

CHAPTER ONE

THEN

He paused on the stage as he listened for the drummer to begin the introduction to the piece. As he waited, he placed his lips around the mouthpiece, moistening the reed just enough to prepare it for the performance. He waited for the timing, listening to the drummer's rhythm and then blew inside the saxophone.

The dim lights of the bar reflected off the instrument's silver finish as the saxophonist began his piece. His fingers danced along the keys, a tune both sorrowful and upbeat at the same time echoing throughout the small tavern. The music reflected the pain the musician felt in his soul, but at the same time communicated his enjoyment and his peace at simply playing his instrument.

Musicians sometimes joke that the saxophone is a "P.H.D." instrument—"press here, dumbass." It doesn't require the same amount of mouth control as the brass or even some woodwinds, you just press a key, blow and instant music.

Carl Flint knew differently.

He knew that for any instrument, regardless of complexity, the one thing necessary to produce true music was simple.

OUTLAW BLUES

Passion.

Passion for life, passion for memory, passion for anything. The instrument was simply a tool to communicate that passion. Whereas the writer would rely on the pen, the musician relied on his instrument. But passion was always the key ingredient.

Without passion, music didn't exist. Carl Flint understood this. Especially because for him, music was the only passion he had left.

He finished his set and no applause came. No surprise, given that there were only four people in the bar besides him and the drummer. Two of them were regulars so engrossed in their particular brand of poison that they were practically passed out. The third was the man tending bar and the fourth sat in the rear, smoking a cigarette, his face obscured by the darkness.

Flint took off the neck strap and set the saxophone down on its stand. He climbed off the stage and went over to the bar, taking a seat before the server.

"The usual, boss?"

Flint nodded. "My cancer sticks, too." The bartender set down a pack of cigarillos with a small box of wood matches. Flint tore open his prize and placed it between his lips, igniting the tip of the cigar with one of the matches. A moment later, the bartender set down a glass filled with golden liquid, the ice clinking against the side.

As Flint alternated between puffs on the cigarillo and sips of the double Jack on the rocks, the stranger came over towards him and occupied the empty stool without an invitation.

PERCIVAL CONSTANTINE

“Good set.”

“Thanks,” said Flint.

“Been a long time, Flint.”

Flint used his peripheral vision to get his first look at the stranger and instantly wished he hadn't. “Jackal.”

“Glad you remember me,” said the stranger. “But I've told you before, it's Jaquel.”

“I prefer my version.”

“I bet you do.”

“What do you want?”

“What, a guy can't come down to visit an old friend?”

“We were never friends. Wouldn't even call us acquaintances.”

“Be that as it may, I've got something that might interest you,” said Jackal.

“I'm retired,” said Flint.

“And how's that working out for you?”

Flint offered no response.

“C'mon man, you're sitting here, running some blues bar—”

“I make a good living running this place.”

Jackal glanced around the room as he smoked his cigarette and chuckled a little. “Oh yeah, I can see that. This place is really jumping.”

“It's a weeknight, what do you expect?”

“Do you at least wanna hear what I have to offer?”

“Do I look like I'm interested?”

“Most people would say no, but I know differently.” Jackal flicked the ash from his cigarette in the tray. “I know you're looking for a way out, a way to retire peacefully

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somewhere nice and quiet, preferably tropical. Instead, you're stuck here in this dive, playing music that no one listens to."

"Did he send you?" asked Flint.

Jackal smiled. "See? Tough guy routine aside, you *are* interested."

Flint felt his blood pressure rise. "Cut the crap and just answer the damn question. I'm in no mood for your shit."

Jackal took another drag on his cigarette and nodded. "It's him."

"Christ..." muttered Flint. "Dante."

"The one and only. There's a mark here in the city, he thought you'd be willing to come out of retirement for this one."

"Why me?"

"Because you're one of the best marksmen he's ever seen, that's why."

"Oh go to hell, Jackal, we both know he never did that ranking crap. So I ask you again—why me? He's got any number of go-to guys, so why doesn't he go to one of them for this?"

"Okay, so it's obvious placating your ego isn't going to get me anywhere."

"Exactly, so why don't you just tell me the real story? What makes me so goddamned special that he wants me for this job?"

"One word—convenience," said Jackal. "It's an urgent job, he needs it done immediately. And he figures contracting you for it would be faster—and cheaper—than flying someone else in and risk missing his window."

PERCIVAL CONSTANTINE

“I haven’t fired a gun in five years,” said Flint. He looked at his right hand, stretching out the fingers. “Digits aren’t what they used to be.”

“You still have your equipment though, right?”

Flint hesitated. Used that hesitation to take a large gulp of his whiskey and a few puffs on the cigar. “Yeah, I still got it.”

“Of course you do, bet you still clean them every day.”

“Week.”

Jackal shrugged. “Close enough. Besides, seeing you up there with that sax, seems like your fingers still move pretty well.”

“Maybe so, but reflexes aren’t the same,” said Flint. “Cleaning is a game for young guns. I’m pushing fifty. I drink, I smoke, and I don’t exercise for shit. What makes you think I can handle a job like this?”

“Your eyesight still good?”

“As good as ever.”

“Then you could be in a wheelchair for all the big man cares. It’s a distance hit, we just need him sniped.”

“You said this was an urgent job.”

“That I did.”

“How urgent is urgent?”

“Dante figured you might have some trepidation given how your last assignment went. So he’s giving you some time to think it over,” said Jackal.

“How very generous,” muttered Flint. “How much time?”

Jackal threw a few bills on the bar to cover his tab. “I’ll be back tomorrow night expecting your final answer.”

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“Don’t bother. The answer’s no.”

“The job pays fifty.”

“Thousand?”

Jackal nodded.

“Pretty decent chunk of change,” said Flint. “Still not interested.”

“C’mon Flint, the hell’s the matter with you? You could do this job with your eyes closed and it pays a lot.”

“The last job.”

Jackal nodded. “Okay, fair enough. Things got messed up, but you walked away from a lot of cash that time. Cash that could’ve helped that girl. Think what you could do with that money now.”

Flint hesitated before he responded with, “who’s the target?”

“That information is on a strictly need-to-know basis. And until you accept, you don’t need to know.”

“If I’m walkin’ into a shitstorm, I need to know which way the wind’s blowing.”

“Relax, you grizzled old bastard,” said Jackal. “You know how the big man operates. This is nothing you can’t handle and no one you’ll shed any tears for, I can promise you that much.”

“Tomorrow night, then?” asked Flint.

Jackal grabbed his cigarettes and lighter before standing. “You got it, cowboy. I’ll see you then.”

Once Jackal left, the bartender returned to collect the money. He counted it with a grunt before depositing it in the register. “Cheap bastard didn’t leave a tip.”

“Not surprised,” said Flint.

PERCIVAL CONSTANTINE

“Friend of yours?”

“Don’t got any friends and if I did, I sure as hell wouldn’t count the Jackal among them.”

“Don’t mind me saying boss, but he seemed to have you a bit rattled.”

Flint locked eyes with the bartender. “I *do* mind you saying.”

“Sorry sir,” said the bartender, now staring intently at his own shoes. Without looking up, he added, “so what did he want to talk to you about?”

“Mickey, I pay you to pour drinks, not to ask questions.”

Mickey nodded. “Sorry for being curious. I’m a bartender, it’s in my nature.”

“And it’s in my nature to keep my business my own.”

“Right, sorry boss.”

Flint glanced over his shoulder at the two regulars who remained. “Get them up.”

“Want me to call them a cab?” asked Mickey.

“For all I care, you can leave them on the sidewalk. Just don’t want them in my place after hours.”

“Got it.”

“Good,” said Flint. He downed the rest of the whiskey and set the empty glass on the counter. “Lock up on your way out, I’m going upstairs to get some shut-eye.”

“Have a good night, boss.”

Flint set his hands on the counter and pushed up to get off the stool. As he moved towards a door at the back of the tavern, he muttered under his breath.

“The hell’s so good about it, huh?”

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He ascended the staircase to the single room apartment above the bar. Once inside, he kicked off his shoes and removed his shirt. Flint caught sight of his naked chest in the mirror, running his calloused fingertips along the lines of his torso. Tracing the scars that stood there from battles long over. Each one had a story to tell and each story Flint wished he could forget. He looked into the eyes of the man who stared back at him in the mirror. His skin was creased from age and his formerly jet-black hair was thinning at the top and lightening at the temples. Even the stubble on his face had gone from black to gray and his dark brown eyes looked tired.

He sighed and opened the door to the closet. Flint reached for the shelf above the hanging clothes and pulled out a large, black case.

Inside sat an old shotgun and two long-barrel revolvers. Custom-made but with a look that resembled the old Colt Peacemaker. Flint removed one of them and opened the chamber, staring at each empty hole.

“We may be too old for this life, girl. But something tells me we’re going in for one last ride. And I’m bettin’ it’ll be the one that finally does us in.”