

## Ninety-Eight Point Six

Jeffery Deaver

Suit jacket slung over his shoulder, the man trudged up the long walk to the bungalow, his lungs aching, breathless in the astonishing heat, which had persisted well after sundown.

Pausing on the sidewalk in front of the house, trying to catch his breath, he believed he heard troubled voices from inside. Still, he'd had no choice but to come here. This was the only house he'd seen along the highway.

He climbed the stairs to the unwelcomingly dark porch and rang the bell.

The voices ceased immediately.

There was a shuffle. Two or three words spoken.

He rang the bell again, and finally the door opened.

Sloan observed that the three people inside gazed at him with different expressions on their faces.

The woman on the couch, in her fifties, wearing an overwashed sleeveless housedress, appeared relieved. The man sitting beside her—about the same age, rounding and bald—was wary.

And the man who'd opened the door and stood closest to Sloan had a grin on his face—a thick-lipped grin that really meant, *What the hell do you want?* He was about Sloan's own age—late thirties—and his tattooed arms were long. He gripped the side of the door defensively with a massive hand. His clothes were gray, stained dungarees and a torn work shirt. His shaved scalp glistened.

“Help you?” the tattooed man asked.

“I'm sorry to bother you,” Sloan said. “My car broke down—it overheated. I need to call Triple A. You mind if I use your phone?”

“Phone company's having problems, I heard,” the tattooed man replied, nodding toward the dense, still night sky. “With the heat—those rolling brownouts or blackouts, whatever.”

He didn't move out of the doorway.

But the woman said quickly, “No, please come in,” with curious eagerness. “Our phone just rang a bit ago. I'm sure it's working fine.”

“Please,” echoed the older man, who was holding her hand.

The tattooed man looked Sloan over cautiously, as people often did. Unsmiling by nature, Sloan was a big man, and muscular—he'd worked out every day for the past three years—and at the moment he was a mess; tonight he'd trekked through the brush to take a shortcut to the lights of this house. And like anyone walking around on this overwhelmingly humid and hot night, every inch of his skin was slick with sweat.

Finally, the tattooed man gestured him inside. Sloan noticed a bad scar across the back of his hand. It looked like a knife wound, and it was recent.

The house was overly bright and painfully hot. A tiny air conditioner moaned but did nothing to cool the still air. He glanced at the walls, taking in fast vignettes of lives spent in a small bubble of the world. He deduced careers with Allstate Insurance and a high school library and nebulous involvement in the Rotary Club, church groups, and parent-teacher organizations. Busmen's holidays of fishing trips to Saginaw or Minnesota. A vacation to Chicago memorialized in framed, yellowing snapshots.

Introductions were made. "I'm Dave Sloan."

Agnes and Bill Willis were the couple. Sloan observed immediately that they shared an ambiguous similarity of manner that characterized people long married. The tattooed man said nothing about himself. He tinkered with the air conditioner, turning the compressor knob up and down.

"I'm not interrupting supper, I hope."

There was a moment of silence. It was eight p.m., and Sloan could see no dirty dishes from the night's meal.

"No" was Agnes's soft reply.

"Nope, no food here," the tattooed man said with a cryptic edge to the comment. He looked angrily at the air conditioner as if he were going to kick it out the window, but controlled himself and walked back to the place he'd staked out for himself: an overstuffed Naugahyde armchair that still glistened with the sweat that'd leached from his skin before he stood to answer the door.

"Phone's in there." Bill pointed.

Sloan thanked him and went into the kitchen. He made his call. As soon as he stepped back into the living room, Bill and the younger man, who'd been talking, fell silent fast.

Sloan looked at Bill and said, "They'll tow it to Hatfield. The truck should be here in

twenty minutes. I can wait outside.”

“No,” Agnes said, then seemed to decide she’d been too forceful and glanced at the tattooed man with a squint, almost as if she was afraid of being hit.

“Too hot outside,” Bill said.

“No hotter’n in here,” the tattooed man replied caustically, with that grin back. His lips were bulbous, and the top one was beaded with sweat—an image that made Sloan itch.

“Set yourself down,” Bill said cautiously.

Sloan looked around and found the only unoccupied piece of furniture, an uncomfortable couch covered in pink and green chintz, flowers everywhere. The gaudy pattern, combined with the still heat in the room and the nervous fidgeting of the large, tattooed man set him on edge.

“Can I get you anything?” the woman asked.

“Maybe some water if it’s not too much trouble.” Sloan wiped his face with his hand.

The woman rose.

“Notice,” the tattooed man said coolly, “they didn’t introduce me.”

“Well, I didn’t mean—” Bill began. The man waved him silent.

“My name’s Greg.” Another hesitation. “I’m their nephew. Just stopped by for a visit. Right, Bill? Aren’t we having a high old time?”

Bill nodded, looking down at the frayed carpet. “High old time.”

Sloan was suddenly aware of something—a curious noise. A scraping. A faint bang. No one else seemed to hear it. He looked up as Agnes returned. She handed Sloan the glass, and he drank half of it down immediately.

She said, “I was thinking, maybe you could look at Mr. Sloan’s car, Bill. Why don’t you and Greg go take a look at it?”

“Dave,” Sloan said. “Please. Call me Dave.”

“Maybe save Dave some money.”

“Sure—” Bill began.

Greg said, “Naw, we don’t wanna do that. Too much work in this heat. ’Sides, Dave looks like he can afford a proper mechanic. He looks like he’s rollin’ in dough. How ’bout it, Dave? Whatta you do?”

“Sales.”

“Whatcha sell?”

“Computers. Hardware and software.”

“I don’t trust computers. Bet I’m the only person in the country without E-mail.”

“No, a good eighty million people don’t have it, I heard,” Dave told him.

Bill piped up. “Children, for instance.”

“Like me, huh? Me and the kiddies? Is that what you’re saying?” Greg asked.

“Oh, no,” Bill said quickly. “I just was talking. Didn’t mean any offense.”

“How about you, Greg?” Sloan asked. “What line’re you in?”

He considered for a minute. “I work with my hands... Want to know what Bill does?”

A dark look crossed Bill’s face; then it vanished. “I was in insurance. I’m between jobs right now.”

“He’ll be working someday soon, though, won’t you, Bill?”

“I hope to be.”

“I’m sure you will,” Agnes said.

“We’re *all* sure he will. Hey, Sloan, you think Bill could sell computers?”

“I don’t know. All I know is I enjoy what I do.”

“You good at it?”

“Oh, I’m very good at it.”

“Why computers?”

“Because there’s a market for what my company makes right now. But it doesn’t matter to me. I can sell anything. Maybe next year it’ll be radiators or a new kind of medical laser. If I can make money at it, I’ll sell it.”

“Why don’t you tell us about your computers?” Greg asked.

Sloan shrugged dismissively. “It’s real technical. You’d be bored.”

“Well, we don’t want to bore anybody now, especially us kiddies. Not if we’re having such an enjoyable party, the family all together...family.” Greg thumped the arm of the chair with his massive hands. “Don’t you think family’s important? I do. You have family, Dave?”

“They’re dead. My immediate family, that is.”

“All of ’em?” Greg asked curiously.

“My parents and sister.”

“How’d they die?”

Agnes stirred at this blunt question, but Sloan didn't mind. "An accident."

"Accident?" Greg nodded. "My folks're gone, too," he added emotionlessly.

Which meant that, because he was their nephew, Bill and Agnes had lost a sibling, too. But Greg didn't acknowledge their portion of the loss.

The sound of the air conditioner seemed to vanish as the silence of four mute human beings filled the tiny, stifling room. Then Sloan heard a faint thumping. It seemed to come from behind a closed door off the hallway. No one else noticed. He heard it again; then the sound ceased.

Greg rose and walked to a thermometer tacked up on the wall. A silver wire ran through a hole sloppily drilled through the window jamb. He tapped the circular dial with his finger. "Busted," he announced. Then he turned back to the threesome. "I heard the news? Before? And they said that it was ninety-eight degrees at sunset. That's a record round here, the newscaster said. I got to thinking. Ninety-eight point six-that's the temperature of a human body. And you know what occurred to me?"

Sloan examined the man's eerie, amused eyes. He said nothing. Neither did Bill or Agnes.

Greg continued. "I realized that there's no difference between life and death. Not a bit. Whatta you think about that?"

"No difference? I don't get it." Sloan shook his head.

"See, take a bad person. What son of person should we use, Bill? Maybe a person who doesn't pay his debts. How's that? OK, now what I'm saying is that it's not his *body*, it's his *soul* that's a welcher. When he dies, what hangs around? A welcher's soul. Same thing with a good man. There's a good soul hanging around after a good body goes. Or a murderer, for instance. When they execute a murderer, there's a killer's soul still walking around."

"That's an interesting thought, Greg."

"The way I see it," the intense man continued, "a body is just a soul warmed to ninety-eight point six degrees."

"I'd have to think about it."

"OK, our folks are dead, yours and mine," Greg continued.

"True," Sloan replied.

"But even when they're gone," Greg said philosophically, "you can still have trouble because of them, right?" He sat back in the slick, stained chair and crossed his legs. He wore no

socks, and Sloan got a look at another tattoo—one that started on his ankle and went north. Sloan knew that tattoos on the ankle were among the most painful on the body, since the needle had to hit bone. A tattoo there was more than body painting; it was a defiant reminder that pain was nothing to the wearer.

“Trouble?”

“Your parents can cause you grief after they’re dead.”

*Any psychiatrist’d tell you that*, Sloan thought, but he decided that this was a bit too clever for Greg.

The young man rubbed his massive hand over his glistening head. That was quite a scar he had. Another one was on his opposite arm. “There was this thing happened a few years ago.”

“What was that?” Bill asked.

Sloan noticed that Agnes had shredded the napkin she was holding.

“Well, I’m not inclined to go into specifics with strangers,” he said, irritated.

“I’m sorry,” Bill said quickly.

“I’m just making a point. Which is that somebody who was dead was still causing me problems. I could see it real clear. A bitch when she was alive, a bitch when she was dead. God gave her a troublemaker’s soul. You believe in God, Sloan?”

“No.”

Agnes stirred. Sloan glanced at three crucifixes on the wall.

“I believe in selling. That’s about it.”

“That’s *your* soul then. Warmed to ninety-eight point six.” A rubbery grin. “Since you’re still alive.”

“And what’s your soul like, Greg? Good, bad?”

“Well, I’m not a welcher,” he said coyly. “Beyond that, you’ll have to guess. I don’t give as much away as you do.”

The lights dimmed. Another dip in the power.

“Look at that,” Greg said. “Maybe it’s the souls of some family hanging around here, playing with the lights. Whatta you think, Bill?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“A family that died here,” Greg mused. “Anybody die here that you know of, Bill?”

Agnes swallowed hard. Bill took a sip from a glass of what looked like flat soda. His hands shook.

The lights came back on full. Greg looked around the place. “Whatta you think this house’s worth, Sloan?”

“I don’t know,” he answered calmly, growing tired of the baiting. “I sell computers, remember? Not houses.”

“I’m thinking a cool two hundred thousand.”

The noise again from behind the door. It was louder this time, audible over the moaning of the air conditioner. A scraping, a thud.

The three people in the room looked toward the door. Agnes and Bill were uneasy. Nobody said a word about the sound.

“Where’ve you been selling your computers?” Greg asked.

“I was in Durrant today. Now I’m heading east.”

“Times’re slow round here. People out of work, right, Bill?”

“Hard times.”

“Hard times here, hard times everywhere.” Greg seemed drunk, but Sloan smelled no liquor and noticed that the only alcohol in sight was a corked bottle of New York State port and a cheap brandy, sitting safely behind a greasy-windowed breakfront. “Hard times for salesmen, too, I’ll bet. Even salesmen who can sell *anything*, like you.”

Sloan calmly asked, “Something about me you don’t like, Greg?”

“Why, no.” But the man’s steely eyes muttered the opposite. “Where’d you get that idea?”

“It’s the heat,” Agnes said quickly, playing mediator. “I was watching this show on the news. CNN. About what the heat’s doing. Rioting in Detroit, forest fires up near Saginaw. It’s making people act crazy.”

“Crazy?” Greg asked. “Crazy?”

“I didn’t mean you,” she said fast.

Greg turned to Sloan. “Let’s ask Mr. Salesman here if I’m acting crazy.”

Sloan figured he could have the boy on his back in a stranglehold in four or five minutes, but there’d be some serious damage to the tacky knickknacks. And the police’d come, and there’d be all sorts of complications.

“Well, how 'bout it?”

“Nope, you don't seem crazy to me.”

“You're saying that 'cause you don't want a hassle. Maybe you *don't* have a salesman's soul. Maybe you've got a liar's soul...” He rubbed his face with both hands. “Damn, I've sweated a gallon.”

Sloan sensed control leaving the man. He noticed a gun rack on the wall. There were two rifles in it. He judged how fast he could get there. Was Bill stupid enough to leave an unlocked, loaded gun on the rack? Probably.

“Let me tell you something—” Greg began ominously, tapping the sweaty arms of the chair with blunt fingers.

The doorbell rang.

No one moved for a moment. Then Greg rose and walked to it and opened the door.

A husky man with long hair stood in the doorway. “Somebody called for a tow?”

“That'd be me.” Sloan stood and said to Agnes and Bill, “Thanks for the use of the phone.”

“No problem.”

“You're sure you don't want to stay? I can put some supper on. Please?” The poor woman was now clearly desperate.

“No. I have to be going.”

“Yeah,” Greg said, “Dave's got to be going.”

“Damn,” the tow operator said. “Hotter in there than it is outside.”

*You don't know the half of it*, Sloan thought and started down the steps to the idling flatbed.

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The driver winched Sloan's disabled Chevy onto the bed, chained it down, and then the two men climbed inside the cab of the truck. They pulled out onto the highway, heading east. The air conditioner roared, and the cool air was a blessing.

The radio clattered. Sloan couldn't hear it clearly over the AC, but the driver leaned forward and listened to what was apparently some important message. When the transmission



was over, the driver said, “They still haven’t caught that guy.”

“What guy?” Sloan asked.

“The killer. The guy who escaped from that prison earlier.”

“I didn’t hear about that.”

“I hope it makes it on *America’s Most Wanted*. You ever watch that show?”

“No. I don’t watch much TV,” Sloan said.

“I do,” the tow driver offered. “Can be educational.”

“Who is this guy?”

“Sort of a psycho killer, one of those sorts. Like in *Silence of the Lambs*. How ‘bout movies, you like movies?”

“Yeah,” Sloan responded. “That was a good flick.”

“Guy was in the state prison about twenty miles west of here.”

“How’d he escape? That’s a pretty high-security place, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. My brother...um, my brother had a *friend* that did time there for grand theft auto. Hard place. What they said on the news was that this killer was in the yard of that prison and, what with the heat, there was a power failure. I guess the backup didn’t go on either or something, and the lights and the electrified fence were down for, I dunno, almost an hour. By the time they got it going again, he was gone.”

Sloan shivered as the freezing air chilled his sweat soaked clothes. He asked, “Say, you know that family where you picked me up? The Willises?”

“No, sir. I don’t get out this way much.”

They continued driving for twenty minutes. Ahead, Sloan saw a band of flashing lights.

The driver said, “Roadblock. Probably searching for that escapee.”

Sloan could see two police cars. Two uniformed officers were pulling people over.

The salesman said to the tow driver, “When you get up there, pull off to the side. I want to talk to one of the cops.”

“Sure thing, mister.”

When they pulled over, Sloan got out and told the driver, “I’ll just be a minute.” He inhaled deeply, but no air seemed to get into his lungs. His chest began to hurt again.

One of the officers glanced at Sloan. The big man, his tan shirt dark with sweat, approached. “Hold up there, sir. Can I help you?” He held his flashlight defensively as he walked

coward Sloan, who introduced himself and handed over a business card. Sloan observed the man's name badge: *Sheriff Mills*. The law enforcer looked the card over and then at Sloan's suit and, satisfied that he wasn't the man they were looking for, asked, "What can I do for you?"

"Is this about that fellow who escaped from the prison?" He nodded at the squad car.

"Yes, sir, it is. You seen anything that might help us find him?"

"Well, it might be nothing. But I thought I should mention it."

"Go ahead."

"What's the prisoner look like?"

"Just escaped about two hours ago. We don't have a picture yet. But he's in his mid-thirties, beard. Six feet, muscular build. Like yours, more or less."

"Shaved head?"

"No. But if I was him, I mighta shaved it the minute I got out. Lost the beard, too."

"Tattoo?"

"Don't know. Probably."

Sloan explained about his car breaking down and his stop at the Willises' house. "You think that prisoner would come this way?"

"If he had his wits about him, he would. To go west'd take him fifty miles through forest. This way, he's got a crack at stealing a car in town or hitching a ride on the interstate."

"And that'd take him right past the Willises'?"

"Yep. If he took Route 202. What're you getting at, Mr. Sloan?"

"I think that fellow might be at the Willises' house."

"What?"

"Do you know if they have a nephew?"

"I don't think they ever mentioned one."

"Well, there's a man there now—sort of fits the description of the killer. He claimed he was Bill's nephew, visiting them. But something didn't seem right. I mean, first of all, it was supertime, but they hadn't eaten and they weren't cooking anything and there were no dirty dishes in the kitchen. And anything Greg told them to do, they did. Like they were afraid to upset him."

The sheriff found a wad of paper towel in his pocket and wiped his face and head. "Anything else?"

“He was saying weird stuff—talking about death and about this experience he had that made him look at dying differently. Like it wasn’t that bad a thing... Spooked me. Oh, and another thing: he said he didn’t want to mention something in front of strangers. He might’ve meant me, but then why’d he say ‘strangers,’ not ‘a stranger’? It was like he meant Bill and Agnes, too.”

“Good point.”

“He also had some bad scars. Like he’d been in a knife fight. And he mentioned somebody who died—a woman, who gave him as much grief after she was dead as before. I was thinking he meant trouble with the law for killing her.”

“What’d their daughter say?”

“Daughter?”

“The Willises have a daughter. Sandy. Didn’t you see her? She’s home from college now. And she works the day shift at Taco Bell. She should’ve been home by now.”

“Jesus,” Sloan muttered. “I didn’t see her... But I remember something else. The door to one of the bedrooms was closed, and there was a sound coming from inside it. Everybody there was uneasy about it. You don’t think she was, I don’t know, tied up inside there?”

“Lord,” the sheriff said, wiping his face, “that escapee—he was arrested for raping and murdering girls. College girls.” He pulled out his radio. “All Hatfield police units. This’s Mills. I have a lead on that prisoner. The perpetrator might be out at Bill Willis’s place off 202. Leave one car each on the roadblocks, but everybody else respond immediately. Silent roll up, with lights out. Stop on the road near the driveway, but don’t go in. Wait for me.”

Replies came back.

The sheriff turned to Sloan. “We might need you as a witness, Mr. Sloan.”

“Sure, whatever I can do.”

The sheriff said, “Have the driver take you to the police station—it’s on Elm Street. My girl’s there; Clara’s her name. Just tell her the same thing you told me. I’ll call her and tell her to take your statement.”

“Be happy to, Sheriff.”

The sheriff ran back to his car and jumped in. His deputy climbed into the passenger seat, and they skidded 180 degrees and sped off toward the Willises’ house.

Sloan watched them vanish and climbed back in the truck, said to the driver, “Never

thought I'd end up in the middle of this."

"Most exciting call *I've* ever had," the man replied, "I'll tell you that."

The driver pulled back onto the highway, and the flatbed clattered down the asphalt toward a faint band of light radiated by the heat-soaked town of Hatfield, Michigan.

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"I don't see anybody but the Willises," the deputy whispered. He'd made a fast reconnaissance of the bungalow through a side window. "They're just sitting there talking, Bill and Agnes."

Three male officers and two women—five-eighths of the Hatfield constabulary—surrounded the house.

"He might be in the john. Let's go in fast."

"We knock?"

"No," the sheriff muttered, "we don't knock."

They burst through the front door so fast that Agnes dropped her soda on the couch, and Bill made it two steps to the gun rack before he recognized the sheriff and his deputies.

"Lord of mercy, you scared us, Hal."

"What a fright," Agnes muttered. Then: "Don't blaspheme, Bill."

"Are you OK?"

"Sure, we're OK. Why?"

"And your daughter?"

"She's out with her friends. Is this about her? Is she all right?"

"No, it's not about her." Sheriff Mills slipped his gun away. "Where is he, Bill?"

"Who?"

"That fellow who was here?"

"The guy whose car broke down?" Agnes asked. "He left in the tow truck."

"No, not him. The guy calling himself Greg."

"Greg?" Agnes asked. "Well, he's gone, too. What's this all about?"

"Who is he?" the sheriff asked.

"He's my late brother's son," Bill said. "He really is your nephew?"

“Much as I hate to say it, yeah.”

The sheriff put the gun away. “That Sloan, the man who called the tow truck from here—he had this idea that maybe Greg was that escapee. We thought he’d held you hostage.”

“What escapee?”

“A killer from that prison west of here. A psychopath. He escaped a couple of hours ago.”

“No!” Agnes said breathlessly. “We didn’t have the news on tonight.”

The sheriff told them what Sloan had mentioned about how odd Greg had behaved and how the Willises clearly didn’t want him there, were even afraid of him.

Agnes nodded. “See, we...”

Her voice faded and she glanced at her husband, who said, “It’s OK, honey, you can tell him.”

“When Bill lost his job last year, we didn’t know what we were going to do. We only had a little savings and my job at the library, well, that wasn’t bringing in much money. So we had to borrow some. The bank wouldn’t even talk to us, so we called Greg.”

Clearly ashamed, Bill shook his head. “He’s the richest one in the family.”

“Him?” Sheriff Mills asked.

Agnes said, “Yep. He’s a plumber.... No, sorry, a ‘plumbing contractor.’ Makes money hand over fist. Has eight trucks. He inherited the business when Bill’s brother died.”

Her husband: “Well, he made me a loan. Insisted on a second mortgage on the house, of course. And plenty of interest, too. More’n the banks woulda charged. Was real obnoxious about it, since we never really had him and his dad over when he was growing up—my brother and me didn’t get along too good. But he wrote us a check, and nobody else would. I thought I’d have another job by now, but nothing came up. And unemployment ran out. When I couldn’t make the payments to him, I stopped returning his phone calls. I was so embarrassed. He finally drove over here tonight and stopped by unannounced. He gave us hell. Threatening to foreclose, drive us out in the street. That’s when Mr. Sloan showed up. We were hoping he’d stay. It was a nightmare sitting here listening to Greg go on and on.”

“Sloan said he was scarred. Like knife wounds.”

“Accidents on the job, I guess,” Bill said.

“What’d he mean about a woman who died a few years ago?”

Nodding, Bill said, “He wouldn’t tell us exactly what he meant.” He looked at Agnes. “I’

d guess that must've been his girlfriend. She died in a car wreck, and Greg sort of inherited her son for a few months. It was a mess—Greg's not the best father, as you can imagine. Finally, her sister took the boy.”

The sheriff remembered something else Sloan had said. “He said he heard something in the other room. It seemed suspicious to him.”

Agnes blushed fiercely. “That was Sandy.”

“Your daughter?”

A nod. The woman couldn't continue. Bill said, “She came home with her boyfriend. They went into her room so she could change out of her uniform before they went out. The next thing you know— well, you can figure it out... I told her to respect us. I told her not to be with him when we were home. She doesn't care.”

*So it was all a misunderstanding*, Sheriff Mills reflected.

Bill laughed faintly. “And you thought Greg was the killer? That's wild.”

“Wasn't that far-fetched,” the sheriff said. “Think about it. The guy escaped at five tonight. That'd be just enough time to steal a car and get to your place from Durrant in early evening.”

“Guess that's right,” Bill said.

The sheriff returned to the door and started to open it. Bill said, “Wait a minute, Hal. You said Durrant?”

“Right. That's where the prison is that guy escaped from.”

Bill looked at Agnes. “Didn't that fellow Sloan say he'd just come here from Durrant?”

“Yeah, he did. I'm sure.”

“Really?” the sheriff asked. He returned to the Willises, then asked, “What else do you know about him?”

“Nothing much really. Just that he said he sold computers.”

“Computers?” The sheriff frowned. “Around here?”

“That's what he said.”

This was odd; Hatfield was hardly a high-tech area of the state. The closest retail computer store was fifteen miles south of here. “Anything else?”

“He was pretty evasive, now that I think about it. Didn't say much of anything. Except he did say his parents were dead.”

“And he didn’t seem very upset about it,” Agnes offered.

The sheriff reflected: “And Sloan was about the same age and build as the killer. Dark hair, too.”

*Damn, he thought, I didn’t even look at his driver’s license, only his business card. He might’ve killed the real Sloan and stolen his car.*

“And that was another thing. He said his car overheated,” Bill pointed out. “You’d think a salesman’d be in a new car. And you ever hear about cars overheating nowadays? Hardly ever happens. And at night?”

“Mary, Mother of God,” Agnes said, crossing herself, apparently finding an exception to the rule about blasphemy. “He was right here, in our house.”

But the sheriff’s mind continued further along this troubling path. Sloan, he now understood, had known there’d be a roadblock. So he’d disabled his car himself, called Triple A, and waltzed right through the roadblock. *Hell, he even walked right up to me, ballsy as could be, and spun that story about Greg to lead the law off*

*And we let him get away. He could be—*

*No!*

And then he felt the punch in his gut. He’d sent Sloan to police headquarters. Where there was only one other person at the moment: Clara. Twenty-one years old. Beautiful.

And whom the sheriff referred to as “his girl” not out of any vestigial chauvinism but because she was, in fact, his daughter, working for him on summer vacation from college.

He grabbed the Willises’ phone and called the station.

There was no answer.

Sheriff Mills ran from the house, climbed into his car. “Oh, Lord, please no...”

The deputy with him offered a prayer, too. But the sheriff didn’t hear it. He dropped into the seat and slammed the door. Ten seconds later, the Crown Vic hit eighty as it cut through the night air, hot as soup and dotted with the lights from a thousand edgy fireflies.

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No reconnaissance this time.

On Elm Street downtown, the sheriff skidded to a stop against a trash can, knocking it

over and scattering the street with empty soda bottles and Good Humor sticks and wrappers.

His deputy was beside him, carting the stubby scattergun, a shell chambered and the safety off.

“What’s the plan?” the deputy asked.

“This.” Sheriff Mills snapped and slammed into the door with his shoulder, leveling the gun as he rushed inside, the deputy on his heels.

Both men stopped fast, staring at the two people in the room, caught in the act of sipping Arizona iced teas. Dave Sloan and the sheriff’s daughter, both blinking in shock at the hostile entrance.

The officers lowered their weapons.

“Dad!”

“What’s the matter, Sheriff?” Sloan asked.

“I—” he stammered. “Mr. Sloan, could I see some ID?”

Sloan showed his driver’s license to the sheriff, who examined the picture; it was clearly Sloan. Then Mills shamefacedly told them what he’d suspected after his conversation with the Willises.

Sloan took the news good-naturedly. “Probably should’ve asked for that license up front, Sheriff.”

“I probably should have. Right you are. It was just that things seemed a little suspicious. Like you told them that you’d just come from Durrant—”

“My company installs and services the prison computers. It’s one of my big accounts.” He fished in his jacket pocket and showed the sheriff a work order. “These blackouts from the heat are hell on computers. If you don’t shut them down properly, it causes all kinds of problems.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, sir. You have to understand—”

“That you got a killer on the loose.” Sloan laughed again. “So they thought *I* was the killer... Only fair, I suppose, since *I* thought Greg was.”

“I called before,” the sheriff said to his daughter. “There was no answer. Where were you?”

“Oh, the AC went out. Mr. Sloan here and I went out back to see if we could get it going.”



A moment later, the fax machine began churning out a piece of paper. It contained a picture of a young man, bearded, with trim, dark hair: the two-angle mug shot of the escapee.

The sheriff showed it to Sloan and Clara. He read from the prison's bulletin. "Name's Tony Windham. Rich kid from Ann Arbor. Worth millions, trust funds, prep school. Honors grad. But he's got something loose somewhere. Killed six women and never showed a gnat of regret at the trial. Well, he's not getting through Hatfield. Route 202 and 17're the only ways to the interstate, and we're checking every car." He then said to the deputy, "Let's spell the boys on the roadblocks."

Outside, Sheriff Mills pointed Dave Sloan to the garage where his Chevy was being fixed and climbed into his squad car with his deputy. He wiped the sweat with a soggy paper towel and said good night to the salesman. "Stay cool."

Sloan laughed. "Like a snowball in hell. Night, Sheriff."

\* \* \*

In Earl's Automotive, Sloan wandered up to the mechanic, who was as stained from sweat as he was from grease.

"Okay, she's fixed," the man told Sloan.

"What was wrong with it?"

"The cap'd come loose, and your coolant shot out is all. Feel bad charging you."

"But you're gonna anyway."

The man pulled his soggy baseball cap off and wiped his forehead with the crown. Replaced it. "I'd be home in a cold bath right now, it wasn't for your wheels."

"Fair enough."

"Only charged you twenty."

Any other time, Sloan would have negotiated, but he wanted to get back on the road. He paid and climbed into the car, fired it up, and turned the AC on full. He pulled onto the main street and headed out of town.

Ten miles east of Hatfield, near the interstate, he turned into the parking lot of a Greyhound bus station. He stopped the car in a deserted part of the lot. He climbed out and popped the trunk.

Looking inside, he nodded to the young, bearded man in prison overalls. The man blinked painfully at the brilliant lights above them and gasped for air. He was curled up fetally.

“How you doing?” Sloan asked.

“Jesus,” Tony Windham muttered, gasping, his head lolling around alarmingly.

“Heat...dizzy. Cramps.”

“Climb out slow.”

Sloan helped the prisoner out of the car. Even with the beard and sweat-drenched hair, he looked much more like a preppy banker than a serial killer, though those two activities weren't mutually exclusive, Sloan supposed.

“Sorry,” the salesman said. “It took longer than I thought for the tow to come. Then I got stuck in the sheriff's office waiting for them to come back.

“I went through two quarts of that water,” Windham said. “And I still don't need to pee.”

Sloan looked around the deserted lot. “There's a bus on the hour going to Cleveland. There's a ticket in there and a fake driver's license,” he added, handing Windham a gym bag, which also contained some toiletries and a change of clothes. The killer stepped into the shadow of a Dumpster and dressed in the jeans and T-shirt, which said, “Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.” Windham pitched his prison outfit into the Dumpster. Then he hunched over and shaved the beard off with Evian water and Edge gel, using his fingers to make certain he'd gotten all the whiskers. When he was finished, he stuffed his hair under a baseball cap.

“How do I look?”

“Like a whole new man.

“Damn,” the boy said. “You did it, Sloan. You're good.”

The salesman had met Tony Windham in the prison library a month ago when he was supervising upgrades of the penitentiary computer systems. He found Windham charming and smart and empathic—the same skills that had catapulted Sloan to stardom as a salesman. The two hit it off. Finally, Windham made his offer for the one thing that Sloan could sell him: freedom. There was no negotiation. Sloan set the price at three million, which the rich kid had arranged to have transferred into an anonymous overseas account.

Sloan's plan was to wait for one of the hottest days of the year, then, pretending there'd been a momentary electric blackout, he would shut down the power and security systems at the prison using the computers. This would give Windham a chance to climb over the fence. Sloan

would then pick up the killer, who'd hide in the trunk, specially perforated with air holes and stocked with plenty of water. Since he'd be coming from the prison, Sloan had assumed that every car would be searched at roadblocks, so he'd stopped the car outside one of the few houses along Route 202 and left his coolant cap off so the car would overheat. He'd then asked to use the phone. He'd intended to learn a little about the homeowners so he could come up with a credible story about suspicious goings-on at the house and distract the cops, keep them from searching his car. But he'd never thought he'd find as good a false lead as the crazy plumber, Greg.

*"I realized that there's no difference between life and death. Not a bit. Whatta you think about that?"*

Sloan gave Tony Windham five hundred in cash.

The killer shook Sloan's hand. Then he frowned. "You're probably wondering, now that I'm out, am I going to clean up my act? If I'm going to, well, keep behaving like I was before. With the girls."

Sloan held up a hand to silence him. "I'll give you a lesson about my business, Tony. Once the deal closes, a good salesman never thinks about what the buyer does with the product."

The boy nodded and started for the station, the bag over his shoulder.

Sloan got back in his company car and started the engine. He opened his attaché case and looked over the sales sheets for tomorrow. Some good prospects, he reflected happily. He turned the AC up full, pulled out of the parking lot, and headed east, looking for a hotel where he could spend the night.

*"You believe in God, Sloan?"*

*"No. I believe in selling. That's about it."*

*"That's your soul then."*

Dave Sloan reflected, *It sure is.*

Warmed to ninety-eight point six.