

PART ONE
FOUR WEEKS

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PART TWO
SEVEN DAYS

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PART THREE
FORTY-EIGHT HOURS

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When he lies down to sleep, this landscape is always on his mind:

A pine forest covers the hills, as thick as the fur on a bear's back. The sky is so blue, in the clear mountain air, that it hurts his eyes to look up. Miles from the road there is a secret valley with steep sides and a cold river in its cleft. Here, hidden from strangers' eyes, a sunny south-facing slope has been cleared, and grapevines grow in neat rows.

When he remembers how beautiful it is, he feels his heart will break.

Men, women and children move slowly through the vineyard, tending the plants. These are his friends, his lovers, his family. One of the women laughs. She is a big woman with long, dark hair, and he feels a special warmth for her. She throws back her head and opens her mouth wide, and her clear high voice floats across the valley like birdsong. Some of the men quietly speak a mantra as they work, praying to the gods of the valley and of the grapevines for a good crop. At their feet, a few massive tree stumps remain, to remind them of the back-breaking work that created this place twenty-five years ago. The soil is stony, but this is good, because the stones retain the heat of the sun and warm the roots of the vines, protecting them from the deadly frost.

Beyond the vineyard is a cluster of wooden buildings, plain but well built and weatherproof. Smoke rises from a cookhouse. In a clearing, a woman is teaching a boy how to make barrels.

This is a holy place.

Protected by secrecy and by prayers, it has remained pure, its people free, while the world beyond the valley has degenerated into corruption and hypocrisy, greed and filth.

But now the vision changes.

Something has happened to the quick cold stream that used to zigzag through the valley. Its chatter has been silenced, its hurry abruptly halted. Instead of a rush of white water there is a dark pool, silent and still. The edges of the pool seem static, but if he looks away for a few moments the pool widens. Soon he is forced to retreat up the slope.

He cannot understand why the others do not notice the rising tide. As the black pool laps at the first row of vines, they carry on working with their feet in the water. The buildings are surrounded, then flooded. The cookhouse fire goes out, and empty barrels float away across the growing lake. Why don't they run? he asks himself; and a choking panic rises in his throat.

Now the sky is dark with iron-coloured clouds, and a cold wind whips at the clothing of the people, but still they move along the vines, stooping and rising, smiling at one another and talking in quiet, normal voices. He is the only one who can see the danger, and he realizes he must pick up one or two or even three of the children, and save them from drowning. He tries to run toward his daughter, but he discovers that his feet are stuck in the mud and he cannot move; and he is filled with dread.

THE HAMMER OF EDEN

In the vineyard the water rises to the workers' knees, then their waists, then their necks. He tries to yell at the people he loves, telling them they must do something now, quickly, in the next few seconds, or they will die, but though he opens his mouth and strains his throat, no sounds will come out. Sheer terror possesses him.

The water laps into his open mouth and begins to choke him.

This is when he wakes up.

CHAPTER ONE

A MAN called Priest pulled his cowboy hat down at the front and peered across the flat, dusty desert of south Texas.

The low dull-green bushes of thorny mesquite and sagebrush stretched in every direction as far as he could see. In front of him, a ridged and rutted track ten feet wide had been driven through the vegetation. These tracks were called *senderos* by the Hispanic bulldozer drivers who cut them in brutally straight lines. On one side, at precise fifty-yard intervals, bright-pink plastic marker flags fluttered on short wire poles. Moving slowly along the sendero was a truck.

Priest had to steal the truck.

He had stolen his first vehicle at the age of eleven. It was a brand-new snow-white 1961 Lincoln Continental parked, with the keys in the dash, outside the Roxy Theater on South Broadway in Los Angeles. Priest, who was called Ricky in those days, could hardly see over the steering wheel. He had been so scared he almost wet himself, but he drove it ten blocks and handed the keys proudly to Jimmy 'Pigface' Riley, who gave him five bucks then took his girl for a drive and

crashed the car on the Pacific Coast Highway. That was how Ricky became a member of the Pigface Gang.

But this truck was not just a vehicle.

As he watched, the powerful machinery behind the driver's cabin slowly lowered a massive steel plate, six feet square, to the ground. There was a pause, then he heard a low-pitched rumble. A cloud of dust rose around the truck as the plate began to pound the earth rhythmically. He felt the ground shake beneath his feet.

This was a seismic vibrator, a machine for sending shock waves through the earth's crust. Priest had never had much education, except in stealing cars, but he was the smartest person he had ever met, and he understood how the vibrator worked. It was similar to radar and sonar. The shock waves were reflected off features in the earth—such as rock or liquid—and they bounced back to the surface, where they were picked up by listening devices called geophones, or jugs.

Priest worked on the jug team. They had planted more than a thousand geophones at precisely measured intervals in a grid a mile square. Every time the vibrator shook, the reflections were picked up by the jugs and recorded by a supervisor working in a trailer known as the doghouse. All this data would later be fed into a supercomputer in Houston to produce a three-dimensional map of what was under the earth's surface. And the map would be sold to an oil company.

The vibrations rose in pitch, making a noise like the mighty engines of an ocean liner gathering speed;

then the sound stopped abruptly. Priest ran along the sendero to the truck, screwing up his eyes against the billowing dust. He opened the door and clambered up into the cabin. A stocky black-haired man of about thirty was at the wheel. 'Hey, Mario,' Priest said as he slid into the seat alongside the driver.

'Hey, Ricky.'

Richard Granger was the name on Priest's Commercial Driving License (Class B). The licence was forged but the name was real.

He was carrying a carton of Marlboro cigarettes, the brand Mario smoked. He tossed the carton onto the dash. 'Here, I brought you something.'

'Hey, man, you don't need to buy me no cigarettes.'

'I'm always bummin' your smokes.' He picked up the open pack on the dash, shook one out, and put it in his mouth.

Mario smiled. 'Why don't you just buy your own cigarettes?'

'Hell, no, I can't afford to smoke.'

'You're crazy, man,' Mario laughed.

Priest lit his cigarette. He had always had an easy ability to get on with people, make them like him. On the streets where he grew up, people beat you up if they didn't like you, and he had been a runty kid. So he had developed an intuitive feel for what people wanted from him—deference, affection, humour, whatever—and the habit of giving it to them quickly. In the oilfield, what held the men together was humour: usually mocking, sometimes clever, often obscene.

Although he had been here only two weeks, Priest had won the trust of his co-workers. But he had not figured out how to steal the seismic vibrator. And he had to do it in the next few hours, for tomorrow the truck was scheduled to be driven to a new site, seven hundred miles away, near Clovis, New Mexico.

His vague plan was to hitch a ride with Mario. The trip would take two or three days—the truck, which weighed forty thousand pounds, had a highway speed of around forty miles per hour. At some point he would get Mario drunk, or something, then make off with the truck. He had been hoping a better plan would come to him, but inspiration had failed so far.

‘My car’s dying,’ he said. ‘You want to give me a ride as far as San Antonio tomorrow?’

Mario was surprised. ‘You ain’t coming all the way to Clovis?’

‘Nope.’ He waved a hand at the bleak desert landscape. ‘Just look around,’ he said. ‘Texas is so beautiful, man, I never want to leave.’

Mario shrugged. There was nothing unusual about a restless transient in this line of work. ‘Sure, I’ll give you a ride.’ It was against company rules to take passengers, but the drivers did it all the time. ‘Meet me at the dump.’

Priest nodded. The garbage dump was a desolate hollow, full of rusting pickups and smashed TV sets and verminous mattresses, on the outskirts of Shiloh, the nearest town. No one would be there to see Mario pick him up, unless it was a couple of kids shooting snakes with a .22 rifle. ‘What time?’

‘Let’s say six.’

‘I’ll bring coffee.’

Priest needed this truck. He felt his life depended on it. His palms itched to grab Mario right now and throw him out and just drive away. But that was no good. For one thing, Mario was almost twenty years younger than Priest, and might not let himself be thrown out so easily. For another, the theft had to go undiscovered for a few days. Priest needed to drive the truck to California and hide it before the nation’s cops were alerted to watch out for a stolen seismic vibrator.

There was a beep from the radio, indicating that the supervisor in the doghouse had checked the data from the last vibration and found no problems. Mario raised the plate, put the truck in gear, and moved forward fifty yards, pulling up exactly alongside the next pink marker flag. Then he lowered the plate again and sent a ready signal. Priest watched closely, as he had done several times before, making sure he remembered the order in which Mario moved the levers and threw the switches. If he forgot something later, there would be no one he could ask.

They waited for the radio signal from the doghouse that would start the next vibration. This could be done by the driver in the truck, but generally supervisors preferred to retain command themselves and start the process by remote control. Priest finished his cigarette and threw the butt out of the window. Mario nodded toward Priest’s car, parked a quarter of a mile away on the two-lane blacktop. ‘That your woman?’

Priest looked. Star had got out of the dirty light-blue Honda Civic and was leaning on the hood, fanning her face with her straw hat. 'Yeah,' Priest said.

'Lemme show you a picture.' Mario pulled an old leather billfold out of the pocket of his jeans. He extracted a photograph and handed it to Priest. 'This is Isabella,' he said proudly.

Priest saw a pretty Mexican girl in her twenties wearing a yellow dress and a yellow Alice band in her hair. She held a baby on her hip, and there was a dark-haired boy standing shyly by her side. 'Your children?'

He nodded. 'Ross and Betty.'

Priest resisted the impulse to smile at the Anglo names. 'Good-looking kids.' He thought of his own children, and almost told Mario about them; but he stopped himself just in time. 'Where do they live?'

'El Paso.'

The germ of an idea sprouted in Priest's mind. 'You get to see them much?'

Mario shook his head. 'I'm workin' and workin', man. Savin' my money to buy them a place. A nice house, with a big kitchen and a pool in the yard. They deserve that.'

The idea blossomed. Priest suppressed his excitement and kept his voice casual, making idle conversation. 'Yeah, a beautiful house for a beautiful family, right?'

'That's what I'm thinking.'

The radio beeped again, and the truck began to shake. The noise was like rolling thunder, but more regular. It began on a profound bass note and slowly

rose in pitch. After exactly fourteen seconds it stopped.

In the quiet that followed, Priest snapped his fingers. 'Say, I got an idea . . . No, maybe not.'

'What?'

'I don't know if it would work.'

'What, man, what?'

'I just thought, you know, your wife is so pretty and your kids are so cute, it's wrong that you don't see them more often.'

'*That's* your idea?'

'No. My idea is, I could drive the truck to New Mexico while you go visit them, that's all.' It was important not to seem too keen, Priest told himself. 'But I guess it wouldn't work out,' he added in a who-gives-a-damn voice.

'No, man, it ain't possible.'

'Probably not. Let's see, if we set out early tomorrow and drove to San Antonio together, I could drop you off at the airport there, you could be in El Paso by noon, probably. You'd play with the kids, have dinner with your wife, spend the night, get a plane the next day, I could pick you up at Lubbock airport . . . How far is Lubbock from Clovis?'

'Ninety, maybe a hundred miles.'

'We could be in Clovis that night, or next morning at the latest, and no way for anyone to know you didn't drive the whole way.'

'But you want to go to San Antonio.'

Shit. Priest had not thought this through, he was making it up as he went along. 'Hey, I've never been

to Lubbock,' he said airily. 'That's where Buddy Holly was born.'

'Who the hell is Buddy Holly?'

Priest sang: *I love you, Peggy Sue . . .* Buddy Holly died before you were born, Mario. I liked him better than Elvis. And don't ask me who Elvis was.'

'You'd drive all that way just for me?'

Priest wondered anxiously whether Mario was suspicious, or just grateful. 'Sure I would,' Priest told him. 'As long as you let me smoke your Marlboros.'

Mario shook his head, miming amazement. 'You're a hell of a guy, Ricky. But I don't know.'

He was not suspicious, then. But he was apprehensive, and he probably could not be pushed into a decision. Priest masked his frustration with a show of nonchalance. 'Well, think about it,' he said.

'If something goes wrong, I don't want to lose my job.'

'You're right.' Priest fought down his impatience. 'I tell you what, let's talk later. You going to the bar tonight?'

'Sure.'

'Why don't you let me know then?'

'Okay, that's a deal.'

The radio beeped the all-clear signal, and Mario threw the lever that raised the plate off the ground.

'I got to get back to the jug team,' Priest said. 'We've got a few miles of cable to roll up before nightfall.' He handed back the family photo and opened the door. 'I'm telling you, man, if I had a girl

that pretty I wouldn't leave the goddam *house*.' He grinned, then jumped to the ground and slammed the door.

The truck moved off toward the next marker flag as Priest walked away, his cowboy boots kicking up dust.

As he followed the sendero to where his car was parked, he saw Star begin to pace up and down, impatient and anxious.

She had been famous, once, briefly. At the peak of the hippie era she lived in the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco. Priest had not known her then—he had spent the late sixties making his first million dollars—but he had heard the stories. She had been a striking beauty, tall and black-haired with a generous hourglass figure. She had made a record, reciting poetry against a background of psychedelic music with a band called Raining Fresh Daisies. The album had been a minor hit and Star was a celebrity for a few days.

But what turned her into a legend was her insatiable sexual promiscuity. She had had sex with anyone who briefly took her fancy: eager twelve-year-olds and surprised men in their sixties, boys who thought they were gay and girls who did not know they were lesbians, friends she had known for years and strangers off the street.

That was a long time ago. Now she was a few weeks from her fiftieth birthday, and there were streaks of grey in her hair. Her figure was still generous, though no longer like an hourglass: she weighed a hundred

and eighty pounds. But she still exercised an extraordinary sexual magnetism. When she walked into a bar, all the men stared.

Even now, when she was worried and hot, there was a sexy frounce to the way she paced and turned beside the cheap old car, an invitation in the movement of her flesh beneath the thin cotton dress, and Priest felt the urge to grab her right there.

'What happened?' she said as soon as he was within earshot.

Priest was always upbeat. 'Looking good,' he said.

'That sounds bad,' she said sceptically. She knew better than to take what he said at face value.

He told her the offer he had made to Mario. 'The beauty of it is, Mario will be blamed,' he added.

'How so?'

'Think about it. He gets to Lubbock, he looks for me, I ain't there, nor his truck either. He figures he's been suckered. What does he do? Is he going to make his way to Clovis and tell the company he lost their truck? I don't think so. At best, he'd be fired. At worst, he could be accused of stealing the truck, and thrown in jail. I'm betting he won't even go to Clovis. He'll get right back on the plane, fly to El Paso, put his wife and kids in the car and disappear. Then the police will be *sure* he stole the truck. And Ricky Granger won't even be a suspect.'

She frowned. 'It's a great plan, but will he take the bait?'

'I think he will.'

Her anxiety deepened. She slapped the dirty roof of the car with the flat of her hand. 'Shit, we have to have that goddam truck!'

He was as worried as she, but he covered it with a cocksure air. 'We will,' he said. 'If not this way, another way.'

She put the straw hat on her head and leaned back against the car, closing her eyes. 'I wish I felt sure.'

He stroked her cheek. 'You need a ride, lady?'

'Yes, please. Take me to my air-conditioned hotel room.'

'There'll be a price to pay.'

She opened her eyes wide in pretended innocence. 'Will I have to do something nasty, mister?'

He slid his hand into her cleavage. 'Yeah.'

'Oh, darn,' she said, and she lifted the skirt of her dress up around her waist.

She had no underwear on.

Priest grinned and unbuttoned his Levi's.

She said: 'What will Mario think if he sees us?'

'He'll be jealous,' Priest said as he entered her. They were almost the same height, and they fitted together with the ease of long practice.

She kissed his mouth.

A few moments later he heard a vehicle approaching on the road. They both looked up without stopping what they were doing. It was a pickup truck with three roustabouts in the front seat. The men could see what was going on, and they whooped and hollered through the open window as they went by.

Star waved at them, calling: 'Hi, guys!'

Priest laughed so hard he came.

*

The crisis had entered its final, decisive phase exactly three weeks earlier.

They were sitting at the long table in the cook-house, eating their midday meal, a spicy stew of lentils and vegetables with new bread warm from the oven, when Paul Beale walked in with an envelope in his hand.

Paul bottled the wine that Priest's commune made—but he did more than that. He was their link with the outside, enabling them to deal with the world yet keep it at a distance. A bald, bearded man in a leather jacket, he had been Priest's friend since the two of them were fourteen-year-old hoodlums, rolling drunks in LA's Skid Row in the early sixties.

Priest guessed that Paul had received the letter this morning and had immediately got in his car and driven here from Napa. He also guessed what was in the letter, but he waited for Paul to explain.

'It's from the Bureau of Land Management,' Paul said. 'Addressed to Stella Higgins.' He handed it to Star, sitting at the foot of the table opposite Priest. Stella Higgins was her real name, the name under which she had first rented this piece of land from the Department of the Interior in the autumn of 1969.

Around the table, everyone went quiet. Even the kids shut up, sensing the atmosphere of fear and dismay.

Star ripped open the envelope and took out a single sheet. She read it with one glance. 'June the seventh,' she said.

Priest said: 'Five weeks and two days from now.' That kind of calculation came automatically to him.

Several people groaned in despair. A woman called Song began to cry quietly. One of Priest's children, ten-year-old Ringo, said: 'Why, Star, why?'

Priest caught the eye of Melanie, the newest arrival. She was a tall, thin woman, twenty-eight years old, with striking good looks: pale skin, long hair the colour of paprika, and the body of a model. Her five-year-old son, Dusty, sat beside her. 'What?' Melanie said in a shocked voice. 'What is this?'

Everyone else had known this was coming, but it was too depressing to talk about, and they had not told Melanie.

Priest said: 'We have to leave the valley. I'm sorry, Melanie.'

Star read from the letter. "The above-named parcel of land will become dangerous for human habitation after June 7th, therefore your tenancy is hereby terminated on that date in accordance with clause nine, part B, paragraph two of your lease."

Melanie stood up. Her white skin flushed red, and her pretty face twisted in sudden rage. 'No!' she yelled. 'No! They can't do this to me—I've only just found you! I don't believe it, it's a lie.' She turned her fury on Paul. 'Liar!' she screamed. 'Motherfucking liar!'

Her child began to cry.

‘Hey, knock it off!’ Paul said indignantly. ‘I’m just the goddam mailman here!’

Everyone started shouting at the same time.

Priest was beside Melanie in a couple of strides. He put his arm around her and spoke quietly into her ear. ‘You’re frightening Dusty,’ he said. ‘Sit down, now. You’re right to be mad, we’re all mad as hell.’

‘Tell me it isn’t true,’ she said.

Priest gently pushed her into her chair. ‘It’s true, Melanie,’ he said. ‘It’s true.’

When they had quietened down, Priest said: ‘Come on, everyone, let’s wash the dishes and get back to work.’

‘Why?’ said Dale. He was the winemaker. Not one of the founders, he had come here in the eighties, disillusioned with the commercial world. After Priest and Star, he was the most important person in the group. ‘We won’t be here for the harvest,’ he went on. ‘We have to leave in five weeks. Why work?’

Priest fixed him with the Look, the hypnotic stare that intimidated all but the most strong-willed people. He let the room fall silent, so that they would all hear. At last he said: ‘Because miracles happen.’

*

A local ordinance prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages in the town of Shiloh, Texas, but just the other side of the town line there was a bar called the Doodlebug, with cheap draught beer and a country-western band and waitresses in tight blue jeans and cowboy boots.

Priest went on his own. He did not want Star to show her face and risk being remembered later. He wished she had not had to come to Texas. But he needed someone to help him take the seismic vibrator home. They would drive day and night, taking turns at the wheel, using drugs to stay awake. They wanted to be home before the machine was missed.

He was regretting that afternoon's indiscretion. Mario had seen Star from a full quarter of a mile away, and the three roustabouts in the pickup had glimpsed her only in passing, but she was distinctive-looking, and they could probably give a rough description of her: a tall white woman, heavy set, with long dark hair . . .

Priest had changed his appearance before arriving in Shiloh. He had grown a bushy beard and moustache, and tied his long hair in a tight plait which he kept tucked up inside his hat.

However, if everything went according to his plan, no one would be asking for descriptions of him or Star.

When he arrived at the Doodlebug, Mario was already there, sitting at a table with five or six of the jug team and the party boss, Lenny Petersen, who controlled the entire seismic exploration crew.

Not to seem too eager, Priest got a Lone Star longneck and stood at the bar for a while, sipping his beer from the bottle and talking to the barmaid, before joining Mario's table.

Lenny was a balding man with a red nose. He had given Priest the job, two weekends ago. Priest had

spent an evening at the bar, drinking moderately, being friendly to the crew, picking up a smattering of seismic exploration slang, and laughing loudly at Lenny's jokes. Next morning he had found Lenny at the field office and asked him for a job. 'I'll take you on trial,' Lenny had said.

That was all Priest needed.

He was hardworking, quick to catch on, and easy to get along with, and in a few days he was accepted as a regular member of the crew.

Now, as he sat down, Lenny said in his slow Texas accent: 'So, Ricky, you're not coming with us to Clovis.'

'That's right,' Priest said. 'I like the weather here too much to leave.'

'Well, I'd just like to say, very sincerely, that it's been a real privilege and pleasure knowing you, even for such a short time.'

The others grinned. This kind of joshing was commonplace. They looked to Priest for a riposte.

He put on a solemn face and said: 'Lenny, you're so sweet and kind to me that I'm going to ask you one more time. Will you marry me?'

They all laughed. Mario clapped Priest on the back.

Lenny looked troubled and said: 'You know I can't marry you, Ricky. I already told you the reason why.' He paused for dramatic effect, and they all leaned forward to catch the punchline. 'I'm a lesbian.'

They roared with laughter. Priest gave a rueful smile, acknowledging defeat, and ordered a pitcher of beer for the table.

The conversation turned to baseball. Most of them liked the Houston Astros, but Lenny was from Arlington and he followed the Texas Rangers. Priest had no interest in sports, so he waited impatiently, joining in now and again with a neutral comment. They were in expansive mood. The job had been finished on time, they had all been well paid and it was Friday night. Priest sipped his beer slowly. He never drank much: he hated to lose control. He watched Mario sinking the suds. When Tammy, their waitress, brought another pitcher, Mario stared longingly at her breasts beneath the chequered shirt. *Keep wishing, Mario—you could be in bed with your wife tomorrow night.*

After an hour, Mario went to the men's room.

Priest followed. *The hell with this waiting, it's decision time.*

He stood beside Mario and said: 'I believe Tammy's wearing black underwear tonight.'

'How do you know?'

'I got a little peek when she leaned over the table. I love to see a lacy brassiere.'

Mario sighed.

Priest went on: 'You like a woman in black underwear?'

'Red,' said Mario decisively.

'Yeah, red's beautiful, too. They say that's a sign a woman really wants you, when she puts on red underwear.'

'Is that a fact?' Mario's beery breath came a little faster.

'Yeah, I heard it somewhere.' Priest buttoned up. 'Listen, I got to go. My woman's waiting back at the motel.'

Mario grinned and wiped sweat from his brow. 'I saw you and her this afternoon, man.'

Priest shook his head in mock regret. 'It's my weakness. I just can't say no to a pretty face.'

'You were *doing* it, right there in the goddam road!'

'Yeah. Well, when you haven't seen your woman for a while, she gets kind of frantic for it, know what I mean?' *Come on, Mario, take the friggin' hint!*

'Yeah, I know. Listen, about tomorrow.'

Priest held his breath.

'Uh, if you're still willing to do like you said . . .'

Yes! Yes!

'Let's go for it.'

Priest resisted the temptation to hug him.

Mario said anxiously: 'You still want to, right?'

'Sure I do.' Priest put an arm around Mario's shoulders as they left the men's room. 'Hey, what are buddies for, know what I mean?'

'Thanks, man.' There were tears in Mario's eyes. 'You're some guy, Ricky.'

*

They washed their pottery bowls and wooden spoons in a big tub of warm water and dried them on a towel made from an old work shirt. Melanie said to Priest: 'Well, we'll just start again somewhere else! Get a piece of land, build wood cabins, plant vines, make wine. Why not? That's what you did all those years ago.'

‘It is,’ Priest said. He put his bowl on a shelf and tossed his spoon into the box. For a moment he was young again, strong as a pony and boundlessly energetic, certain that he could solve whatever problem life threw up next. He remembered the unique smells of those days: newly sawn timber; Star’s young body, perspiring as she dug the soil; the distinctive smoke of their own marijuana, grown in a clearing in the woods; the dizzy sweetness of grapes as they were crushed. Then he returned to the present, and he sat down at the table.

‘All those years ago,’ he repeated. ‘We rented this land from the government for next to nothing, then they forgot about us.’

Star put in: ‘Never a rent increase, in twenty-nine years.’

Priest went on: ‘We cleared the forest with the labour of thirty or forty young people who were willing to work free, twelve and fourteen hours a day, for the sake of an ideal.’

Paul Beale grinned. ‘My back still hurts when I think of it.’

‘We got our vines for nothing from a kindly Napa Valley grower who wanted to encourage young people to do something constructive instead of just sitting around taking drugs all day.’

‘Old Raymond Dellavalle,’ Paul said. ‘He’s dead now, God bless him.’

‘And, most important, we were willing and able to live on the poverty line, half-starved, sleeping on the floor, holes in our shoes, for five long years until we got our first saleable vintage.’

Star picked up a crawling baby from the floor, wiped its nose, and said: 'And we didn't have any kids to worry about.'

'Right,' Priest said. 'If we could reproduce all those conditions, we could start again.'

Melanie was not satisfied. 'There has to be a way!'

'Well, there is,' Priest said. 'Paul figured it out.'

Paul nodded. 'You could set up a corporation, borrow a quarter of a million dollars from a bank, hire a workforce, and become like any other bunch of greedy capitalists watching the profit margins.'

'And that,' Priest said, 'would be the same as giving in.'

*

It was still dark when Priest and Star got up on Saturday morning in Shiloh. Priest got coffee from the diner next door to their motel. When he came back, Star was poring over a road atlas by the light of the reading lamp. 'You should be dropping Mario off at San Antonio international airport around nine thirty, ten o'clock this morning,' she said. 'Then you'll want to leave town on Interstate 10.'

Priest did not look at the atlas. Maps baffled him. He could follow signs for I-10. 'Where shall we meet?'

Star calculated. 'I should be about an hour ahead of you.' She put her finger on a point on the page. 'There's a place called Leon Springs on I-10 about fifteen miles from the airport. I'll park where you're sure to see the car.'

'Sounds good.'