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Black Jack Point

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Extract

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In shimmering heat, Jimmy Bird smoked a cigarette and paced off a rectangle of dirt. About the size of a grave, a little wider, a little longer. Jimmy wasn't good at math – that algebra in high school where they mixed letters and numbers together had been his undoing – but he could eye a piece of ground and calculate how long it took to clear and dig to a certain depth. Ditches. Garden beds. Graves. The earth on Black Jack Point fed salt grass and waist-high bluestems and Jimmy pictured a hole six feet across, six feet down. He figured it would take him and his partners three hours of steady digging, being a little slower in the dark. Then an hour or so to sort through the loot, load the valuables on the truck, and good-bye poverty. In a few days he'd be poolside in the Caribbean, chatting up coffee-colored girls in bikinis, fishing in water bluer than blue, buying a boat and lazing on its warm deck and watching the world not go by.

But he felt uneasy even with millions in the dirt under his feet. *What if somebody sees us?* he'd asked this morning.

Then we take care of them, Jimmy, Alex had said.

What do you mean take care of them?

I mean just what you think. Alex said it with that odd half smile, caused by the little crescent-moon scar at the corner of his mouth. Like he was talking to a child.

I don't want none of that, Jimmy Bird said, and as soon as he said it he knew he'd made a big mistake. It showed a lack of drive, a complaint he'd heard about himself from his wife, his mama, his daddy, even his little girl.

Alex had kept smiling like he hadn't heard. That smile made Jimmy's bladder feel loose.

I mean we shouldn't leave a mess, Jimmy quickly amended. *That's all I meant.*

Alex smiled, patted Jimmy's back. *No messes. I promise.*

Jimmy Bird took a stake with a little flutter of fluorescent orange plastic ribbon topping it and drove it into the middle of the ground. Make it easier for them to see in the dark. He felt relief that old man Gilbert wasn't going to be up at his house tonight. He couldn't see the Gilbert place through the density of oaks, but that was for the best. No one to see them. No one to get hurt.

No messes. I promise.

Jimmy Bird didn't like those four words the more he considered them – maybe *he* had gotten demoted to *mess* – and he patted the pistol wedged in the back of his work pants for reassurance. Patted the gun three times and he realized it was just the bop-be-bop rhythm of his little girl patting the top of her teddy bear's head. He'd miss her most of all once he left the country. He'd send her some money later, anonymous like, for her schooling. She might get that math with the letters and numbers mixed together way better than he had.

By his reckoning he would go from ditchdigger to multi-millionaire in about twelve hours. Jimmy Bird slung the metal detector back over his shoulder and moved through the heavy growth of twisted oaks.

They drove home early because the bedsprings squeaked.

Patch Gilbert was a romantic but a bed-and-breakfast full of artsy-fartsy bric-a-brac was not his idea of a love nest. But his lady friend, Thuy Linh Tran, had wanted to go to Port Aransas, even though it wasn't terribly far from Port Leo and could hardly count as a real getaway. Thuy thought Port Aransas romantic because it was actually on an island; you rode a little ferry to get there, and you could watch the porpoises darting in the ferry's wake. They'd had a nice dinner and red vino at an Italian place, Patch had taken his pill to rev his engine, they'd snuggled into bed, and he didn't even have Thuy's modest gown off before they discovered the bedsprings on the genuine antique bed screamed like banshees every time they moved.

'We're not making love in this bed, Patch,' Thuy said.

'But I took a pill.' At seventy he felt no erection should be wasted.

'No.'

'It's Monday night. This place is mostly empty. Ain't nobody gonna hear us, angel.' He started nibbling on her ear.

'No.' She was sixty-nine and more stubborn than he was. So they had quarreled – the trip was her idea but it was for his birthday, and he wasn't happy with this squeaking turn of events – and in a fit, they got dressed and checked out and just drove back to Port Leo, to Patch's old house on Black Jack Point. The drive was mostly awkward silences. It was midnight and they were both in sour moods and Patch suddenly worried that Thuy needed a little courting. She wanted to go straight home when they got back to his house but he convinced her to come in and make up and drink a little wine.

She wasn't sleepy. Arguing had riled her up, made her more talkative; so he was hopeful she'd spend the night.

'How long's it been, baby, since you walked on a beach late at night?' Patch Gilbert poured Thuy another glass of pinot noir. 'Now that's romance, a beach real late at night.'

Thuy smiled. 'I ran across a beach at midnight, with three children in tow, hoping not to get shot and to find a spot on the boat. When I left Vietnam, Patch. It wasn't romantic.' She leaned over and kissed him, a chaste little peck against his wine-wet mouth. 'I should go. I haven't been up this late in years.'

He felt their time slipping away. Her kiss gave him that shivery energy of being twenty-five. At least inside. 'Come down to the beach with me.'

'I thought you retired from sales.'

'Well, honey, if I have to *sell* you on the idea—'

'You didn't sneak another one of those pills, did you?'

'Don't need 'em.'

'Shameless.'

'We don't have time for shame. Listen, we'll just get the sand in between our toes.' His voice went husky and he took the wineglass from her hands. 'It feels good, the wet sand against your skin.'

'Patch.'

'Baby.' He kissed her gently, almost shyly. He felt the neediness in his own kiss, the hopeful wondering – not felt since high school, before the marines, before selling drilling equipment for so many years, before cancer took Martha and left him alone – if there was going to be any dessert on his plate. He loved Thuy but had never broken the habit of lovemaking as careful conquest.

'I'm too old for anyone to call baby,' Thuy said.

'Never too young,' Patch said. 'Let's go.' He took her hands in both of his and stood. Gentle insistence worked wonders. After a moment, she stood with him.

The night was clear but the moon was an ill-lit curve. Patch frowned, because he loved the moonlight on the bay, on the sands, on the high grasses. It silvered the world, made it lovely as a dream. Tonight was too dark. He and Thuy walked down the long path, a line of gravel threading through the salt grass, down to a small curve of beach. The blackjack oaks were gnarled and bent from the constant wind from St Leo Bay. He and Thuy slipped off their shoes – boots and socks for him, espadrilles for her – and they walked to the edge of the surf, the summer-warm water tickling their toes.

'The Milky Way.' Thuy pointed at the wash of stars. 'We call it *vãi ngan há*.'

'What do you call kissing?'

'*Hôn nhau*.' She ran a finger down his spine and he grinned at her. 'I counted those same stars as a little girl. I wanted to know exactly how many there were. I wanted them all. Like most children I was a little greedy.'

'I'm greedy for you,' Patch said.

They kissed, and she leaned into him, the surf wetting the cuffs on his jeans. He was sliding a worn hand under the silk of her blouse when he heard a motor rev steadily, then purr and die. He leaned back from her.

'Patch?'

'Listen.'

He heard it again, a truck motor, the engine rumbling, a door slamming, down the beach and over to the west, deep in the

grasslands, in a thick growth of oaks, from the southern end of Black Jack Point.

'Goddamn it,' he said.

'What is it?'

'Kids joyriding on my land.' He walked up the beach, smacked sand off the bottom of his feet, hopped, pulled on socks, yanked on his cowboy boots.

'Let them be. Let's count the stars.'

'They're trespassing,' he said. 'Digging ruts in my land.'

'Maybe they're looking for a makeout spot.'

'Not here. This is *our* spot.'

'Just call the police,' she said.

'Naw. I'm gonna go talk to them. You go on back to the house.'

'No.' She slipped on her flats. 'I'll go with you.'

'Might be snakes out there.'

'I'm not afraid.' She took his hand. 'I'll show you how to lecture kids.'

They walked up the beach, into the grasslands, into the darkness.

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As Stoney Vaughn wiped the smear of blood and brains from his hands, a sick fluttering twist in his guts announced: *You just screwed up your life forever, buddy.* It was an unusual feeling. Failure. Shock. The loss of control that flooded his heart. He glanced up at Jimmy Bird, loading the newly boxed coins into the dark hollow of the storage unit. Intent on his work, Jimmy wasn't looking at him, or at Alex either. Alex was watching along the corridor of storage units, a gun in his hand, making sure that no one saw them. The only light was from the truck's headlights.

Stoney wadded up the hand wipe Alex had thoughtfully offered, threw it on the floor, reconsidered the wisdom of that act, and tucked the bloody wipe into his backpack. Against the hard heavy lump of stone he kept wrapped inside. He had to be careful now. He swallowed the dryness in his throat, kept the shudder out of his voice. 'Alex. This changes everything.'

Alex Black didn't even glance his way. 'Not really. I planned for this.'

'How, exactly, did you do that?'

'We lay low for a while. We can't buy the land right away, obviously.'

'Obviously.'

'So we wait a bit. One of those nieces will be wanting to sell soon, and then you can unfold the wallet and play your little get-famous game.' Alex stepped back inside the storage unit, unclipped a flashlight from his belt, played it over the boxes. 'Which one's got the Eye?'

'There. Small box on the top,' Jimmy Bird said.

Stoney forgot to breathe. He felt the heavy weight of the emerald

in his knapsack, feeling bigger than a fist, bigger than a heart. Oh, Jesus, Alex would kill him. Alex pried open the box, played the light over the big fake green chunk of rock Stoney had slipped into the emerald's place. He'd been so careful, going through the loot, finding the stone first, replacing it with the fake before the others even spotted the emerald. He waited, watched Alex glance over the stone.

Then Alex shut the box.

'Gentlemen,' he said, his head down, his round wire-rim glasses catching the glow from his flashlight, 'here's the plan. We double lock the doors. Stoney, you got the key to one lock, I got the key to the other. Alibis, those are your own problem. But none of us knows the others, none of us ever heard the others' names.' He glanced over at Jimmy. 'You come with me. We'll clean up your truck, get rid of the evidence.'

'The bodies—' Stoney started.

'Aren't going to be found for a long time,' Alex said. 'If ever.'

'I knew him. The cops'll come talk to me,' Jimmy Bird said. His voice was hoarse, trembling.

'Maybe not.'

'I don't want to sit around. I want my cut now.'

Alex stared at him.

'I'm just asking for what's fair,' Jimmy Bird said.

'Sure. I understand. But first, man, we got to get your truck cleaned up. We'll give you your cut tomorrow, help you redeem it for cash, get you out of the country.'

'Thanks. I just want what's fair.'

'Fine.'

After the three men stepped out of the storage unit, Alex slid down the door, fastened a lock onto one side. Stoney, his hands steadier than he thought possible, fastened the other. *Click. Click.* Locked.

'Now,' Alex said. 'Mr Bird. Mr Vaughn. I know you'll both behave. Now that you're accessories.' He turned the flashlight's beam up into his boyish face.

'Don't threaten me, Alex,' Stoney said. 'You don't have a dig without me. You wouldn't have any of this without me.'

'That's right, Stone Man,' Alex said. 'I also killed two people for you tonight. So maybe you owe me more than I owe you right now.'

Stoney kept his mouth shut.

'Let's go, Jimmy. Stoney, we'll talk in a week. Not before. Calm down. I just made all your wishes come true.' Alex smiled, slapped him hard on the shoulder. 'Go home, sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite.'

Stoney forced a smile. He watched Alex and Jimmy Bird climb into the winch truck. Stoney got into his Porsche. He followed the truck out of the storage lot; it turned right, heading south back to Port Leo. Stoney turned left, heading up toward Copano Flats and the comfortable sprawl of his bayside mansion. He jabbed at the radio and head banger rock – *Nirvana, great,* he thought, *the voice of a dead guy* – turned up too loud, blasted the car.

He kept one hand on the steering wheel, the other hand in the knapsack where he'd placed the emerald. It felt hot in his hand, which was crazy; buried in the ground for nearly two hundred years, it should be cool.

You just stole a couple million dollars from a homicidal maniac, he thought.

Stoney Vaughn made it a half mile down the road before he had to pull over and throw up.