

"Just like that?" Shelagh asked.

"Yeah. Just like that. Nobody killed my kid brother. No preacher filled me with the Lord's goodness and light. No Jessie Jackson looked me in the eyes. None of that good shit. I just woke up one morning and started thinking. Thinking, you crazy Lincoln, you one crazy stupid no-good muthuh. Ain't that right James?"

James sipped his drink and stared at the table.

"So why are you here?" Shelagh again, unable to leave well enough alone.

"I'm working with a youth project, federal thing. I walked into their office down in Watts looking for help, you know, get back to school, get a job. And whadda they do, man, they trains me to be a youth worker. Three years, and now they sent me up here to help start things up in this neighborhood. Me, Lincoln, one of the best car thieves Watts ever seen."

If we can believe you, I thought. I'd heard about car theft rings operating out of California. They come up here, get local kids to steal the cars and take the risks, scoop up the profits and head back south. There was probably a market for vintage cars too, like 55 Chevs, even a lemon that could be fixed up with proper cash and sold to a collector.

"And the scar?"

Jesus, Shelagh.

"Knife fight."

"And the other guy?"

"Dead."

"Wow," said Shelagh, shaking her head, almost admiringly, I thought.

"That's the only person I ever killed. Swear to God, and I do believe in the good Lord now. Only guy I ever hurt bad. Self-defense, man. Territory thing. He wanted mine and came after me. You do or get done to. Right James?"

James just leaned his head back and half-closed his eyes.

And that somehow triggered a switch in Shelagh's curiosity.

"What about you James?"

James didn't answer. His eyelids closed.

"James don't like to talk too much bout himself. Right James?"

"Left Kansas City because of a paternity suit," James said, not moving or opening his eyes. "I moved to Cleveland, but had to leave there."

Shelagh: "How come?"

"Another paternity suit. So I moved to L.A."

"And let me guess," Shelagh said, "you had to leave there because of a paternity suit."

"Jesus, Shelagh, give the man some privacy," I finally said.

James opened his eyes and slowly rolled his head in my direction.

"It's cool man," he drawled. "You got a smart lady here." He looked at Shelagh. "Yes ma'm, three paternity suits."

"Proud of it?" Shelagh asked, and I would've hauled her into another room, if James' look a moment before hadn't shut me up.

I just wanted to agree on a price, have them sign the papers, and get them out the door. This wasn't an R&B dance. One guy was running from the law in three states, and the other, youth worker or not, had murdered somebody in a fight over drug turf. All I wanted was to unload the Chev.

"No. I'm not proud. It was foolish."

"So what does a man do about three paternity suits?"

"I go back, I got nothing. I started a job here, in a pipeline company. I'm a welder. Pretty good wages, I gonna send some back, what I can."

"All three."

I couldn't help butting in: "Can't go very far split three ways, plus your own expenses."

James kept looking at Shelagh: "When you got nothing, anything's something. Anthea...that's the Kansas City lady...might say, 'Fuck you James, what am I sposed to do with fifty dollars,' but she gonna take it all the same to the store."

"I could sure use an extra fifty," Shelagh said.

"I'll buy the car," James said, looking at Lincoln now, who nodded. "But, like I said, I just started work. I'd have to pay you a fifty a week." James looked at me now.

"I don't know..." I started.

"Sounds fine," Shelagh said.

I wanted another drink, but the scotch was gone.

"I'll put it in writing."

"Not necessary," she said. I was about to insist, but James beat me to it. He asked for some paper and a pen, and told me to write up a payment agreement, which I did, and he signed, along with the transfer documents.

"I want to take the car."

"But there's no insurance, and it's legally in my name until you transfer the papers."

"I just drive Lincoln and me home and park it till I do the paper thing tomorrow."