

**DAVE  
WARNER  
RIVER OF  
SALT**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

*For Marie, Bernadette and Nadine — my girls of '63.*

# Contents

1. Yuri	7
2. Twang	21
3. Watusi Stomp	39
4. Membership	56
5. Cockeyed Optimist	71
6. Aquarium	88
7. Paradise Lost	99
8. A Trip South	113
9. Edward	122
10. Death and Resurrection	144
11. Forest For Trees	165
12. A Shirt Returns	174
13. Glow	188
14. The Trouble with Secrets	198
15. The First Stone	208
16. Match	222
17. I Wanna Hold Your Hand	230
18. The Nineteenth Hole	238
19. The Other Side Of Dallas	242

# 1. Yuri

‘It’s a fucking disgrace. This country has gone down the shitter.’

Holding the offensive newspaper with his fat left hand, Little Joey backhanded it with his right, the same way he smacked around a numbers runner who hadn’t made his quota. Al knew what was coming next. What had come next every morning since April, making breakfast even more stressful: Fucking Russians.

‘Fuckin’ Russians.’

There it was. Al nodded as if in sympathy but in truth he admired Yuri Gagarin, admired anybody who could sit in a fucking tin drum and be shot into outer space. How many Russian cosmonauts were up there just floating around? You’d never believe what the Russians told you. Could be dozens. Mind you, given the job these last few months, it might be relaxing. Every bodyguard he knew had an ulcer. So far Al seemed to have been spared but perhaps that was because he hardly felt like eating. You couldn’t put two hands on a burger for fear of a bullet in the back of the head. Bodyguard used to be a good job, prestigious, but ever since Carmelo had gone on the warpath, it had turned to shit. Philly was a fucking slaughterhouse. Little Joey should have distanced himself from Carmelo but what Joey was thinking — erroneously in Al’s considered opinion — was that if Carmelo won the struggle with the Don, then Carmelo would come gunning for those who had been his enemy. Joey wasn’t dumb. Well, not that dumb. He knew he couldn’t sit on the fence forever but he was holding out, hoping New York stepped in, said, enough is enough, you assholes can’t sort out your problems, we’re taking over — in which case he might be rewarded for keeping a cool head.

Al smuggled a look at the boss slurping his coffee. There was a difference between being cool and being negligent. Refusing to change your habits, that was negligent. And who were the suckers who would pay for such negligence?

Sam, sitting opposite, stopped scanning the doorway for a moment to meet his eye, thinking the same thing: We're the ones gonna take lead and all he wants to do is talk Russians.

'They got women astronauts too. Can you believe that?'

No point correcting the boss. He'd forget 'cosmonaut' by lunch. Stubborn little motherfucker. He ate breakfast here most every day. They'd made it as secure as possible: two guys at the back door, Caesar in the car out front, them in the booth so they only had to defend three sides maximum. Including staff, there were fifteen people besides them. The skinny guy at the stool in the cheap suit, some sort of insurance guy would be Al's guess, was there most days. Same for the college kid looked like Troy Donahue with the glasses. He was always reading a book or a magazine at a table by himself. Apart from them, couple of secretaries grabbing a bite to eat, a henpecked husband and his wife, the staff who were mainly Polacks. Day before yesterday had been a bit of a scare, that shiver you feel: two guys, heavy set in suits, walking in off the street. Al's hand had gone straight to his inside coat pocket. He'd felt Sam tense, the same. The guys had ordered ham and eggs and sat on the far side. In the end nothing ... but the tension, whew ...

'They'll have a woman in space before we've even got one of our guys up there.'

Joey was shaking his head. He didn't even look up at the tinkle of the front door bell but Al and Sam did. Couple of guys, looked like plumbers, no threat. Breathe out.

'You guys see Arnold Palmer on the TV?'

'No, boss.'

Al didn't own a TV. If he did, he would not be watching golf. Golf had become Little Joey's latest thing. The plumbers were getting coffee, Al watching just in case.

'The guy is amazing.'

The golf course was another place that was a pain-in-the-ass to watch over the boss. Little Joey was a terrible golfer. He swung like he was swatting flies. Al was sure his boss hated it but the New York guys had taken it up and the ripples had spread. Sam and Al spent half their time looking out for snipers and the rest of the time looking for Joey's ball.

‘That’s one thing the fucking Russians can’t do. Play golf.’

Al’s eyes followed the plumbers, backs to him now, sitting on their stools. The bell rang again. Al’s eyes flicked quickly, like the tip of a whip: two guys, suits ... same guys as the day before. He watched, real careful now.

‘I need gloves.’

Why wouldn’t he just shut up?

‘Ricki says ever since he bought gloves his game has improved. I have to stop slicing. Some guys hook. I slice.’

Al sensed somebody approaching, he tensed and swung ... relaxed, only Troy Dona —

If Al had had the time, he would have congratulated the kid on his demeanour, his whole technique, his patience, and of course his accuracy but he never got that far because suddenly there was an automatic in the kid’s hand and Al knew he’d been bested and it was the end. He never even felt the sting of the twenty-two-calibre bullet, being already dead when the kid shot Sam through the throat. Acting on instinct, Little Joey picked up the newspaper to shield his head. The kid put two right through the photo of Yuri Gagarin — the one thing Little Joey might have approved of — into Little Joey’s brain, then walked calmly towards the door.

Blake moved purposefully just like the old guy who’d once done jobs for Capone had told him.

‘Never rush out. It invites the unwanted, accidents, problems. You get hit by a car, knock over a pram ... people remember that. I knew a guy: he fired, turned and ran straight through a glass door. He bled out on the pavement before the guy he shot. Wear glasses. All they remember: the guy wore glasses.’

By now the door was within reach. He was aware of the sense of disbelief around him. It was too immediate for the witnesses to be afraid. They were still processing, thinking it must be some stunt, thinking, what happened just then didn’t actually happen. He pulled open the door. It felt light, like a cardboard prop. The bell jangled. They should invent a bell that doesn’t jangle when you’re leaving, he thought absently. All his thoughts were absent or, at the most, viewed through tracing paper. It was always that way in the zone and he’d been in the zone ever since he’d first entered the diner. Only when he stepped outside did he move into technicolour. Jimmy had a gun on Little Joey’s driver, who

was compliant, both hands on the steering wheel. Vince was covering the street. Right that second, Blake sensed the sedan approaching. It skidded to a halt: Marcello, always on time. Vince pulled the back door open for him and jumped in the front himself. Blake slid over. Jimmy piled in quick behind him and pulled the door. Marcello gunned the engine.

Nobody spoke.

No whoops, no shouts. It was business. Jimmy clapped him on the shoulder with that big hand of his that had always been there for him, the same right hand that had knocked their booze-hound father flat on his worthless ass and scared him out of their lives when Jimmy was just seventeen. When they still had a mother. All of this passed through Blake's brain before he heard the first siren heading back from where they'd left.

Marcello finally said, 'How many, kid?'

'All of them.'

Vincent sighed. 'I liked Al. It wasn't his fault he worked for that cocksucker.'

Winter was coming. Cold air seeped in through the car body and seemed to elevate the smell of stale tobacco. Nobody had lit up a cigarette yet, even though Jimmy and Marcello were inveterate smokers. It was as if all those parts of the world not directly to do with assassination and escape had been frozen.

After twenty minutes, Marcello pulled over two blocks north of their apartment block, popped the glove compartment, pulled out a lumpy envelope and passed it across to Jimmy, who opened it and quickly skimmed the notes.

'Three hundred bucks. For a triple? What the fuck!'

'The deal was only for Joey.'

'And how else is he supposed to get to Joey?'

'No one forced him to take the job.'

'The Don can't afford another three hundred?'

'You don't know who the client is. Don't suppose nuthin'. You're on thin ice, Jimmy.'

Vincent, who was Jimmy's friend, looked deep into his eyes.

'Take the money. You guys are building a reputation as reliable. That's money in the bank.'

Blake felt his brother was about to say something. This would not be advisable.

'It's okay,' Blake said, and stepped out of the car. The weight of the automatic in his bomber jacket made it sag to the right, and for the first time since he'd used it at the restaurant, Blake thought of it as a thing and not a limb, an extension of himself. That was his secret; when he was on a job, the gun was part of him, like a little kid playing bang-bang in a back lot pointing his finger. Jimmy snatched the money and slammed the door, a futile gesture, as Marcello had boosted the car earlier. What the fuck did he care if they took to it with an axe?

The brothers stood and watched the Electra rumble away under skies grey as an elephant's belly.

'It stinks,' said Jimmy but what went unsaid was he was the one who'd made the deal. He was the one who'd quoted too cheap, forgetting the bodyguards. Blake would never hold that against him though. They started along the sidewalk. The wind probed their clothes like the fingers of a dead man. It was a mixed neighbourhood but Blake felt more at home with the Polacks and Spades than the Italians from the old neighbourhood, a lot of who were now made guys with new allegiances. This was something he had grasped a long time ago but Jimmy still didn't get it. Vincent was one of his brother's oldest pals and Vincent loved Jimmy but even to Vincent they were outsiders now. That was never going to change but his brother still thought it was like when he was the bravest, toughest kid on the block leading the Italian kids, busting heads, boosting cars. The world had grown up around Jimmy without including him.

They lived in a plain red brick block. Blake hated it. He hated the cold of Philly. He especially hated the music Jimmy and his friends listened to: crooners who sang in neckties swaying with the mike, their eyes shut. The dark vestibule smelled of some kind of oily soup and yesterday's mutton fat. Blake tried the light switch but like always, nothing happened, the globe had been dead for a month. The bonus was he didn't have to look at the peeling wallpaper that had been there since the twenties and was even more depressing than this gloom. He gripped the bannister to begin hauling himself up the four floors.

His brother spoke softly in the dark. 'I'm sorry. It's my fault. I should have asked for triple or double at least. I'll make it up to you.'

'You don't have to.'

'I will. Trust me.'

Those were two words you never wanted to hear from Jimmy.

Later they were eating steaks at the small table in their apartment. This was the extent of their celebration for now. The irony of marking his kills by eating steak was not lost on Blake — dead meat buys dead meat — but he blocked the thought so it was no more than a soft footfall at the end of a dark hallway. Some men are born to write poetry or design frocks or hit a baseball out of the park. Everybody except Blake believed he'd been born to pull a trigger. This was the fourth time in a little over twelve months he and Jimmy had sat down to eat steak after a display of his prowess, and though he did not relish his calling, he still enjoyed the steak. Life dealt you a hand, you did your best with it. Or you tossed it in.

'You okay, champ?' Jimmy's eyebrows knitted as he leaned over, concerned. 'I didn't overcook it?'

'No, you cooked it fine.'

'So, what? You want to go dancing? I could scare up Trixie, she could find that friend of hers, the blonde ...'

'Mindy.'

'Yeah.'

Blake shrugged. Dancing didn't appeal. He didn't know what he wanted to do except maybe turn on the heater but the brothers were frugal and winter was coming when you'd need every cent to pay to be warm. Unless he chased another job. But no, he'd prefer to shiver than put a bullet in somebody's brain. The cash should last them a few months at least. His mind drifted back to the car, the parting argument about the money.

'You shouldn't have said that to Marcello, about the money.'

Jimmy nodded. 'I know. But it's okay. They need us. And the Don should have fucking paid more. And I know it's my fault, I made the deal but even so ... it had to be said.'

'You think he was the client?'

Marcello had never actually revealed who the hit was for.

'Of course he was the fucking client.'

'It could have been Carmelo.'

'No. Marcello and Vincent are the Don's guys. They wouldn't have anything to do with that psycho.'

'So why wouldn't the Don go after Carmelo? Why Little Joey?'

Jimmy pushed his plate away, shook his head like his kid brother had so much to learn. 'Carmelo is expecting that. He's strong. A lot of guys like Little Joey are sitting on the fence. You try to hit Carmelo and miss ... sends a bad message, rats start to leave the ship. So, you make an

example of Little Joey. “You guys think you can sit on the bench, think again.” Little Joey was a warning in lights from the Don: “I got teeth too.”

Three days later Blake was walking down the hallway to their apartment, his bones brittle. He’d had to force himself to leave the local diner. It was snug in there and he liked the sound of the cash register and plates and cutlery. Outside it was grey and too cold to shoot hoops. The weather had brewed up a chill all too quick. But he’d been there close on two hours and he couldn’t stay forever. Jimmy was with Vincent scoping some job, so it was just him. As he passed number seventeen, he heard music like no music he’d ever heard before. It was all twang and thumping tomtoms. The guy in eighteen was a tall, skinny white guy and Blake knew him to nod to when they passed on the stairs but that was all. There was no sign of any woman living in the apartment. For a whole minute Blake stood outside the door listening to the music. It made him tingle all over. He realised the sound must have been a record, not radio, because when it finished he could hear the click of the needle. He was going to turn away but curiosity got the better of him and he knocked. A few seconds later the door opened and the guy stood there looking like he expected a complaint, defensive but more worried than angry.

‘The music ...’ Blake began.

‘Was it too loud? I’m sorry.’

‘No, no it was ... I’m Blake.’

‘Pete Lanscombe.’

They shook hands awkwardly.

‘I’m in ...’ Blake pointed up the hall.

‘Eighteen.’

‘Yeah. I’ve never heard anything like that. It sounded ... wild.’

Lanscombe’s face lit up. ‘Isn’t it! I picked it up in California. I just got back. This guy was playing ... Dick Dale. It’s called surf music.’

Lots of times people say, ‘That changed my life.’ Sometimes they mean it, like the first time they spy their husband or wife. Or when they get shot in the knee because they skimmed or didn’t pay on time. Of course that changes your life: you’ll walk with a permanent limp and wake in the cold, dark hours with your bones throbbing. Lots of times though it’s just a filler, one of those things said for effect. That’s what Blake thought anyway, but when he heard that record with the twangy guitar he felt

deep down inside that it really wasn't going to change anything, even though it should have changed everything.

Sometimes you can be wrong.



'You really want to go to California and play that thing?'

'That thing' was a Fender Stratocaster and it had cost Blake all his cut of the Little Joey job, apart from what they'd put aside for rent and food. It was his pride and joy but he didn't mind Jimmy speaking about it like it was a cheap ukulele. Jimmy didn't know any better and he was trying to look interested. Blake had been practising three hours straight. He figured it must have been driving his brother nuts. His fingers were blue with cold. He looked up from the guitar.

'I know it's just a dream.'

'No, no, don't say that.' Jimmy wagged a finger in his face. 'You want to do that, we'll do that.'

'Come on, Jim, all your friends are here.'

Jimmy's head was the size of a melon that could feed an Irish family. He shook it now. 'They're not my friends. You're my friend, the only one. I don't owe them nothing.'

What had transpired to alter Jimmy's opinion from three months earlier when the iceblock that was winter hadn't yet been dropped on their doorstep, was that the Don had forbidden Jimmy's planned robbery of a large craps game run by Carmelo. It seemed Carmelo was back at the heel with all the fight gone from him and the Don preferred that to crushing him as he might have and creating yet another power vacuum. At least that's what Blake had picked up from Jimmy. Blake didn't really care about or understand the deeper machinations of that crowd.

'I'm serious.' Jimmy was hunched in his big overcoat, hands jammed into the pockets. 'I'm sick of this. Let's get the fuck out of here, go live on Redondo Beach.'

'You don't swim.'

'Yet.'

'We need a car. They say in California you have to have a car.'

'We'll get one. Play me something.'

'The only thing I can play is "Silent Night".'

The guitar was only one or two years old. Blake had spied it in a pawnbroker's window. He didn't know any musicians but he saw there

were a lot of musical instruments in the shop and figured the old Jewish guy who ran it might be able to suggest somebody who could teach him from his list of musician clients.

‘You don’t want those guys. Nice young kid like you. They’re all black, all addicts. My sister’s kid has been learning guitar. I’ll give you the address.’

Blake had thought the guy meant ‘kid’ the way everybody called him kid. It turned out though that Arnold Schleider really was a kid, thirteen years old. He charged Blake a buck for two one-hour lessons a week. They sat in Arnold’s bedroom beneath a Yankees banner. Arnold’s mom brought them cups of cocoa. A Mob triggerman being schooled in guitar by a thirteen-year-old Jewish kid taking cocoa breaks ... the weirdness wasn’t lost on Blake. Arnold wasn’t exactly a prodigy, so his method was to teach Blake just how he’d been taught. That meant ‘Silent Night’, which was still fresh in Arnold’s memory from the recent Christmas.

Blake didn’t want to play it now but Jimmy was so eager, like a big puppy waiting for you to toss a ball.

Hesitatingly, he fought his way through it, only having to go back twice.

‘That’s great. That is really fucking good. You’re a talent. You don’t have to do that other shit.’

Blake thought, no, seriously, we both know I do.

Jimmy was walking around in circles now, head bowed. ‘Leave it with me. This is going to happen. Trust me.’



The main thing occupying Blake’s mind as he sat in the broken chair in the basement of the parking lot, the wall behind him smeared in blood, was Jimmy saying, ‘Trust me.’ Even if the waitress at the diner hadn’t very carefully slipped him the address and whispered, ‘Your brother says you’ll give me five bucks for this,’ those words still would have been the steaming dog turd in the dining room of his mind. He’d tried to not look hurried, finished his coffee in his own good time and pushed out into the sleet. As if he had confirmed an appointment, the Mercury slid along the snow-flecked tar and stopped in front of him. Marcello and Vincent. Marcello told him to get in.

He acted dumb. ‘What’s wrong? Is Jimmy okay?’

‘The boss wants to see you.’

That was all Marcello had said. Vincent had said nothing, tight-lipped, strained. You didn't have to be a genius: Jimmy says 'trust me', then he doesn't come home — okay, that in itself is not unusual — but the waitress with the address written on her pad, and then the Mercury and the guys ... what the fuck had Jimmy done? The second thing occupying his mind was not the cold — that was just a harsh fucking reality, Vincent was stamping his feet and Marcello was kicking a radiator that clearly wasn't working because it was an icebox down here — the second thing he was thinking about, way back there, was that this chair once occupied a place in a fine dining room. Maybe a hotel, or a large house where dinner guests dressed in black ties and tails, and ate sliced beef off silver platters. It was now a piece of junk, creaky, sloping to the right, cut adrift from its family and left here in this freezing basement lit by a single bulb. The splatter on the wall behind suggested the last person it had supported had not left the room in the same health in which he had entered. Another chair was placed right opposite him but not matching, a bentwood, better condition. Somewhere a pipe dripped. The rumble of the freight elevator descending turned all their heads. It was one with wire mesh in front. Eventually Blake could make out the Don, Franco Repacholi, or rather his cashmere coat. His cadaverous face was in shadow. His personal fixer, 'Peste', was at his side as always. Blake remembered asking Vincent what the name meant, pest?

'The plague, silent and deadly,' Vincent replied. 'You see him outside your house, you're already dead.'

An outsider might have found it amusing, a little stagey even, but it was all too fucking real to Blake.

Trust me.

The elevator jolted to a halt. Repacholi yanked open the grille himself. Blake noticed little things like that. The Plague couldn't defend his boss if he had one hand on the grille. The Don clipped over on his leather shoes and sat on the bentwood. He wore leather gloves to match the tan coat.

'What the fuck. It's fucking freezing in here.'

It was the first time anybody had spoken since Marcello had said the same thing ten minutes earlier and just like then it made mist when Repacholi opened his mouth.

'The radiator's not working, boss.'

Marcello gave it a kick to prove the point. The Don shook his head as if to ask the Lord to give him strength. Then his eyes fixed on Blake and Blake felt his insides turn to soup.

‘You’re not in trouble, kid. I like you. Jesus Christ, it’s cold down here. You do a good job. You keep your head down. You don’t make trouble. So, I want to assure you I’m genuine. We can put this behind us, move on. Where is he?’

Repacholi pulled a cigarette case from his inner jacket pocket, flipped it open, offering one to Blake who shook his head. Blake had never smoked. People who smoked always had their hands occupied with lighters or matches or tearing cellophane and he wanted his hands to always be ready.

‘Where is your brother?’

The words ‘I don’t know’ had pushed their way to the door of the moving bus but before they could ring the bell, Repacholi pointed a bony finger at him.

‘Before you tell me you don’t know, which I understand, he’s your brother ...’ Repacholi put the cigarette between his lips then produced a smooth little silver lighter and fired up, inhaling, ‘... I must warn you, this is a very serious situation for you.’

Somehow Blake found words. ‘What do you think he did?’

‘I don’t *think*, I know. Same as I know you weren’t involved. Eighteen top quality furs. Mink, sable ...’ he waved his cigarette, ‘... gone. I busted my balls to boost those. Flew in this shit-hot alarm guy from ... where the fuck was he from?’

Even though his boss kept his gaze on Blake, the bodyguard knew he was the one being asked. ‘Detroit.’

‘Flew him in.’ Repacholi took another drag as if the memory pained him. ‘More fucking planning than D Day. And to have that taken from me, by someone in my own family, that’s like ... fucking Eskimo would freeze to death in here ... it’s like a knife going into my own nuts. That’s what it’s like.’

Marcello gave the radiator another kick to show he was trying something.

‘Your brother knows I use the Margolis warehouse.’

‘Maybe it was Margolis? Jimmy didn’t come home. He probably figures you’ll think it’s him.’

‘It is him.’

‘It could be Margolis.’

Peste spoke. ‘It was not Margolis.’

Blake now knew whose blood was on the wall behind him but kept swinging, his desperation palpable. ‘What about the Feds? Maybe they have a wiretap. All cops are dirty. They heard about the furs ...’

The boss held up his palm: desist. 'You are not guilty but because the guilty party is not here and you are family, you are responsible. However, you can discharge that responsibility. I need to know where he is. Half of those furs belong to New York. You see what I'm dealing with, son? This is an extra-jurisdictional situation. Things happen on my patch, I become responsible even though I am not guilty. There is nothing I can do for him. I won't pretend otherwise. It's too fucking cold. I can only protect you from New York if you give me your fuck-up brother. You're loyal. I like that. Don't be stupid here. We'll find him. Your brother's not that smart. But you know what, he loves you. If he were in this room right now freezing his nuts off, he would tell you, save yourself. And I promise you absolutely, this will be no impediment to you going forward. The opposite. No-one will harm you. I give you my word. Now I am going to ask you, and I want you to think very carefully before you answer. Where is Jimmy?'

Under the illumination of the headlights you could see snowflakes falling. They look like lost souls, thought Blake. He remembered a picture of a painting he had seen in a book once, scared and tortured humans falling into hell's belly. He was numb, had been on the ride over, sitting in the back alongside Vincent. Pennsport: he hadn't been in this neck of the woods for a while but it figured. Jimmy used his Irish pals for the job. They got drunk. Or their women did. Somebody blabbed. They must have been damn near caught in the act because Jimmy hadn't even made it home. He'd obviously cut out and gone to ground. And all to get him to California and a bullshit dream that was never going to happen now. It was silent in the car. They had cruised into the street, headlights off. Row houses. The address was across the way, plain brick, a jaundiced light in a second-floor apartment. Blake looked across at Vincent, stretched back, eyes closed, a revolver sitting in his shoulder holster. There for the taking. He could do it. He could ...

'Time.'

It was Marcello. He had driven. Peste was beside him, a sawed-off shotgun across his lap. Blake's heart was galloping now, his cheek cold against the passenger window, his breath misting it up.

He'll know I've betrayed him, he thought. The Don sold me some candy, a way out. I took it. Jimmy will look down from a grimy window and through the descending snow he'll see legs in dark trousers striding his way and he will know.

The click of the car doors closing, quiet as it was, made him jump. He snuck another look at Vincent, the gun still within reach. Still time. No sounds except their breathing, the others' footsteps had been snuffed already.

'You didn't do anything wrong, kid. You had no choice.' Vincent sounded resigned, like he was talking to himself. Then his voice changed a gear. 'You need to get out. I know what the Don said. I think he believes it. Now. But sooner or later he'll doubt. They always do. They should be there now. Marcello the front, Peste the back. Take my gun, hit me across the head with it and get the fuck outta here.'

Vincent's words were like a child's fist beating on the window of a car sinking in the river. They couldn't break through.

'Blake, listen to me. Jimmy is my best friend. This is the only thing I can do for him. Take the fucking gun.'

Blake snapped the pistol from the holster and backhanded Vincent across the forehead. He thought he heard the crack of bone but it was lost as he shoved open the door and jumped out, skidding on the sidewalk. For an instant he stood looking up at the window, suspended the way a tiny leaf gets snagged in a spider web. Then he started moving quickly away in a hunched run. Something made him turn and look back up. Two bright muzzle flashes lit the window. He ran.

Going back to his apartment was too dangerous. They could put a call through, send somebody. Or they might not. Who would they send? The Pest? Would the Don risk him knowing Blake was armed? But maybe there would be somebody waiting anyway. Somebody out of New York, sitting there in the dark. He couldn't risk it. But he had to. That's where the guitar was.

The cab took the last of his cash. He had it drop him a block away. He couldn't afford to think of Jimmy, not yet. He cut through a back alley. Nobody obvious at the rear of the building. The front clear too. If it was him he'd be waiting in the vestibule or the apartment, give the target two steps inside then open up. Blake could wait for some other tenant, come in with them but nobody was out. It was too cold. He pushed the door open into the gloomy vestibule tensing for shots, the pistol gripped in his right hand down by his leg. Nothing except the familiar smell of soup, and the mutter of faint television. He took the stairs carefully. The muzzle flashes snapped in his head like rim shots. Down the dark corridor now, pitch black, past Lanscombe's, with some kind of quiet

jazz playing tonight. He stood outside the door to his apartment, pistol still in his right hand, key now in his left. He sniffed, inhaled. A good killer, you'd never hear a breath, waste of time trying, but tobacco, cologne ... he could smell nothing. Pistol gripped and ready for action, he slid the key in the lock began to turn it. That's when he heard the door to Lanscombe's apartment open and knew he'd fucked up. He'd been bested. He was a dead man. The killer had taken out Lanscombe first. There was a gun probably with a silencer pointing at the back of his head right now. He'd betrayed Jimmy for noth—

'Hey, Blake.'

He swung around, pistol pointing, found the will to not depress the trigger. He saw Lanscombe's hands go up.

'Easy, man.'

He dropped his hand back down. The light from Lanscombe's apartment was backlighting him. He had his hand out, something in it.

'Some woman knocked on my door. Irish. She said Jimmy said to give this to you.'

It was a brown paper package, small, wrapped in string and tape. Blake took it.

'Thanks.'

Lanscombe retreated towards his flat. 'Oh, and she said Jimmy said, "Get a suntan."'

Lanscombe's door closed behind him and Blake was alone again with that odour of mutton fat. He ripped open the package. Cash, several hundred by the looks. He felt shame. He had thought his brother dumb. Jimmy had known all along how it would play out if things went awry. This cash must be some advance he'd negotiated. He knew they would grab Blake. He knew the deal they'd put to him, he knew Blake would take it and would come back for his guitar.

Trust me.

River of salt, flowing from my eyes. Blake tasted it, couldn't stop it.