

"A powerful novel. Beginning to end, it never loses its grip . . .
The book is a wonderful achievement" *Michael Connelly*

Gar Anthony **HAYWOOD** Cemetery Road



"A thoughtful book, written with a layered complexity . . . And it's a
helluva crime story, too, with plenty of surprises" *Robert Crais*

"*Cemetery Road* is the kind of novel that only a seasoned
writer can bring us" *Laura Lippman*

A Selection of Titles by Gar Anthony Haywood

The Aaron Gunner Mysteries

FEAR OF THE DARK
NOT LONG FOR THIS WORLD
YOU CAN DIE TRYING
IT'S NOT A PRETTY SIGHT
WHEN LAST SEEN ALIVE
ALL THE LUCKY ONES ARE DEAD

The Joe and Dottie Loudermilk Series

GOING NOWHERE FAST
BAD NEWS TRAVELS FAST

writing as Ray Shannon

MANEATER
FIRECRACKER

CEMETERY ROAD

Gar Anthony Haywood



This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

This first world edition published 2009
in Great Britain and 2010 in the USA by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS LTD of
9–15 High Street, Sutton, Surrey, England, SM1 1DF.

Copyright © 2009 by Gar Anthony Haywood.

All rights reserved.
The moral right of the author has been asserted.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Haywood, Gar Anthony.
Cemetery Road.
1. Criminals – Crimes against – California – Los Angeles – Fiction.
2. Los Angeles (Calif.) – Fiction. 3. Detective and mystery stories.
I. Title
813.5'4-dc22

ISBN-13: 978-1-78010-035-7 (ePub)
ISBN-13: 978-0-7278-6851-0 (cased)
ISBN-13: 978-1-84751-193-5 (trade paper)

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

For the stubborn few who continued to believe, long after the lights went out. You know who you are. God bless you and keep you well.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people offered me invaluable assistance in the writing of this book, but the following individuals deserve specific mention:

Alexis Moreno, Los Angeles historian

Eddie Muller, writer and pal

Joe Rein, boxing journalist and historian

Lt Ken Thomas, Public Information Office, Pelican State Prison

Patricia Medina, Executive Director, Crescent City Chamber of Commerce

Ray Mooring, US Bureau of Engraving and Printing

Winter, 1979

What I've always remembered most about my last day in Los Angeles is the smell of burning tar.

A neighbor across the alley from O's mother's garage was having his roof redone and the stench of molten tar hung in the air like a hot, black cloud.

'Goddamn, that shit stinks!' R.J. kept saying.

O' was late as usual and all the waiting around had R.J. going through Kools like a chocolate junky through Kisses. By the time O' finally showed up, over forty minutes after the agreed-upon hour, the floor of the garage was littered with butts, R.J. having crushed them underfoot with an animal-like ferocity to assuage his terror.

'What the fuck kept you?'

It was a curious thing. R.J. was tighter with O' than I had ever been, but it was he who seemed afraid our friend was gone forever, that O' had changed the plan and decided not to come. I had entertained the idea myself, but only briefly. We were all going to be running soon enough; leaving without making this final, farewell gesture would have surely been too foolish an improvisation for O' to even consider.

'I thought somebody might be following me, so I had to drive around a while till I was sure nobody was.'

O' tossed the big canvas bag he'd brought with him on to a workbench overrun with hand tools. It landed with the sound of a fat man jumping on a hardwood floor.

'You don't trust me enough to know I was still coming, you probably don't trust me enough to believe it's all here.' He opened the mouth of the bag, kept his eyes on R.J. 'You want to count it?'

'Goddamn right we want to count it.' R.J. flicked one last cigarette toward the floor and moved to the bag, never giving me so much as a backwards glance. He reached in, retrieved a pair of dog-eared bundles of green, and flipped them over to me. 'Check it out, Handy,' he said.

I ran a thumb across the bills as he rifled through the bag's full contents, O' watching us both with the detached demeanor of an innocent man in a police line-up. I wasn't as concerned about O's dishonesty as R.J. was, but I scrutinized the two stacks of tens and twenties closely enough to make a rough estimate: 'Looks like fifteen hundred, give or take.' I underhanded the money back to R.J., who returned it to the swollen belly of the canvas bag and proceeded to flip through two more bundles of his own.

'It's all there, R.J.,' I said.

He looked up.

'And we don't have time to get in his ass even if it's not. We're on the clock here.'

'Fuck the clock. A hundred and forty grand is a lotta bread, Handy. How do we know—'

'Because we know the *man*,' I said. 'That's how.'

R.J. thought about it, giving O' the hard look his unabashed suspicion demanded, and closed up the bag.

'Let's do this, then,' O' said.

He had rolled an old black, steel-drum barbecue grill to the center of the garage earlier that day, hours before R.J. and I had arrived shortly before noon, and now he

brought the canvas bag and a can of kerosene over to it, acting as high priest of the dark ceremony we had all come here to take part in. He poured the bag's contents over the grill's open maw, drenched the mountain of emerald paper liberally with kerosene, and produced a book of matches. He started to strike one, but I put a hand out at the last second and said, 'I'll do it.'

My two friends looked at me with equal surprise.

'I'm the one who wanted this. I'm the one who should have to live with it.'

I took the matches from O's hand and snapped one to life, tossing the yellow flame into the grill before regret had any chance to take over the room.

We watched the money burn in silence for a long while, our eyes thick with smoke and our hearts heavy. This was only part of the price we had to pay for absolution, and it wasn't going to be anywhere near high enough.

'It wasn't our fault,' O' said, his gaze fixed on the fire.

'Hell, no,' R.J. agreed, speaking a lie he knew he would never truly be able to believe.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want the debate to begin anew.

'I'm gonna miss you niggas,' R.J. said.

O' and I nodded our heads in silence, though I was already certain it wasn't O's and R.J.'s friendship I was going to miss most in the years to come.

It was the hope I used to have for my eternal soul.

ONE

It's not a problem young people have to worry about, but right around the time he hits his middle forties, a man starts giving serious thought to dying well. In his sleep in his own bed, or in the course of a street fight meant to settle something meaningful. His end doesn't have to be poignant, just devoid of indignity. You wouldn't think that would be too much to ask.

But how a man leaves this world, much like the way he comes into it, is almost never his own call to make, so evil men die on satin sheets in 400-dollar-a-night hotel rooms, while good ones breathe their last lying face down in cold, dark alleyways, their bodies growing stiff and blue on beds of rain-soaked newspaper.

Robert James Burrow didn't deserve to go out like royalty, perhaps, but he didn't deserve the ignoble exit he made either, shot four times and left to rot in the trunk of a stolen Buick LeSabre, down by the Santa Monica Pier in Los Angeles where we both grew up.

Twenty-six years earlier, a more fitting death for the hard-nosed brother we all knew as 'R.J.' could hardly have been imagined. Back then, like me, R.J. and trouble went hand-in-hand, so relentless was his pursuit of it. But this was two-and-a-half decades later, and the weight of all that time should have slowed him down some. The man was closing in on fifty, just as I was myself, and four bullets was at least two more than his killing should have required.

I learned of my old friend's murder via telephone. His widow had somehow tracked me down in Minnesota and invited me to the funeral, talking to me like someone who hadn't last seen or spoken to her husband in over twenty years. I allowed her to say goodbye and hang up believing I intended to come, when in fact I had no such compulsion. It didn't matter that R.J. and I had once been as close as two men not bound by blood could possibly become, nor that I literally owed him my life. He was a reminder of what I had always considered my darkest hour, and I wasn't going to stop avoiding him now just to answer the quixotic call of loyalty and unpaid debt.

Or so I thought.

Squeezed into an overpriced coach seat on a flight from Minneapolis/St Paul to Los Angeles, two days after receiving the Widow Burrow's call, I tried to tell myself I was making the trip simply to close the book on R.J. forever. I wasn't going out there to see anybody, or to ask any questions. R.J.'s death had nothing to do with me, and I had nothing to gain by trying to behave otherwise.

Had I only found the strength to stay home, I might never have learned how wrong I was. I would not have gone rooting around the city of my birth for people I had no reason to make enemies of, and I would not have seen what a pitiful corpse my old friend made, gray and silent in his fancy burial clothes. A few words of bad news taken over the telephone, that's all R.J.'s murder would have been to me. Something to be saddened and shaken by for a day or two, then slowly set aside like a faded letter I no longer cared to read.

There are times I almost wish things had gone down exactly that way. But then I remind myself of the remote possibility that R.J.'s soul rests a little easier because they didn't, and I leave all my second-guessing for another day.

TWO

R.J.'s service was mercifully brief.

It was a hushed and somber Catholic affair that somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty people attended in the chapel at Holy Cross Cemetery in Fox Hills. The young white priest who called my friend's soul to rest did not know him, and everyone else only thought they did. I stood in the back of the chapel for the duration of the proceedings, cold marble walls on all sides, then followed the throng out to the treeless hill where the priest said a few last words over the body before it was dispatched to the earth. I intended to leave right then, my duty to a man I hadn't seen in over twenty years done, but before I could peel away from the crowd, someone behind me dropped a hand on my shoulder to thwart my cowardly escape.

'Need a ride to the repast, Handy?'

I'd been dreading the sight of O'Neal Holden all morning, and now that the fear of finding him had finally left me, here he was, grinning like the joke was on me. He'd added a few pounds around the waist and his clothes were befitting a man who gave more orders than he took, but other than that, he looked like the same old O'. Big, gregarious, and as prone to pounce upon the vulnerable as a cat in the high weeds.

Without thinking about it, I offered him my hand, too overcome by nostalgia to do anything else. 'O'. What's goin' on?'

He gripped my hand with both of his and drew me into an embrace. 'Not a thing. Damn, it's good to see you.'

We were fast becoming the last ones standing at the gravesite. R.J.'s widow Frances and their only child, a lovely and statuesque daughter named Toni who'd been at her mother's side throughout the service, had long since been loaded into the lead car of the funeral procession and taken away, and with the sky overhead turning an appropriate shade of gray, everyone else was rushing to follow.

'I didn't think you'd come,' I said. 'But then, I didn't think *I* was coming, either.'

'Yeah, I hear you. I wasn't sure I was coming myself until I got in the car. But hell, it was R.J. What else was I gonna do?' He gave me the once-over, said, 'I damn near didn't recognize you. I was expecting big changes – gut like mine, male pattern baldness, a mouth full of false teeth. But hell, man, you might look better now than the last time I saw you! What, they don't have red meat and cheese where you come from?'

'Red meat costs money and dairy wreaks havoc on the blood pressure. Weight's not much of a problem when your income and your doctor have you eating apples and oatmeal.'

'Yeah, but what doctor where? What part of the world you call home now, exactly?'

'Minnesota. St Paul,' I said, accepting the fact that I was either going to give him this information, or hear him ask for it in a dozen more, and increasingly indiscreet ways.

'St Paul, huh? Damn. What line of work you in up there? Something mechanical, right?'

'I own a repair shop, yeah.'

'Let me guess: TVs, computers, vacuum cleaners . . .'

‘A little of all that, but mostly I just fix junk. Things too old and obsolete for anyone else to be bothered with.’

‘I like it. It suits you. Now – you wanna guess what business *I’m* in?’

‘You’re a city mayor. Down in Bellwood, I think it is.’

“‘Where LA business goes to work.’ That’s right.’ He flashed his discomfiting grin again. ‘You like that? “Where LA business goes to work”? I came up with that.’

I nodded to be kind.

‘Hey, come on, brother, let’s go. We’ll run by the repast for a hot minute, then drive out to my fair city, finish catching up over a big, fat-and-cholesterol laden dinner. What do you say?’

‘I’m not going to the repast, O’. My flight home’s at seven, I’m going back to the motel before I miss it.’

‘You’re going back tonight? You came for the funeral and that’s it?’

He’d been working on my nerves for a while now, but I’d finally reached my limit. I set my jaw and said, ‘I don’t feel particularly safe out here, to tell you the truth. Call me a victim of an overactive imagination.’

‘Say what?’

‘My thinking what happened to R.J. might have had something to do with us, I mean.’

He let out a small laugh, said, ‘You aren’t serious?’

‘They shot the man four times and left him in the trunk of a car, O’. You gonna tell me you haven’t been thinking the same thing?’

‘Man, that’s bullshit. That’s *crazy*.’ He checked to make sure we were alone, then lowered his voice anyway. ‘What happened to R.J. was all about R.J. He was doing what he always did, looking for trouble where you or I wouldn’t even think to try, and he got hurt. End of story.’

‘You sound awfully sure of that.’

‘I am sure of it. But before you ask—’

‘Had you seen him recently?’

‘—the answer’s no. I hadn’t. We had a deal, remember?’

‘I remember. But deals change. People change. Agreements get renegotiated.’

O’ shook his head.

A pair of groundskeepers were busy setting R.J.’s casket in the grave, apparently in a race to beat the oncoming rain. It wasn’t much of a distraction, but I let my eyes drift over in their direction as if it were.

‘It was good seeing you again, O’. If you go on to the repast, offer the family my condolences, will you?’

‘Handy, Jesus Christ . . .’

I turned to walk away and he let me go, down the hill toward the taxi I hoped was still waiting for me at the chapel.

‘You can stop running now, Handy,’ O’ called out after me. ‘Nobody’s chasing you, and nobody ever was!’

I wanted badly to believe him. He had charged me with cowardice in this way once before and I was still trying to convince myself he was right, that all my reasons for being afraid were nothing more than smoke. But I couldn’t. Just as I had the first time, I fled Los Angeles hoping to never see it again.

Unable to shake the absolute certainty that it was either that or die.

THREE

One of life's greatest mercies is the impermanence of memory. Some memories lose their shape and form faster than others. Details dim and disappear, forever out of reach of the conscious mind. Settings shift and grow vague, while the people in them perform all nature of tricks, morphing into others and moving about at will, either imposing themselves upon a time and place in which they played no part, or vacating one that holds little meaning without them. Six men in a room become two, three become five. The variations are endless.

Other memories, meanwhile, prove themselves to be indelible.

The smile of an old girlfriend; the sound of a car crash; the pain of a knife wound at the very instant the blade invades your flesh.

For me, it has always been a voice.

It is the voice of a child. Small, female, infused with dread. When she comes to me in my sleep, she never utters more than a single word, yet the inflection she places upon it is something I have been unable to shake for going on three decades:

Daddy.

It is a plea for mercy not intended for me. I am not the child's father. But I am the only one there to hear her, and to see the flames of a raging fire threatening to engulf her, so I am the one she is left to implore.

Her name is Sienna.

She has fair skin and dark brown hair that radiates in curls around her face like silken ribbon. Her eyes are wide, the color of a golden sunset, and her cheeks are aglow with youth and untested innocence. She is the most beautiful black child I have ever seen, and she is only four years old.

Daddy, she says.

She is not my responsibility. I have never laid eyes on her before, and her father is all but a stranger to me. If I reach out to save her, I am as doomed as she, because the fire is not the only danger such an act will require me to face. I know this, and I am paralyzed by the thought. But I eventually go to her nonetheless, diving into the white-hot halo surrounding her with arms outstretched, fingers beckoning.

Then, suddenly, smoke floods my lungs and fills my eyes, and the girl is no longer there to be rescued. I am alone in the fire, and it has me in its full and immutable grasp before I can even open my mouth to scream.

It is all a false memory, of course. The fire is of my own invention.

Still, even with my eyes wide open, I can sometimes feel its tendrils peeling the flesh off my bones just the same.

On the street in Frogtown, the St Paul community I call home, people call me 'Handy', exactly as they did in what was then called 'South-Central' Los Angeles over twenty-five years ago.

I can no longer recall exactly how or when I got the name, but it refers to the penchant I have always had for fixing things others have declared either beyond all hope or unworthy of repair.

Growing up, I was one of those kids who like to take things apart just to see how

they work – toys and clocks, bicycles and radios – and this habit has followed me right into middle-age. My gift, if you can call it that, is an innate comprehension of machines and the mysteries they present, the cause and effect of levers and switches, motors and drive belts. It is a talent which has never earned me anything approaching wealth, to be sure, but it has at least managed to be sporadically profitable.

For the past nine years, after leapfrogging from one dead-end job and ungrateful employer to another, I have made a meager living working for myself, juggling small jobs almost anyone else could do with larger ones few others can or will take on for themselves. The small jobs, I perform in great number and on the cheap – rewiring old table lamps, installing cards and upgrade components in home computers – but the big ones I take on selectively, and for a considerable fee. The people who bring me the simple stuff are generally lazy individuals who lack the initiative to read a user's manual, but those who hire me to tackle more challenging projects almost always have nowhere else to turn. I am the only person they've been able to find with either the expertise or patience the work they want done requires.

The objects of these latter exercises tend to be old and mechanical: manual typewriters and wind-up alarm clocks, belt-driven turntables and telephones with rotary dials. It is not always clear to me why their owners prefer to have them repaired rather than replaced, but I suspect they are motivated more by sentiment than common sense. There is a magic in old-school devices that newer, more technologically advanced versions of same do not possess, and sometimes, just the sounds these machines make alone are enough to render them irreplaceable to their owner.

Such as it is, I ply my trade out of a little storefront on Rice and University I share with 'Ploitation Station, a video and memorabilia shop that specializes in the movies of the 1970s Blaxploitation era. Under a constant, period-appropriate soundtrack of Motown, Stax and Sound of Philadelphia R & B, Quincy Hardaway rents out copies of *Cleopatra Jones* and *Black Gunn* on the east side of the shop, while I tinker with things that are broken on the west side. Quincy is a very fat and effeminate black man in his early thirties who would starve in a day if he were dependent upon the shop to eat, but its proprietorship is really just a hobby for him; the business was a footnote to a large estate he inherited from a wealthy aunt many years ago, and he keeps it going at no small expense primarily as a gesture to her memory.

Ordinarily, I pay little attention to the ebb and flow of Quincy's business, especially when the object of my day's work holds a certain fascination for me. Consumed by the challenge and nostalgia of some projects, I can sit at my bench and listen to Quincy jabber without actually registering a word he's saying, both of us laboring to the accompaniment of the music of my youth, the hours slipping by like a train on greased rails.

It should have been this way for me with Andy Loderick's mini-bike. When Loderick first wheeled the home-made, motorized two-wheeler in for me to see, I almost took the job of refurbishing it for free. He said he had built the thing himself over thirty years earlier when he was just fourteen, using an old bicycle frame and a Briggs & Stratton lawnmower engine in accordance with some mail order plans he'd ordered from an ad in a comic book, and now that his mother's passing had brought him home from Pennsylvania where he'd gone off to college and remained, he'd hauled the stout but rusted little bike out of her garage in the hopes that I could

recondition it for the entertainment of his two sons.

I told him I would do exactly that, or die trying.

Unfortunately, the bike had come to me less than twenty-four hours after R.J.'s funeral, and O'Neal Holden's final words to me at the cemetery were still rattling around in my head. I was running scared, and I had been for a long time.

O' thought I had no reason to run, any more than he did. He had always been steadfast in this opinion, and I had never been able to decide whether that made him the smartest man I knew, or the most oblivious. Either way, before I'd picked up the phone less than a week ago to hear the news of R.J.'s death, I'd been capable of acknowledging the possibility, however remote, that O' was right and I was wrong. It was the only hope I had worth living for.

But no more. Now, R.J. was dead, murdered in a cruel and gratuitous fashion that reeked of malice, and I had come home from Los Angeles with renewed confidence in both my right to be afraid, and my need to run farther still.

For three days, I strove to go about my normal business, barely able to concentrate on the work I had before me. My distraction made mild annoyances out of things I usually have no quarrel with – Quincy's choice in music, the smell of oil and solvent that always lightly permeates my side of the shop – and heightened my awareness of the people entering and exiting my peripheral vision. For this reason, it was I who looked up first when two young bucks sauntered into the shop just before noon, moving with the leisurely pace and unsettling silence of encroaching death.

The older and larger of the two couldn't have been much more than seventeen. He had jet-black skin and a head crowned with a white Yankees cap over a red bandanna, the cap's visor turned at a right-angle to his slitted eyes. His younger, fair-skinned homie wore a mushroom cloud Afro and a giant ski jacket festooned with logos on the back and along the length of both sleeves. Both boys were otherwise dressed in the standard urban uniform of oversized baggy pants and sports jersey, gleaming white tennis shoes barely visible beneath pant legs that scraped the ground in a dozen folds of excess material.

None of this by itself was cause for alarm, of course; the clothes and the attitudinal gait, even the big kid's sneer were all too commonplace for young people today. But the younger boy, the one with the big hair and benign facial expression, had brought a distinctive aura into the shop along with his shadow, and I knew what it was even before the door had completely closed behind them.

Quincy did too. He watched the pair slink around between his racks of precious videos for a full minute, Yankee-boy fingering through the cases as if he actually knew who the hell Fred Williamson was, then said, 'Can I help you boys?' Asking the question in that way salespeople always do when what they really want to know is, *Why the fuck did you pick my place to jack?*

'We just lookin',' the big kid said.

His friend said nothing, but both of them continued to inch along their separate aisles, patiently and all-too conspicuously working their way toward Quincy and the counter he stood behind, right beside the cash register.

The boy with the Afro was just slipping a long-barreled revolver out from under his jacket when I eased up behind him and jammed the snout of an old .38 Beretta into the back of his left ear. He and his older dog never saw me coming because they didn't

think I could move that fast, or would care to even if I were somehow capable. They'd given me a passing glance at the door and seen little more than a sad-eyed, middle-aged black man with a salt-and-pepper beard sitting at a workbench, a meaningless screwdriver in his hand. I knew that was all they'd seen, because that was the man I often saw myself, gazing out from the mirror while brushing my teeth, or reflected in the glass of a storefront window as I passed. I couldn't blame them for not expecting much.

'Give me the gun, youngblood,' I said, and I made a point of saying it like something I only had the patience to say once.

While he thought the order over, and Quincy stood there staring at me in mute astonishment, I watched the larger boy to see how much killing was about to be forced upon me. If he was armed too, and made a move to prove it, I'd have to shoot both boys in rapid succession: first the one near me, then his dark-skinned companion. Anything less would have been foolhardy.

Three seconds went by, and I still didn't have the boy with the Afro's answer.

'Don't try me, junior,' I said, and I screwed the Beretta's nose harder yet into the side of his skull, my eyes still fixed upon the kid closer to Quincy. When the latter boy suddenly came unfrozen, bringing me within an inch of committing the double-homicide I'd been contemplating, his only intent was to flee. He was at the shop's door and out of it in the time it takes most people to blink, his incredulous accomplice crying out his name in a senseless attempt to order his return.

'Tommy!'

But Tommy was good and gone.

I finally snatched the revolver from the younger boy's hand while the shock of his abandonment was still setting in, and then it was just him and me and Quincy, and the .38 I continued to jam into the back of the kid's left ear.

'Call nine-one-one,' I said to Quincy.

As my landlord slid to the phone on the wall behind him, I told the boy with all the hair to turn around, and make sure he took his sweet damn time doing it. He did.

I don't know what I was expecting to find on his face when he showed it to me – fear, anger, amusement – but what I got resembled none of these things. What I got was a stare as vacant as a paneless window in a gutted building, a little boy gazing at a television set tuned to a nonexistent channel. I had a loaded gun aimed at his head, and the wild-eyed look of a man he might have just pushed close enough to the edge to use it, and he didn't care. I could do with him as I pleased; whatever fate I chose for him now, he was willing to accept without question or quarrel.

He was fourteen years old at the most and, already, life and death to him were but interchangeable, equally valueless sides of the same coin.

At this particular moment in my own life, he could have cursed my mother in her grave and not enraged me more.

Quincy had been stunned by the show of reckless bravado I'd just put on, without a doubt, but I knew it was the sight of the gun in my hand alone that he had found most incredible, because he had never seen me with such a weapon before. In truth, I'd had the Beretta in the shop with me for four days now, after not having touched it in almost twenty-six years. R.J.'s murder had changed the world for me in such a way that I preferred to have the gun close at hand over dying for the lack of it.

Quincy would say later that God had spoken to me that morning four days ago, when I'd gone up to the attic and withdrawn the Beretta from the old liquor bottle sack in which I had banished it, and that was why it was there on the bottom shelf of my workbench when our two would-be thieves stepped in on us, perhaps intending to do more to enhance their street cred than just take Quincy's money and run. But I knew God had had nothing to do with it. God would not have put that gun in my hand knowing how close I would come to emptying it into the head of a child whose most egregious crime was his resemblance to another young fool I once knew, many years ago.

In reality, the two boys looked nothing alike. In height, weight, even the color of their skin, they could hardly have been more different. But deep inside, behind their eyes, they had one thing in common I couldn't help but take note of: the apathy of the dead. A cool, inalterable kind of indifference that winds itself around the heart like a shield and chokes the soul down to the size of a small stone. Such inurement is the fuel of great folly, and it can sometimes lead a boy to do harm to others in ways he will eternally, and altogether uselessly, regret.

'Handy! Handy, *don't!*'

Hanging up the phone, Quincy must have seen a change come over my face, my fear and mild irritation giving way to something far more combustible and impossible to contain. I slammed the butt of the Beretta across the forehead of the teenage boy before me, hard enough to leave an imprint on his skull, and he dropped to the floor like an empty coat. I stood over him and watched a wide rivulet of blood run from a fresh scalp wound down the side of his face, and put everything I had into finding all the satisfaction possible in the sight, before my rage could spur me on to greater and far more unforgivable things.

'Jesus Christ, Handy, you didn't have'ta do that!' Quincy cried, forcing his great girth between me and the motionless body on the floor. 'You might'a killed the boy!'

He wanted to disarm me, but was too afraid to try. I wasn't Errol 'Handy' White anymore, or anyone else he thought he knew; I was just a crazy man with two guns who might be capable of anything. In the midst of his indecision, I walked back to my side of the shop and sat down at my workbench again. I put the two firearms down on the bench where the uniforms could see them when they eventually responded to Quincy's call and braced myself for their arrival.

As tired of being alive as I could ever remember being.

FOUR

The difference between a good man and a bad one often comes down to nothing more than the quality of his judgment. In making life-altering choices, his conscience may speak to him, but it is the voice of reason he ultimately adheres to, the basic math of what he has to gain versus what he stands to lose.

The two close friends I made for myself as I entered into manhood – O’Neal Holden and R.J. Burrow – were no more inherently evil than I. We took little pleasure in the distress of others, and put no effort into feigning indifference to it. But we were all brash and foolish and drunk with the power of youth, and serious consequences for our actions was a concept we scoffed at like a ghost story. We saw ourselves as invulnerable, and could not imagine how we could bring any real harm to others when we could not possibly bring harm to ourselves.

We first came together as a trio in our junior year at Manual Arts High School, where I essentially affixed myself to the pre-existing duo of O’ and R.J., who had been best friends since the third grade. O’ was a tall and beautiful ladies-magnet offhandedly involved in two sports, while R.J. was a comic with a mean streak nobody ever crossed without losing teeth. Each was fascinating in his own way, but O’ was the real draw, a beacon of future stardom I was powerless not to admire and idolize. I expect R.J. felt much the same.

O’ was born to be a mover and a shaker, a force of nature wrapped tightly if precariously in human form. No one who ever met him came away wondering what he would eventually become, because only one vocation offered him wealth and power to the extent he seemed to deserve them. Politics was O’s unavoidable destiny, and the only thing open to question was what *kind* of elected official he would choose to become: the kind whose wisdom and compassion for his constituency marks him worthy of their trust, or the kind, far more common than the other, who wields that trust like chips on a poker table for his own personal enrichment?

The O’ I grew up with was equally capable of evolving into either animal, and it was this quality of unpredictability that always made it so exhilarating – and terrifying – to know him as a friend.

R.J., by comparison, was not nearly so complex. If any of us was predisposed to a life of crime, it was him. R.J. was short and lean and forever on the lookout for any sign of disrespect, and there was no fight or challenge he would not take on with the zeal of a man possessed. His father was a closeted gay man who, in a drunken stupor, liked to beat his wife unconscious to minimize his sense of emasculation, and R.J. came to school most days relishing the opportunity to either make people laugh or make them bleed, the choice was entirely theirs. He had fast hands and quick feet, and he came at you like a blur, throwing punches you couldn’t see while deflecting all your own. Had there been an ounce of bully in him, he would have been the most feared man at Manual; as it was, he was simply the most vigorously avoided.

As for myself, I was the wildcard, the consistent middle ground between O’s lethal charm and R.J.’s brute force. Some people probably thought of me as the ‘brains of the outfit’, but brains were a non-issue. What I had over my two friends was restraint: the unremitting need to question and second-guess any action before daring to take it. O’

always equated this inclination to a shortage of courage, but it saved our asses on enough occasions that he came to grudgingly appreciate it over time.

We were petty thieves. That was the simple truth of it. Larceny was not our constant occupation, just an occasional one, something to do with all our excess testosterone until we could find more constructive uses for our time. We all had big plans for the future, and with varying degrees of effort, we pursued them beyond high school, O' at UCLA, R.J. and I at Los Angeles City College. O' was going into politics, I was going to be a mechanical engineer, and R.J. had ambitions toward sports writing. None of us expected to be stealing televisions and car stereos forever.

In the end, however, a little more than three years out of high school, we were still players in the game when we committed one crime too many, and only O' had the wherewithal to survive its repercussions. It was just another rip-off, a bit larger and more complicated than most of the others we'd pulled over the years, perhaps, but like the others, it should have incurred no casualties.

That R.J. was the one who predicted otherwise still haunts me to this day.

'Excel Rucker? Man, are you crazy?'

'No. What's crazy about it?'

From the other end of the couch I was slouched across, R.J. took a long, expansive drag on the blunt pinched between his thumb and forefinger, his face taking on a scowl of deep concentration. 'That's some dangerous shit, that's what. Jackin' dope dealers.'

'It ain't dangerous if we do it right,' I said.

I stole a furtive glance at O', fishing for his reaction, but all he did was sink even deeper into the red leather beanbag chair he was sitting in and stare further yet into space, happy for now just to smoke a joint of his own and listen in.

We were all hanging at O's crib, our official base of operations in those days. It was a one-bedroom bachelor pad way out in Playa del Rey, big and clean and architecturally futuristic, and it sat just close enough to the beach that we could smoke dope and talk strategy with the illusion that we were doing so in style.

'What you mean, "right"?' R.J. asked.

'I mean we find one of his safe houses and watch it for a while. See who goes in and out, and when.'

'And then?'

'And then we figure out a way to take it down without anybody getting hurt. Same as we always do.'

'Cept we ain't always rippin' off drug dealers. Drug dealers got guns, nigga!' He passed me the joint, holding a lungful of smoke down tight. 'And what about the dope? We don't know nothin' 'bout sellin' cocaine, how we gonna move it without Excel findin' out?'

'We wouldn't try to move it. We'd flush it. The only thing we'd keep is the bread.'

'Say what?'

'He'll be looking for the drugs to show up on the street, but they never will. So all he'll be able to figure is that it had to be another dealer who ripped him off and just rolled the product into his own inventory. 'Cause nobody else would boost the shit and not even *try* to sell it, right?'

R.J. thought about it, looked over at the man in the beanbag chair. 'You hearin' all