs wiping

things down as I went. When I made it downstairs I snagged a couple of plastic grocery bags from the caddy Hawk had hanging on the broken off door to his laundry room and packed the money and envelope inside of them.

I tucked the bag up inside of my duster and strolled out to my silver Honda Accord and dumped the money under the passenger's seat. What I did next was out of necessity, I shut the car door, leaned against it, shoved my finger deep into my throat until I gagged and finally vomited. A mess of spaghetti, garlic bread, and wine came spilling out of me onto the cold sidewalk by the vehicle. I hate vomiting up bread. It chunks up and seems to force vomit into my nose; I would be breathing the smell in for the rest of the night. There went a great dinner from Savini's, an Italian place associated with…well, let's just say, old friends.

After puking I pulled out my cell phone and called the police, they arrived ten minutes later. Thirty minutes after that I found myself talking to Clarence Stepson, the good detective wanted me to come down to the station for an interview.

"I don't feel up to it right now," I said.

"I'm not so sure you have a choice," Clarence said.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Should you be?"

"Clarence you know he was my friend. I have damn few of those left these days. Tonight the city lost another defender, one of the last, if not the last. I feel sick."

"'Cause of how he was killed?"

I nodded weakly, playing the part, "It was a shiner. A bad one."

Clarence shook his head, "Coulda been a group of guys."

"Against Hawk?" I shook my head forcefully, "No way. He was fast, strong and could fly."

"He was giving up the life. Word on the street is he converted and became a pacifist."

"Even a pacifist will defend himself or his family. We both know that."

"So why is he dead?"

"I told ya, a shiner got him."

"You told me alright, yeah, but the only shiner I got is you. You trying to get onto the suspect list?"

"Ain't I already?" I pressed.

Clarence shook his head slowly, "I can't say. You found the body, you messed up the scene of the crime. Dog ain't pleased."

'Dog' was a dull shiner, someone with a minor talent, but useful. His was his nose. He had the smelling capacity of the best bloodhound with a human intellect behind it.

"How was I to know? I thought…I thought maybe they were still there. I thought I could…apprehend them."

"You walked all over Hawk's place. Lucky for you Dog says you didn't go out back, which is how the perp left."

"Just one?"

"I shouldn't have said even that."

"Are you going to hire me for this one?"

"Can't say 'cause I don't know. I'm a betting man, and I'm laying odds on 'no.' You're too close to this one, Billy. Too damn close." His face softened, "You outta go into another line of work."

"Yeah? Like what? Pushing carts down and the Stop 'n Shop? I'm thirty-five years old, never went to college, barely made it through high school. Before I hooked up with people like Hawk, I was in and out of trouble with the law. I have a record for minor things, and you know it; it was Hawk and Boomer that got me set on the straight and narrow, but their guidance didn't come with useful skills that I can turn into a J-O-B. Besides, I'm good at what I do."

"All I'm saying is, it's getting dangerous to shine anymore."

I squinted at him, "You heard something?"

With a shake of his head, he answered, "I hear a lot of things. It doesn't take a brainiac to figure out any shiners that stick their heads up get pounded down flat. You seen Skeet or Saphire around?"

"No," I answered.

"Yeah, neither has anyone else." Clarence said.

We were approached by an unkempt looking beat cop – Dog. He came within five meters of me and nodded, before his face wrinkled in disgust and he turned away, pulling air in through his mouth. "Couldn't contain yourself?"

Dog hated the smell of vomit, claimed it screwed up his shine, but I think it's just the smell. "Cut me a little slack, I just realized what had happened."

"Yeah, after you ran all over Hawk's house. Then you come out and puke your guts up."

"I got a little… Look, Dog, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking clearly. To see him like he was…impaled like that. It shook me up."

Dog snorted, "I don't believe you."

"I don't smell right?"

"Something doesn't smell right. Something about this smells like…money."

A chill ran up my spine, did he know? I said nothing.

"Is that Savini's?"

I nodded, and he scowled.

"There's nothing to that, they are old friends."

"They are mobsters, and a friend of a mobster is not really what you want to be seen as right now. You better choose which side you're on, Billy."

"Yeah, yeah, as I was just going over with Clarence here, I am not exactly rolling in career opportunities and in the one job I got I have to have as many friends as possible."

"Well, Hawk wasn't killed for his stuff." Dog went on. "Guy came in through the back door, Hawk confronted him there, guy killed Hawk and left by the back door. This was a hit."

"You know who did it?" I asked, Hawk's murderer stood out like a beacon to me, all I had to do was follow the light in the darkness now that I had taken the job.

To my surprise, Dog nodded, "I got their scent. The old man injured him. Made him bleed. I got this guy. We don't need you pointing fingers on this on. I can find him."

"I'd like to come," I said.

"Whoa, slow down, you ain't in on this one, Billy," Clarence said, "Not unless the Captain says you are."

"And I got this one." Dog said, "The guy walked outta here, to the alley, but he didn't get into a car and drive away, he walked away. That way." Dog pointed east. "I can follow it like a beacon."

I didn't care for his analogy, it stepped on mine. "I can follow, though, like a concerned citizen."

"We could book you for interference too," Clarence said.

"It wouldn't stick." I retorted.

"It wouldn't have to, dumbass. I swear sometimes, Billy you're thick. While you're going through processing and getting your charges dismissed in front of a night judge, Dog will already have the guy chased down. It'll be in the morning write-up for the paper, you'll be able to read about when you hit the diner for breakfast."

"Or…?" I asked, letting the question hang there.

"Or maybe it doesn't have to play out like that. Maybe we can let you tag along. Seeing as you were Hawk's friend and all, and you have worked with the department for some time." Clarence conceded.

"Only if the Captain says, though, right?"

Clarence winked, "Sometimes, Billy, you are thick."

Dog snorted and called out to his partner, Patricia Wellstone, they got into their car, with her driving and Dog leaning out the window like, well, like a mutt being taken for a ride.

"Coming?" Clarence asked.

IV

Dog was leading us right to where my shine was telling us to go, so I stayed quiet during the car right across town. Hopefully, Clarence would give me a ride back to Hawk's place when this was over. Otherwise, I'd have to take a cab…money wasn't an issue at this moment, so I suppose I shouldn't worry about cab fare. Things must have been better for Hawk than I thought. The money. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it didn't add up. I knew where Hawk lived, his identity wasn't secret. He didn't have a day job, so far as I knew. He wasn't independently wealthy; he didn't do product endorsements like so many other shiners. Where did all that money come from?

Typically, a trail like this leads to a dirty warehouse somewhere, maybe down by docks or in the shipping district. Not this time. Tonight we ended up, after an hour traveling between ten and fifteen kilometers an hour the whole way, at a small ranch style house surrounded by established suburbia. The place was dark. Looking around I noted that the street was dark as well, only one streetlight hadn't been broken out, conveniently, it stood close to our target.

"Cotta Terrace. Hit hard by the mortgage crisis. Probably only one in ten of these places is occupied by the legitimate owner." Clarence said.

"You get a lot of problems out here?"

He shook his head, "Only when the new owners go to move in and find squatters. Most places have had the wire stripped out of them already, appliances taken, insides painted up and vandalized.

Kid stuff really. Honestly, we don't even see much of that anymore; all the kids moved away with their parents."

When Clarence got out of the car, I did too. Dog and Patricia bailed out of their vehicle and came back to ours.

"He's dead." Dog said without pre-ample, "I can smell the blood from here, someone tried to cover their scent from me. Skunk."

I caught a pungent whiff in the air.

"Not the real stuff." He went on, "The kind hunters buy in small bottles and use like perfume. Big mistake; it irritates me but doesn't put me off the scent."

"There are things that put you off the scent?" I asked innocently.

Dog gave me a hard look and turned towards the house. "Patricia, you wanna go around back with Clarence? I'll go through the front, Billy you can watch from here."

Clarence was technically the ranking officer, he just shrugged, "Did you call it in?"

"I sent for a wagon, they'll get here when they can. Busy night for the coroner." Dog answered.

"C'mon, Patricia," Clarence said, "I'll go right you go left." The two split off, leaving Dog and me there alone, he turned back to me.

"You ain't crooked are you?"

The question surprised me, and he must have seen the look before I answered, "No."

"I didn't figure you were, but your smell is all over Hawk's place. In places, it shouldn't have been in. I can testify in court you know, give evidence. We found the safe, your smell was on it. Do you know the combination?"

I nodded.

"What'd you take?"

"He left me a letter."

"And money. I smelled it up until you puked. It's got a very distinct odor. Smells like sweat, blood, and lost dreams. I want half."

My first instinct was to deny it, but Dog wasn't on the take, I didn't know what he was doing, "Why?"

"I figure, and stop me if I'm wrong, I figured Hawk did leave you money. You're an okay guy, I've worked around you for years, you were his friend, you wouldn't steal from him, I don't think. So why take the money? I thought about that over the last hour as we followed this scent. Hawk hired you. You were his contingency plan. One thing I know about Hawk, that you probably do too, is the guy isn't one to forgive and forget. This Buddism bullshit? It was just that. The man had a temper, and he liked nothing more than getting revenge. So you're his revenge. I want in on it. Half. And we're his revenge."

"Why?"

"I owe him."

"So why not do it for nothing?"

Dog snorted, "I would, if I had to, but if I don't have to...?"

I nodded, "He left me twenty large."

"Not that I don't trust you. Let's be clear, I mostly trust you on this, but why do I get the feeling he left you forty? So that would be more like twenty as my share. Don't worry, I'm not going to be a silent partner in this one. I'll pull my weight and give your investigation some legitimacy."

Having Dog along on this one would help considerably; his official contacts could make things easier. "You said the hitman is here, dead."

"The one who pulled the trigger isn't the guy Hawk wants, and you know it. C'mon, their gonna get nervous waiting for us."

I followed Dog up the walk to the front door of the house. He was wrong about one thing, though; all I had been contracted to do was find out who killed him. I couldn't parlay the deal he had made with me into more than it was. If his killer were here, I'd have to find out who was behind the killer without my shine to aid me.

The lawn was mowed, but the shrubs were wild and overgrown. The frame of the door had been popped, probably with a crowbar by an enterprising wire thief, and it pushed open on squeaky hinges at Dog's touch.

"Always noisy, these doors. Like the contractor used the same crappy hardware in every damned house." Dog said.

"They probably did." The smell of skunk was strong here like someone had saturated the place with it. Dog took a deep breath through his nose, taking it in. "Makes my eyes water just to smell it, how can you stand it with your nose?"

"Some things I can filter out, oil, cleaning supplies, you know, manufactured stuff. I don't know why; it came with the gift. This skunk odor isn't real skunk; it's shit. Man-made, foul smelling shit and I can cut right through it. You're puke, though, 100% natural. Good call on your part. Would have been better to vomit in the kitchen, though, it might have worked." Dog moved into the house, flashlight highlighting the despair of abandonment.

"Back here," Clarence called.

"As if I needed someone to tell me that." Dog muttered.

We moved through the house to what used to be known as a 'family room' from back when families still got together and did activities. Clarence and Patricia were there, playing their lights on the body. At first, I thought it was two bodies, then I realized it was one, just cut into several pieces.

"Slice," I said, "Is he out of prison?"

"Yeah, must be." Dog said, "I knew that smell. Thanks, Billy, for the name, it was him."

"You got him?" Clarence asked.

"Yep. Put me in a room with him, and I'll confirm it."

Dog's scent ability was recognized by the courts; he could and had put away criminals based on his word and nose alone.

"So we pick him up," Clarence said he turned away, stepped out back and started making noise on his radio.

Patricia looked at the body. "It's pretty distinctive. You guys had experience with this Slice before?"

I nodded, Dog shook his head, "Before my time, but I've smelled all the evidence for every criminal so I can tag them again if I ever need too. Even the cold cases, you just never know when you'll get lucky."

"What about you, Bill?" Patricia asked me.

"I…was involved with him at one time. I saw what he could do. This looks like his. I thought he got life? How is he even out now? It's only been…twelve years?"

"Kept his nose clean, remember he went down for murder two, not the big one," Patria said, "We studied it at the Academy."

"You're making me feel old." I grumped, trying to avoid looking at the body.

"You're not old, you're experienced." She affirmed, making me feel older than ever.

"Well, my experience doesn't include Mister three piece here. I don't recognize him. Do you guys?"

Dog grinned, "Mister Three Piece, good one."

"No. He ain't familiar." Patricia said. "Looks young, maybe early twenties."

"And he killed Hawk. A shiner in their early twenties that no one has heard about who kills a veteran in their 60's everyone knows."

"Who sent him?" Dog asked.

"This was the payoff, I bet. He came here to collect, and Slice killed him."

"No, he didn't," Clarence said, stepping back into the room.

"What?" I asked this was Slice; he was messy.

"Slice is still in prison. He made his parole, but his release date is three weeks away. Someone else did this."

I was going to protest, but to one side Dog shook his head slightly. Instead, I said, "So we have a new Slicer?" I shook my head, "One was bad enough, maybe I should retire."

We stayed with the body until the coroner arrived, which took until almost dawn. Clarence gave Patricia a ride back to the station, Dog got some alone time with me as he gave me a lift back to Hawk's place. The body was stripped; no id, no money. All ten of his finger tips had been cut off, and even the man's teeth had been cut from his jaw. Someone was really covering their tracks.

"Overkill, Billy. It's a message."

"It was Slice who did it."

"Get me in a room with him, and I'll let you know for certain. I've got the scent. I'd say I'm 95% positive on it right now, just from sniffing around the old case files. He have a twin brother?"

"No. I think you can arrange to get in a room with him easier than I could. I know Clarence can." I said.

"We gotta think about this, Billy. Clarence isn't shiny. We are. I think we should keep this between ourselves as much as possible. Two shiners dead in one night, a third murders our murderer? I got a bad feeling about this."

"You're a cop, you're paid to have bad feelings about everything."

"And the whole world knows that private dicks are cheery optimists? So if I'm so wrong, tell me how good you feel?"

"Can't. 'Cause I don't. I need sleep. You working swings again tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Call me and Patricia for a coffee on shift or wait until after and I'll come by."

"You know where I live?"

Dog just looked at me like I had asked another stupid question. "I'll get my twenty g's then too."

I nodded. "Closer to twenty-two and a half." I figured it was better to concede that I'd gotten more money than giving up too easily and letting him reach the same conclusion. He stopped his car beside mine, and I opened the door to get out.

"I thought you mighta been holding back a bit, probably still are, but that's okay; I have a steady job. Watch yourself, Billy. Hawk was the last high profile shiner living out here, until now. Now that title falls to you."

He drove off while I pondered his last words to me. The sunrise didn't seem so clean and pure anymore; it only brought the dirt that covered the city into the light.

V

I swung by the diner where Ruby worked. We didn't share an apartment. I had brought the subject up, but she…well she was a woman who liked to keep her options open. She had dreams that a guy was going to ride into the diner on a big white horse and carry her off into the sunset, where she would have two kids, a mini-van, and a perfect life. I was just a bed warmer until that day arrived. This was not without benefit to me, as she liked to point out, but I hardly ever cashed in on the advantages of other women and she wouldn't move me out of the 'friends with benefits' zone. A guy would have to be dumb to turn that down for just the 'friend zone.' Especially with Ruby. She was tall and lean and cleaned up well. Fitness was her religion, despite the slop she slung at Ed's Diner. 'Grease of different flavors' she called it and never partook herself. She had natural strawberry blonde hair and her measurements ran close to 36-24-36. She had the ability to spot a loser from a kilometer away and let them down so softly they didn't even begrudge her the lift. Why she hung out with a man like me…well, I had my ideas, but never voiced them.

When times were good, as in I had a paycheck, Ruby would hang off my arm like the perfect dame, loyal, caring, pouty even without being bitchy. However, if things were lean, well I had learned not to come around. A girl like her has a standard to which she needed to be kept, even if she worked slinging plates at Ed's.

Ruby was working tables, the place wasn't busy, so I swung into a booth. If it had been hopping, I would have taken a seat at one of the red vinyl counter stools instead. Ruby came by a moment later with coffee and poured me a cup in that slow, elegant manner that let me know I'd done something wrong. Anniversary? She didn't keep track, which is like saying an alcoholic doesn't know to the ounce how much liquor is left in their house. No, not an anniversary.

"What's wrong, Ruby?" I was too tired to guess and figured I'd only make things worse by playing dumb.

"You were supposed to come by last night. I was off at 9, remember? We were going to watch a couple shows?"

I hadn't called her? I shook my head, no, I didn't remember calling her with what went down about Hawk. I let out a long sigh. "Sorry, Ruby. Sit down for a second would ya?"

"I ain't got time to sit down. You stood me up, didn't even call me. I called three times, sent a text even." Ruby hated text messaging.

She turned away with the coffee pot and took three steps before I said, "Hawk's dead." Her back stiffened, and she turned to face me.

"Billy…you better not be putting me on to get out of trouble!"

I shook my head and took a sip of coffee, when I raised my eyes I saw her slide into the booth across from me. "Who did it?"

Ruby knows of my power, but, as close as we were, I never shared its limitation with her. "He's dead too."

"You didn't!" She looked around fervently.

"Not me, someone beat me to it. I found Hawk, called the cops, they brought Dog in, and Clarence. Dog tracked the guy down. Yeah, yeah, I knew where the guy was too, a place over in Cotta Terrace. Run down, city's been mowing it and keeping it up, but it has been stripped by wire cutters already. We found the guy there. In pieces."

Her hand came to cover the perfect 'O' of her mouth.

"Dog said the scent matched the guy who killed Hawk, but someone else killed Mister Three Piece."

"Mister Three Piece?"

"No ID on the second body, so I hung that name on him. I'm pretty sure I know who killed him, only problem is, that guy has an alibi, a damn good one; he's in prison."

"Geezus, Billy. What are you gonna do?"

"I need to crash, figured I'd get some breakfast and maybe crash at your place if you don't mind."

"My place? What's wrong with your apartment?"

"Dog told me to keep my head down. Hawk was the last good shiner living out in the open around here." I gave her a quick glance before looking back down into my coffee, "Well, the second to last one anyway."

"You don't me…he thinks they're gunning for you?"

I shrugged.

"Didn't they give you police protection? Anything?"

I shook my head. "It's only a theory; the others have disappeared, maybe retired, maybe dead. There haven't been any bodies, so no one really knows. The thing is, Mister Three Piece, he was a shiner too. I mean he would have had to be, to take down Hawk. I don't think Slice could have done Hawk."

"Slice? You mean the Slice? The South Side Slicer? I thought he was dead for killing someone years ago."

"Ruby, you' have been what? Sixteen? Nah, Slice cut a deal, gave up some other bad people, norms, and got his sentence down to second-degree murder. Pulled twenty years for that one, but Clarence checked, he's due out on parole in a few weeks. Except this killing has Slice all over it."

"They got a teleporter then." Ruby said firmly. The thought had occurred to me too. No doubt Dog was already checking that angle as well. Someone jumped into the prison, slept in Slice's rack and let him handle the killing of Mister Three Piece, then swapped with him. Usually, there were extra precautions taken with Shiners and Slice wasn't exactly a lightweight in the world of crime or shine.

I just nodded to Ruby, "I think they must." Of course 'they' was organized crime. It used to be an Italian racket until the Chinese moved in; those sides started a low-level gang war which made them ripe for the picking by the Ramos family, a family with ties to two Mexican Cartels who eliminated the competition in a matter of weeks. Even the eleventh-hour alliance of the Vitellos and Teungs couldn't save either faction. A few of the Teungs were still around, they had degraded until they were little more than a street gang and called themselves the Kongs now. They dealt drugs and whores out of the east side, but couldn't compete with the Ramos Family. The Vitellos had fared better but had been forced to ally with the Ramos's. Of all of them, I disliked the Vitellos the least.

"They aren't going to show up and trash my place looking for you are they?" Ruby asked.

Classic Ruby, the bad guys, are killing people, Shiners, and she's worried about her place. "I doubt it. I hope not, but honestly, babe, if they find me I doubt I'll have much to worry about will I?"

She shook her head, "I don't want to come home to a body, Billy. I don't think I could take that."

"Well, I promise to do my best not to leave a mess or a body for you to find."

"Sure. Fine. Make jokes." The cook hit the bell at the window behind the counter. "I'll go get your food."

I hadn't ordered, but I always got the same thing. Ruby rose and collected it for me, her anger was gone, I could tell by the way she set the plate in front of me. But she switched me to decaf, saying only, "You'll drink an entire pot and if you do you won't get any rest. You look like you need to sleep, Billy."

Things got busy at Ed's, and I left my payment and a good tip on the table when I was done. I parked my Accord six blocks away from Ruby's place in a public lot and walked around about to her apartment. All of the places in her building have private entrances, they went up five stories, and she was on the fourth. The place was nice, good for an evening in or entertaining a dozen people or so, which she did a few times a year while trolling for her prince. It was a two bedroom, and her spare was set up for guests, not as a craft room or a library or any other sort of pretentious kind of space that was a cover for 'junk room.' Looking around after I went in I realized I would have a hard time figuring out what Ruby did for fun by what was in her place. It was generic. Boring. Sooner or later she would settle for someone. Probably not me, if only so she could pretend she made a better catch. After a moment of debating, I took the guest room, stripping off my clothing and taking a quick shower before I turned in. A few hours of sleep and I'd head back to my office to check the mail and messages.

They came while I was sleeping. It's not surprising, that is the best time to get the jump on your victim. The fight was brutal, and there were casualties on both sides. The first I heard about it was when my phone rang at a quarter after eleven.

"Hello?"

"Billy?"

"Yeah?" It was Clarence.

"I've been trying to get a hold of you for the last half hour, where have you been?"

"Sleeping. I didn't get home until seven. Why are you up?" The son of a bitch sounded like he had gotten a full eight hours.

"They got Dog. Where are you? No. Better you not say anything. Meet me at 8th and Pearl, at Waffles in twenty minutes. Can you do that?"

"Dog?"

"Meet me at Waffles. Twenty minutes." The line went dead.

They got Dog.

VI

Waffles is a 24-hour breakfast diner, a step down from just about any other resteraunt you've ever eaten at and it is attached to the Waffle Bar. The two places share the same owner, but the Waffle Bar is not, as you might suspect, a place to get more waffles. The Waffle Bar had illusions of being a sports bar, like cats had illusions of being Lions. It's hard to say which establishment was dragging the other deeper into the muck faster. The bar part of the place opens at 7 am, the earliest a hard liquor joint can open in the state, it closes every night at 3 am and is not closed for any holidays. Consistency, that's what the owner, Mel, said he strived for. Cops loved the place. Cops ate free; this was a courtesy Mel had extended even to me, as I was a 'friend of the officers'. Once the free grub started being served up the robberies and trouble went way down. Mel reinvested his non-stolen profits into God knows what; the money certainly didn't make its way back into either business. Despite the sketchy legality of such gifts, Mel was also known to serve liquor up to the off duty police too. I didn't get that benefit, probably because Mel knows a losing bet when he sees one.

Clarence was already there when I arrived. In Waffles, not the bar. He looked too damned refreshed and rested for my taste; it wasn't natural. At least I had clean clothes and a few hours of sleep under my belt. I nodded at Shirley for coffee and sat down in the booth across from Clarence.

"What happened?" I asked.

"About nine-thirty somebody got into Dog's house and cut him apart. Like Mister Three Piece, same m.o. as before."

"Anyone check on Slice?"

Clarence nodded and took a sip of coffee, judging by the empty sugar packets he was on his third or fourth one. "Slice is gone. Not in lock up. There was a lot of blood at the scene, not all of it was Dogs'. We are having it tested against what we have on file for Slice."

"It'll match." I sighed heavy, "So we got a teleporter, someone was getting him in and out."

"The prison checked the cameras. Most of the shiners are under 24-hour camera surveillance because he was due on parole, Slice was in the general population, they didn't have a camera trained on him at all times. His roomie, also being released in a few weeks, swears he didn't see anything."

"Great. Slice is out and already wanted for capital murder, probably two counts. How'd the fight go down?" What I meant was how did Dog even have a chance to fight back. Slice could have cut his head off first unless he was playing. Mister Three Piece hadn't been tortured, as far as I could tell whoever killed him had done it quickly and humanely.

"I don't know. There are no signs of forced entry. Dog's kids were in school, his wife was at her job, he was there alone. He was…" Clarence paused while Shirley set down my coffee. He waited until she was out of earshot and continued, "His right arm was off, at the shoulder, his left hand was gone at the wrist, then there was a lateral cut, left shoulder to right hip that finished him off. He had a gun handy, behind the headboard and it looks like he got the gun out before he lost his arm, the gun fell on the floor, clutched in his left hand, he got off three shots. 410 buckshot, won't go through walls, but it's plenty good at point blank range. He hit was he was aiming at, there was plenty of blood and splatter where we know the perp had to be standing. Then, well, that last cut finished him off."

"Geezus." I took a gulp of black coffee, lucky for me it wasn't boiling, only warm and I was able to get it down.

"Yeah. Two kids and a young wife. You knew Slice, didn't you? Back in the day?"

I nodded, "I knew him."

"Before you straightened out?"

"We were associated with the Vitellos, yeah, couriers and stuff. He was destined for greater things, his shine had already come out, and I was still finding mine."

"You saw his handiwork?"

I nodded, not wanting to relive this part of my past.

"So you recognized it last night?"

"Which is why I said what I did. Look, Clarence, you were a rookie back then too, I know you saw what he could do as well. So why are you asking me this?"

"You didn't turn him in, Billy. And you didn't testify against him either."

"He was my wake up call. The district attorney never contacted me, I wasn't involved in the killing he went down for. I thought he got life for murder one, so by the time sentencing rolled around, we were splits. Then the gang war started, and I was out. Took a vacation. For a year. Went and lived with my mom and dad back in Cheyenne, got my head on straight, figured out what I was good at."

"Why'd you come back?"

"Cheyenne doesn't have a real call for my kind of talent. What's with the questions, Clarence? You think I was involved with this?"

"Here is what I think." His expression grew grim, "I think if some young punk would have stepped forward thirteen years ago, maybe Slice would have went down for murder one, maybe he would have got the needle, and I wouldn't have two more bodies on my hands."

I thought about that for a moment and nodded, "Could be. Three, though, don't forget Hawk."

Clarence shrugged, "Yeah, well maybe Hawk wouldn't have been killed either, maybe he would have. We matched the blood from Mister Three Piece to what we found at Hawk's place. We're running the DNA, and we should know for certain in a day."

"I know for certain now. Dog knew for certain too. Mister Three Piece was out of town talent, probably from way out of town."

"Foreign?"

"C'mon Clarence, investigation 101, the kid was tan. He wasn't from around here, we'd have heard of him. So some other warm climate, did he look Hispanic to you?"

"This time of year…yeah, I can see that he came from somewhere warm. Not sure on the race thing, he looked more…Greek to me. Italian?"

"The Vitellos?" I shook my head, "I doubt they have a horse in this race, they are fine for your common extortion or larceny, but they don't do murder these days, and this is super high profile. Assuming whoever did this didn't teleport him around you might keep an eye out for a rental car collecting dust in the next few days."

"I can do that part of my job." Clarence said.

"Oh? I'm not so sure you can, Detective. Coming in here, trying to associate three present day murders with something I didn't do thirteen years ago? We're supposed to be on the same side." I drained my coffee and stood up. "Call me when the funerals are arranged would you?"

"Don't go away mad, Billy…" Clarence called after me.

I turned, "Mad? I'm not mad, Clarence. Just tired. Maybe I could have changed things back then. Maybe I could have made a difference, it's water under the bridge. Going back and bringing it up doesn't do anyone any good."

He didn't say anything else, and I turned and moved towards the door. I slapped a one on the counter and called out to Shirley, "Thanks for the coffee." Before I left.

I could have gone back to Ruby's but decided to head for my office. It was lunch time, so I didn't bother calling her. Instead, I sent her one of those text messages that she hates so much, to let her know I wouldn't be around when she finished after the lunch shift.

My office was downtown and came with a parking permit. After I had pulled in I decided I had better do something with all that money Hawk had given me, I gathered it up and filled my inside pockets, peeling off three hundreds, which I wedged back into the seat. I was surprised to find a twenty already there that I had forgotten about. The Bank of Billy paid no dividends, but at least I didn't have to worry about losing my ATM card.

My office was dark, dank and looked like it came right out of the 1930's. A look I fostered with great care. It was rented space in a much larger building, I was on the third floor overlooking the parking lot, not the ocean. The space was split into three rooms, a reception area with a massive desk, sporting a typewriter and a phone, a galley kitchen with a small fridge, coffee maker and a hot plate and my actual office, closed off from the other two rooms by a frosted glass door. The bathrooms were down the hall, which was unfortunate, or I could have lived in the place. I hadn't had a receptionist in years, these days with the rise of modern technology; I could make my own coffee and take my own calls. As I approached, I noticed blood drops on the floor and that the front door to the reception area was open.

There was blood on the doorknob and in splotches on the floor. The smart thing to do would be to call the police. I knew it was Slice. I didn't call the police. We had history, and I thought it would save me.

I pushed the door open, nothing in reception, the blood trail led to the kitchen and to my office. I closed the door loudly behind me. "Slice? I'm alone."

"Back here." Came the muffled reply from my office.

"Fuck." I whispered under my breath, more loudly I asked, "What are you doing here?

"C'mon back, Compass."

'Compass,' there's a name I hadn't heard in over a decade. Shiner names come and go out of style every few years, with some insisting on being called, 'Ralph Jones' and others picking up a moniker from the media or their peers that they slowly start to use. I'd been called 'Compass' a time or two, but it only really stuck with the people I used to run with. I also used it for my company name; Compass Investigations, but that's as far as it ever went.

Gun drawn I pushed my office door open with my off hand. Slice was there and even in the dim light I could see he wasn't long for the world. He was lying on my leather divan, a piece salvaged from the trash 8 years ago, also where I had intended to do my afternoon's work. My inner office had a desk even larger than the reception area; the boss should always have the biggest desk. I kept a filing cabinet too, though it was mostly for show; unlike Hawk's system, I embraced electronic documents. There was an upright fav with bare metal blades sitting behind the desk, a trash can, my laptop and a stapler for office related items. For décor, I had a huge picture of dogs playing pool on the back wall, picked up around the same time and from the same place as my divan.

"Geezus, Slice, what the hell happened to you? I thought you were in prison."

He looked at me with bleary eyes, "You never were a good liar. Let's get down to brass tacks."

I nodded, watching his hands. One was pressed against his stomach, holding a roll's worth of blood soaked paper towels to his gut, the other was casually pointed my direction. That's the one I watched.

"You never sold me out."

I nodded, "Is that going to save me today?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"Why are you here?"

"We had some good times, me and you, back in the day. Didn't we?" Slice said.

"Some and some not so good ones too. I remember them."

"I…we...made some bad choices."

"We could have made better ones, I admit. Drink?" I edged towards my desk not letting my gun barrel waver from him.

"Ah, hell, Compass. Let's not be like this, not now." He slowly clenched his free hand and grimaced as he shoved it under his leg.

I let the barrel of my gun drop and turned my back on him to pull out the whiskey from the bottom drawer of my desk. I only had one glass, so I filled it and then took two steps to the divan to sit the bottle on the floor beside him. I returned to my worn chair and sat down, spinning to face him.

"Fuck it, Slice." I set the gun down on the desktop and picked up the glass of amber liquid with my right hand. "If you're gonna cut me, now's your chance."

He struggled to pull his hand out from beneath him, but only reached for the bottle. I raised my glass in salute, and he returned the gesture.

"Why are you here?" I asked him again.

"To kill you."

VII

Slice pointed his finger at me, and I shrugged and brought my glass to my lips again. It was probably the most valuable thing in the office, the glass, I mean. It was a Waterford Black Cut Tumbler, one of what had originally been a pair. I had accepted it as partial payment for some work I did, one of my first jobs. Come to think of it, I never did collect the balance owed from that case.

A long, low chuckle came out of Slice like a slow moving freight train, "That's it? No reaching for the gun? Just a shrug and another pull of whiskey?"

"Well, Slice, you could have killed me when I walked in. I knew you were here before I even came in; you left blood all over the hallway and door. Frankly, I'm surprised no one has seen it and called the cops already."

"Do you want to die?"

"I wanted to find out why. So…why?"

Slice poured another slug of whiskey into his mouth. The whiskey I could live without, it was solid, don't get me wrong, but he was dying and I still sorta felt that I owed him. He coughed a bit, and I made as if to get up from my chair, but he waved me off in a non-threatening manner. "Why'd I kill those guys? Don't you even want to know how?"

"How you got out? I figure there must be a teleporter around somewhere, probably security is got a bit lax as you're going to be released in a few weeks." I shook my head and gave him a lopsided grin, "Well, you were supposed to be released. I doubt they will let you go now. Killing cops, Slice…that's…"

"Stupid?!" he questioned with a bit of anger.

"No. Well yeah, but that's not what I was going to say. I was going to say, that's not what you do. Which tells me someone either set you up or motivated you to do it."

"It's been a long time since we ran together, Compass. You don't know me anymore."

"You're right. But cop killing is a death wish. They could call down Defiance to root you out and contain you." Defiance was an aging superhero who lived down towards Phoenix.

"Defiance? You think so?" Slice actually sounded impressed, "That's a mighty big towel for a spill like me." He seemed to mull that over in his head for another minute before shaking it and saying, "Nah, everyone knows he's got the Alzheimer's. He doesn't get out anymore unless he has half a dozen handlers."

"I heard something like that too. But then I see his picture once in a while from New York or Buenos Aires. The man doesn't look like he's dying to me. Busy maybe, but dying? No. A double murderer, though, practically in his own backyard? I bet he'd come up here."

"Yeah, that would have been a thing to see, wouldn't it? Me and him going at it…" A shudder passed through him, "No need now. Dog did for me well enough. A fucking dull shine and I underestimated him! I'm practically a dull shiner myself, or I was, Defiance would have torn me apart. So do you want to know why or not?"

"Yeah, actually I still do." I leaned forward to grasp the whiskey bottle. The stem was bloody and sticky as I poured myself another dram.

"Nice cup."

I nodded.

"And the hooch isn't bad either. You moved up in the world." Slice said with a cough. A fleck of blood dotted his lower lip and was immediately licked and smeared by his tongue.

I laughed and gestured around me with my glass. "You think so?"

"From where I've been the last 12 years, yeah, this ain't so bad. I wasn't ever gonna make it on the outside, Compass."

"Why not?"

"I ran with the Vitellos, but their backs got broken before I even started serving my time, I was just too stupid to know it. Now? Hah!" He grabbed the bottle for another swig, "What would they do with me? If they even remembered me at all? Do you think they would have me running some bootleg music and games for them? Selling product to pimply-faced adolescents?"

I thought about that for a moment. It was true, what he said, the Vitellos had been busted a long time. That meant… "Ramos Family." I murmured.

Slice nodded. "Glad to see you're not senile at least."

"What'd they have on you?"

"Are you my priest now? You gonna hear my confession? What they had was bad enough, way bad, but they are 'why' I did what I did."

"Mister Three Piece, Dog and…me?"

"Mister Three Piece?" Slice chuckled, "Yeah, unknown talent. I don't even know his name, they said 'Go here. Kill who you find there.' I went there. I killed who I found. They warned me he was a shiner, a tough one too, so I shouldn't mess around. It was a test really. A test for me and a test of the darkness."

"They got you on the 'D'?" Darkness was a much-rumored drug that suppressed the shine. No one could confirm it actually existed, but everyone speculated that the government was developing it to help deal with the criminals in the judicial system. Many thought it would be a violation of human rights to use it, but as it didn't officially exist the court battles hadn't started yet.

"They got me on something. I had to agree to it before they granted parole. You should see the paperwork I had to sign. Non-disclosure this, legal liability that. Doesn't matter much now, does it?"

"It didn't work?"

"It did. At first, I started it six weeks ago, at first, I was sick all the time, puking and pissing myself, too damned ill to summon a cut. That made people happy, and they slowly tapered down my meds until I was just nauseous. Then one night I had a dream, a good dream, Compass. I was flying. Outside, under the moon, free! It was so wonderful I didn't want to wake up, but here's the tricky thing – I wasn't asleep."

"The Ramos's sprung you?"

He shook his head, "No. I sprang myself."

"You? You're the teleporter?"

"No, I got to shine a little brighter, I just faded out and passed through the walls."

I was stunned; I rocked back in my chair. "You…you…changed? But that's not possible!" The shine when it hit, was a one-time affair, it left you with gifts, and you figured them out. As far as anyone knew, you never gained any more.

"Yeah. Like I said, I got better. Well the family has the prison system locked up pretty tight, they were already working on me before my release, and I'd reached a deal with them. I got stupid again. I should have pointed myself east and just kept on flying, but what did I do? I decided to head back to the pen and wait out my parole. I got back to find Andy Baca standing by my empty bed with a breakfast tray. Fucking Baca! He's a no one, a snitch, practically…and worse, belongs to the family. He kept his mouth shut to the authorities and told the family what he saw. They renegotiated my terms with me, saying that I had the perfect alibi to commit murder and they moved up their schedule."

"Their schedule?"

"I overheard them talking. I learned Spanish; it turns out it's a pretty useful skill to have. So yeah, they moved up their plans. They wanted me to go after Flying Hawk, then that changed, they didn't tell me why, they just sent me to Cotta Terrace. Funny how quick things change, ain't it, Compass? When I left the world, Cotta Terrace was a nice part of town. Now it's full of junkies and squatters. Not all change is progress I guess."

"The whole place is run down, Slice." We stayed there for a moment, each reflecting on the world as it is before I finally shook my head and said, "No. I don't believe you."

"What?"

"You can ghost out and fly, or so you say. But there're two things wrong with that story, at least. First, how'd Dog shoot you? Bullets pass right through ghosts, as far as I know anyway. And second you broke into my office, you didn't just walk through the door."

Slice grinned, "So you don't believe me?"

"No."

He lay back and closed his eyes tightly and then he slowly sunk through my couch, through the floor and into the offices below. I heard screaming, and Slice hastily reappeared, with a startled look on his face. "Shit." He mouthed, but I didn't hear the word, I only saw his lips move. He oriented himself above the couch again and faded back into reality, where he fell with a whoosh onto the old leather.

"Didn't know the office below you was occupied." he said.

"Me either." I was surprised, what had happened to him was nothing short of a miracle. "They'll call the cops." He gave me a quick shrug, winced and coughed up a little blood, which he spat onto my floor. I looked around for my trash can and handed it to him, someone was going to have to clean his blood up, and I was betting it would be me. "You got plenty of time to finish explaining, and it's not like they will be able to take you in anyway, not unless you want them to."

"I'm a wanted man, it'll take less time than you think."

"Then you better get on with it. How'd you get shot and why is my door busted?"

"I can't cut when I'm ghosting; it just passes right through people. Well, you know, without hurting them. I wanted to talk to Dog, ask him a couple of questions and try to confirm what I learned about the family. He brought his piece up like liquid lightning, he must have had more shine than I was told, or he hid it, hell for all I know he visited Andro and got 'tutored.' Still, the blade is faster than an arm, and his went missing. But the tough mother fucker rolled onto his arm off of the bed, and I lost sight of him." Slice had to see what he was cutting; he couldn't kill someone from a thousand klicks away. A hundred yards, sure, five hundred, maybe, but if you were standing in a closet with a curtain between you and him, you were perfectly safe. Until he cut the curtain down.

Slice coughed again and continued, "I hopped up on the bed to get him back in visual, but God damned if he didn't have the piece in his left hand, that's when he winged me. He knew he was going to die, knew it, so he had to take me out first. And he was right, Compass, he was right. I was going to kill him either way. Even after I got his other arm off and picked myself up off the floor, he was right. I knew he'd killed me. He knew it, but he still gave me nothing. I even threatened to wait and gut his family as they arrived back home. He told me to go fuck myself."

"I kinda liked Dog."

"I'm sorry." Slice sounded sincere, "So, I came looking for you. I had your address from online, but you didn't come home, so I figured you were crashing with some dame. I know you though, and I had your office address too. I knew you'd come here eventually."

Lights were flashing on the Venetian blinds of my office from outside. I stood up and peered through them, two squad cars pulled up to the building. No sirens, just the flashing lights. Slice gave me a look that said 'I told you so,' "Alright, I'll allow that you were right about the police." I continued to watch the cars outside, a uniformed man from each vehicle rushed to the side of the street where a crying woman gestured frantically at the building pointing up in my direction. The officers radioed it in, and it looked like they were telling people to get out of the building. "Looks like they are evacuating the place. Probably awaiting the SCaCU." SCaCU stood for 'Shiner Containment and Capture Unit'; essentially a SWAT unit for Shiners.

"Huh, well, that's no small homage, is it?"

"Are you going to go out with a fight?"

"I'm not going back and with my insides all messed up, I doubt I'd live long enough anyway. Plus, you know the pigs, once I get into custody I'd probably die 'trying to escape' anyway. I had bacon for breakfast; I know the score and so do they. As for your fucking door, well, Compass didn't you ever forget your shine? Especially when it was new on you?"

I nodded, he could be telling the truth; he wasn't the smartest guy I knew.

"You know, something funny was happening to me too. It felt like I was slipping away when I ghosted, it wasn't so bad just now, but earlier I'd come all the way over from your place on Vallejo..." Slice paused for a moment, "You know what I said earlier? About you moving up in the world?"

"Yeah."

"I take it back; your place is a shit hole. Anyway, I ghosted over from there, which is why there wasn't much blood in the hallway. Your girl, what's her name?"

"Ruby."

"You love her?"

"I do."

"She love you?"

"It's complicated."

"Sucker. Dump the dame and find yourself a new one."

"So you're not going to kill me then?" I finished off my whiskey, and he held up the bottle questionably, I nodded, and he poured me another slug.

"That still depends."

"On what? We might not have much time here before you have to go."

"I'm not going anywhere. I need you to find something for me."

Slice. Compass. He knew. Of course, he knew! I had told him back when we were barely more than kids, and he was always making cheesy deals with me, like 'Find me the next winning lottery ticket and I'll give you half.' Or 'Where can we go to get laid tonight for free? Point it out, and I'll give you this gum wrapper.' It never worked out well though; we'd get the lottery ticket, scratch it off and found we had won a dollar. We never found a clerk willing to sell us the 8th or 10th ticket down the roll, they always suspected. Getting laid for free might mean a 50-year-old woman sitting on a barstool with loose morals and an itch to scratch or, on one notable occasion, a partner in a gay bar willing to take us both on.

I nodded, "I won't do it for a gum wrapper, Slice."

"I have something far more valuable to trade."

I felt an invisible blade at my throat. It felt like he had actually cut me and a moment later I was sure of it. A trickle of blood dribbled down my neck.

"Huh, I never thought I would feel a blade, I always thought it would just be pain."

"You thought about me cutting you?"

"We didn't leave on good terms."

"Water under the bridge. I have a contract out on your life. I will give it up, renege on my deal in exchange for you finding me something. What's your life worth?"

"Honestly, on the open market, I don't know; a lot to me, not much to you."

"Not true, my friend, my only friend. You are my knife, you are my sword, you are my vengeance. You will not fail me, you're the only one in my life who never has; I figured that out while I was inside. I was making your life worse; you were trying to make mine better. I was so stupid. You were lucky you didn't end up in there with me."

"I think I can take your deal." I said, maybe it was his sentimental outburst, but I suddenly felt that my life was worth quite a lot. The more I get paid, the better I function. Even discounting anything else, I was worth 120 thousand dollars right now, which should make his search pretty strong.

"Shake on it?"

"I don't need to, but I think I'd like that, yeah." We shook hands, and the deal was sealed.

He raised a bloody hand to my neck where he had drawn blood. "Sorry, I'm losing it, got a little shaky there, I guess. Nothing worse than you get from shaving; you'll live."

I heard a heavy diesel engine prowl up to the building on the street below. I didn't dare look out the window now, but Slice already knew SCaCU had arrived. "You better tell me what I'm looking for."

"I'm trying to figure out how to say it."

"You can't twist this. I know you know that, but don't try for a twosy or something philosophical, like 'happiness'"

"I know how it worked. Works. Gimme a second."

I waited patiently, convinced that he already had the question and was just stalling.

"Get your gun."

"Slice, holding a gun is a bad thing to do when SCaCU is around. In fact, the only really safe place for me is on my belly on the floor."

"Don't worry, I'll handle them."

"They can't hurt you." I muttered as I collected my gun.

I holstered it, but he shook his head. "Hold it. On me."

"What?"

"Like you captured me. Just do it."

The door at the end of the hallway was slammed open, and we heard them coming at a trot towards my office door.

Slice looked at me for a moment just before they burst in and said, "Find the children, Compass. Find out what the Ramos Family is doing with the children."

SCaCU burst in, leading with a flash grenade. I hadn't expected that and missed the rapid exchange that followed. Apparently, Slice had been expecting such a tactic, the film of the last few seconds of his life from the helmet cams the officers were wearing showed him lifting one arm off of his eyes and gesturing frantically as he was shot. Officially he was killed for resisting arrest. But not before he had time to cut off my gun arm, both my legs below the knee and decapitate the first two SCACU team members through the door. I had been right earlier; I didn't feel the knife, all I felt was pain.