



THE INHERITANCE

CHRISTOPHER STIRES

“What is Meridian?” Sierra asked.

“A tiny government agency headed by a woman named Kate Guthrie. I don’t know whether it’s CIA, FBI, or National Endowment to the Arts. I do know that after Tru lost Cassandra and the little girl he lost all interest in life. All he wanted was to be alone and as far away from people as he could get.

“Somehow, he met Guthrie, and she became interested in the box. She’s spent twenty years and a lot of tax money to finance Tru’s research. She isn’t going to just let that box slip away.”

I tapped the cigarette pack in my shirt pocket then changed my mind.

Sierra looked nervously up at me. “What are we going to do, Bosco?”

“He’s going to lay low for a little while,” Temple answered for me. “He’s going to lay low until I find out what exactly’s going on here.”

Also by Christopher Stires

Dark Legend
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Paladin's Journey
Sabian (2019)

The
INHERITANCE



Christopher Stires

ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

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THE INHERITANCE

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For My Father and Brother

Norman Stires Jr.

Hugh Timothy Stires

CHAPTER 1



“Pay me.”

“No problem,” I said, pushing aside the bartender schedule I was writing up and opening the large check ledger. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“No checks. Cash.”

I looked up from the ledger, past Cervantes, my lead chef, at the man who was standing beside him. I had never seen this driver before. He was a head taller than me, and his condor-tattooed biceps were bigger than my thighs. His white tank top, stretched taut against his massive chest, had **DELPHI PRODUCE** written across it in cheery orange script.

He stepped closer to me, hitched his pants then cracked his knuckles.

“Cash,” he said firmly.

I smiled and pointed at the other side of the booth.

“Have a seat.”

“I don’t wanna sit with you.”

“Want something to drink? Soda? Coffee?”

“I don’t wanna drink. My boss said to collect in cash or everything stays on the truck.”

I nodded sympathetically. “I know how bosses can be. You should see mine.”

“Pay me. Now.”

“You got it. Tell me how much the order is, and I’ll get it out of petty cash.”

“Wrong. I’m collectin’ for the last two months. Your check bounced higher than my butt on ol’ Bonnie Minerva’s Posturepedic.”

Cervantes rocked gently on his heels, then looked across the quiet dining room toward the lounge.

“Now we have a problem,” I said slowly. “My boss doesn’t allow me to keep that much cash on hand. Security risk.”

“I’m outta here.”

“Wait a second. What’s your name?”

He hesitated, glancing sideways at Cervantes then back at me.

“Tom.”

“Glad to meet you. I’m Jess. Here’s the situation, Tom. We changed banks last month. They were supposed to notify you. Obviously, they didn’t. I knew a couple of checks got lost in the move, but I didn’t know which ones. This check is good.”

“Cash,” he repeated.

Turning toward the window, I watched the rain sheeting the parking lot. Lightning flashed over the low scrub hills in the distance. Think.

A chocolate-brown Mercedes rolled into the first stall near the doors. That had to be the woman from Beverly Hills.

“Well, what’s it gonna be?” asked Tom. “I don’t have all day.”

I picked up my pen and wrote *Delphi Produce* on the top check.

“This is what I’m going to do—”

“Do anything you want,” Tom responded, “as long as it includes cash.”

I continued writing. Faster.

“The check’s good, Tom, but I know you’re going to catch some grief for taking it. I’m going to give you the check for your boss and a six-pack of Bud for you.”

Tom cracked the knuckles of his right hand.

“The check and half a case of Bud.”

Tom tugged on his lower lip as he eyeballed me.

“I like Jack Daniels.”

“We don’t carry Jack. The check, half a case, and five bucks cash.”

“Twenty bucks.”

“The check, half a case, five bucks cash, and a Kings cap I have in the office.”

Tom leaned closer and stabbed me in the chest with his finger.

“The check had better be good.”

“If it’s not I’ll hold my boss down for you.”

“Okay. Yeah.” He stepped back. “I’ll go unload the truck.”

I handed the check to him. “Thanks, Tom.”

Tom folded the check neatly in half then shoved it into his hip pocket and strolled toward the kitchen.

Cervantes moved quickly beside me.

“I thought you were going to offer him a dead cat on a string next.”

“They only get that if they paint the fence.”

Cervantes chuckled. “I’m going to call the suicide hotline. I want them to know we’re walking the walk again.”

“You mean we don’t have a direct line by now?”

The Mercedes woman stepped through the front doors, closing her umbrella and smoothing her somber suit. She was young—late twenties, thirty tops—and efficient-looking, easy to spot as a lawyer even without the leather briefcase and stiletto heels.

Coolly, she surveyed the restaurant, and her slender face tightened into a rigid mask. She was not happy, and I knew most of her aggravation was aimed directly at me. And I guess it was deserved, for the trouble I’d given her.

Cervantes started for the kitchen then stopped.

“Jess,” he said, turning around and looking down at the check ledger. “Tomorrow’s payday.”

I closed the ledger.

“Don’t worry, amigo. Who else would ride shotgun?”

He frowned, still unsure, then headed into the back.

I climbed out of the booth and headed toward the woman.

“You must be Ms. Wyatt,” I said, nearing. “I’m Jess Claiborne. Thanks for meeting me here.”

She noted the booth I’d come from and marched toward it, ignoring my offered hand.

“Really,” I said, “I appreciate this.”

“I had no option, Mr. Claiborne,” she called over her shoulder.

“Hey, I’m sorry about missing—”

“I have a trial starting in the morning, Mr. Claiborne, but the partners instructed me to conclude this matter this week. In fact, they told me to conclude it or clean out my office. So, may we begin?”

I smiled as she slipped into the booth.

“I know how bosses can be. You should meet mine.”

CHAPTER 2



“I will be ready momentarily,” Wyatt said, pulling another file from her briefcase. “Everything has to be done precisely as we were instructed.”

“Take your time.”

I fingered the crisp business card she’d slapped on the table. She was an associate for the law firm of Dunn and Mercer, and she was handling the dispensation of my uncle’s estate. *Estate* was her word. My father’s brother was a bum and a drunk, and those were the good things the family said about him.

I wouldn’t know. I’d only met him once, when he’d attended a kindergarten Christmas play I was in. I was the wise man who brought myrrh. I remember that, and hiding behind my mother when the strange, foul-smelling man was introduced to me. I also remember my father having a black eye the next morning.

I had made three appointments in as many weeks to meet Wyatt at her firm's offices on Wilshire, and I had canceled all three appointments. Work. Plus I had no burning compulsion to drive for two hours from San Corona to Beverly Hills.

My experience with lawyers was limited. I had only dealt with one lawyer, one other time. He'd had an honors degree from the finest mail-order college in Mexicali and was enthusiastically recommended by six of my seven cellmates.

Maybe I should have been a little curious, but whatever Uncle Truman had left me wasn't worth the effort.

Wyatt studied the three stacks of papers in front of her then checked her briefcase again. I noticed traces of white etching the corners of her mouth. She was too young to be eagerly pursuing a vindictive ulcer.

I decided not to mention the Maalox residue, or the hickey peeking timidly out from behind her high collar and fading make-up.

Thunder cracked overhead.

Virgil, my part-time day busser, cloaked in his yellow rain slicker, signaled me he was taking the garbage outside; and I nodded okay. Diana, one of my servers, waved goodbye and headed out into the rain.

Slowly, I scanned the dining room. We had thirty-one tables, and only three were occupied. At table five, finishing their lunch, were Goddard and Devlin, casket salesmen from the factory down the road. Eddie and Henry J., veteran meatpackers from the Louis Ranch, were at table eleven with their newest energetic trainee in tow. At table twenty-nine were three suits who'd arrived about twenty minutes ago. I'd never seen them before. They sipped coffee and munched

nachos as Iris, my boss's sister-in-law, replenished their salsa bowl.

I sighed.

In the darkened lounge, there were only twelve customers surrounding the bar for the beginning of Happy Hour. Seven months ago we would have been packed, with no place to sit, no place to stand. But that was before the new Roebuck's Country Grill opened at Main and D next to Walmart.

We couldn't compete with the high-tech national chain. I had tried everything—food specials, drink specials, group discounts, door prizes. Nothing worked. Roebuck's had it all—location, brand recognition, and major backing. Within seven months, my staff had been cut by a quarter, and most of those remaining were working part-time. I figured we'd be closed for good by the end of the year. If we lasted that long.

Maybe if we gave away a free dish with every steak or rib entree?

An adorable baby contest?

Ugliest dog?

Wyatt brushed some cornbread crumbs off the table then placed a small cassette recorder down.

"Wyatt, are ladies' nights still legal?" I asked.

She looked directly at me for the first time.

"What?"

"Special drinks prices for women if they come in on a certain night. Is it still legal to do that?"

"No," she answered. "I have to tape this meeting for the partners. I trust that it is not a problem for you."

I chuckled. "Do you need fingerprints, too?"

"Yes, I, in fact, do need your fingerprints."

"You're not serious."

"Very serious."

I shook my head. "What's going on here? What did my uncle leave me that requires all this?"

"All in due time, Mr. Claiborne. This matter has to be executed as we were instructed."

"What if we don't?" I asked. "What happens then? Is Uncle Truman going to come back and fire you?"

Her mouth tightened. "If you will keep the witty retorts to a minimum, this will proceed much more smoothly."

"Sorry, witty retorts are out of my league. Stupid jokes I can handle."

Wyatt straightened the center stack of papers.

"I had to rearrange my entire schedule to drive down here, Mr. Claiborne. I would appreciate your full cooperation."

"Yes, ma'am." I reached for my cigarettes. If I had rearranged my entire day to drive to Beverly Hills, that would have been all right. Of course, it would have. Lawyers. Why is it *they* never have to swear to tell the truth in court?

But now, I had to admit, I was curious. This lawyer, whose haircut probably cost more than my weekly take-home, had been ordered to meet with me. Why? What could Uncle Truman have that wielded that much weight?

Wyatt popped two Rol-Aids into her mouth. I lit my cigarette and studied the hickey on the side of her neck.

The makeup had rubbed off on her collar, and I could clearly see it when she looked to the right. The mark was shaped like a fat-bottomed eight. It didn't fit the uptight impression I had of her. I could imagine a lot, but no one over fifteen gave hickeys. No, people over fifteen gave each other deeper and longer-lasting bruises.

Wyatt eyed my cigarette and cleared her throat loudly.

“Yes, ma’am.” I crushed the cigarette out then slipped the unsmoked butt back into the pack. “Y’know, if we don’t start soon, I’m going to start cracking witty retorts again.”

“I’m ready.” She pressed the record button on her cassette. “Thursday the sixth. Four-seventeen p.m. State your full name, please.”

“Jesse Gabriel Claiborne.”

“You were born in Philadelphia, and you are thirty-three years old?”

“Thirty-two,” I corrected.

She jotted a neat note on her legal pad.

“Your parents are Marshall and Julia Claiborne. They currently reside in Delaware. Your father is a military chaplain and your mother an executive advisor for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. You have one sister and two brothers.”

I nodded and watched Iris refill the coffee cups for the three suits. The casket salesmen walked toward the front doors. Were they holding hands?

“The cassette cannot record a nod,” Wyatt informed me. “You currently reside in a one-bedroom apartment in San Corona, California.”

“Male strippers,” I said, snapping my fingers.

“What?”

“We have male strippers perform one night then mudwrestling the next. Then...I dunno—psychic tax advisors the following.”

“May we please keep on track, Mr. Claiborne? I want to finish this. You currently reside in San Corona.”

“Yes,” I answered.

“You have never been married, and you have no children.”

“That’s the way it worked out.” I should have been married, however. I’d told Laurel not to wait, and she’d followed my advice. The last I’d heard she was married to an architect in Atlanta and had twin boys.

“You are currently employed at Quinlan’s Steak and Rib Palace in San Corona. State your position and length of employment.”

“I’m the manager. I’ve been here almost two years.”

“Is all the information I have just presented accurate and correct?”

“Don’t accurate and correct mean the same thing?”

Wyatt pressed her bloodless lips together.

“Yes, it’s accurate and correct.”

“Thank you. Now, I need to take your fingerprints.”

“No,” I said evenly. “Not now, not ever, counselor. Non-negotiable.”

Wyatt hesitated then handed me a pen and slipped several papers from a file folder.

“I need for you to verify these documents. The first two are your birth certificate and Social Security card.”

I stared at the papers. They weren’t copies. They were originals.

“Next are your high school diploma and humanities degree from UC-Berkeley. Please initial anywhere.”

I set the papers, unsigned, on the table.

“How did you get these?”

Wyatt ignored me.

“The final document is your prison record,” she said. “You served eight years in a Mexican prison in the Chiapas Highlands. You were considered an average prison-

er, for an American. You participated in two unsuccessful escape attempts, and, altogether, you spent seventy-three days in solitary confinement. The reason for your original incarceration is a little vague, to say the least. For our records, please state the nature of your offense.”

“I was young and stupid and had purpose.”

Wyatt shifted uneasily in her seat. My answer must have sounded harsher than I’d intended.

“What is going on here?” I asked quietly.

She popped another Rol-Aid.

“Who are you, Wyatt? Who are Dunn and Mercer? What does this have to do with my uncle?”

“I have to do this as we were instructed,” she replied. “All will be clear momentarily.”

I shoved the papers toward her.

“The moment has arrived.”

“We have to be absolutely certain that you are Jesse Gabriel Claiborne,” she said, gathering the papers together.

“That’s who I am.”

She glanced past me.

I turned in my seat toward the three suits.

“Your bodyguards don’t have to rescue you.”

Wyatt shook her head. “They are not bodyguards. They are couriers. They *are* armed, however.”

“That’s nice. Either tell me what’s going on here or go back to Beverly Hills.”

“All right. One final item first. Mr. Dunn and Mr. Mercer request, most humbly, that after our business is concluded today you do not involve them any further. They have honored every codicil of the agreement they signed, and only request that they be allowed to live out the rest of their lives in peace.”

"You're joking."

"No."

I leaned back in my seat, dumbfounded.

Wyatt inhaled deeply. "As I informed you in our telephone conversations, our firm was retained by your uncle."

I tapped the burnt cigarette butt back out of the pack. How could my father's older brother afford a Beverly Hills law firm? And, even if he could, why would he have them contact me?

"Truman Claiborne was our firm's first client, and our only client for several years," Wyatt said, taking a paper from her briefcase. "As I advised you, he passed away nearly six weeks ago. This is a certified death notice. Mr. Dunn and Mr. Mercer personally identified the remains."

I took the notice from her. Uncle Tru had been fifty-seven and lived in Fort Grace, Alaska. The cause of death was blank.

Wyatt continued. "After Mr. Claiborne's death, Mr. Dunn and Mr. Mercer were required to seek you out within six weeks. This was not a problem until you kept canceling appointments. The time limit expires tomorrow."

"Since when do time and limits mean anything to a lawyer?"

"Mr. Dunn and Mr. Mercer informed me that this time limit would be honored without excuse."

"If it's so important, then why did they send you? Why didn't they come themselves?"

"They're afraid of you."

"Why, Wyatt? Why any of this? I didn't know the man."

"You may not have known him, but he certainly knew all about you." She waved her hand over my prison record

and the other documents. “You are the only individual named in his will.”

CHAPTER 3



As I fastened the cable running from the DVD player to the television, I glanced through the doorway into the tiny apartment kitchenette. Sierra, wearing the Dallas football jersey she had stolen from me and Levi's cut-offs, stood in front of the refrigerator and gazed at the contents inside.

Rain peppered the roof.

"I don't see any Fig Newtons," she called.

"There aren't any."

"Why not?"

"I think you ate them all."

"Add them to your list. Fig Newtons are a must."

"What list?"

"This week I cook and you shop. That's the deal."

"What deal? What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you see the little chalkboard I put up in the bathroom yesterday? Things-To-Do-This-Week. Left side is

yours, right side is mine. You're laundry this week, too. I'm vacuuming and dusting."

"When did we decide this?"

"A couple days ago."

"Was I awake?"

"Don't try to weenie out now. It's a done deal."

"Right." I stepped away from the player and television then pressed the remote. Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape* flashed onto the screen. The Cooler King was moving into the escape tunnel. The Nazis were patrolling the barbed wire. I changed the channel. I don't watch prison movies anymore.

I adjusted the tint of the CNN newscaster's face then shut off the set. It was working well enough.

Sierra Marian Price walked into the living room, tossing a green pear in her right hand. She was twenty-four years old with short brown hair and soft, inviting brown eyes. Every morning she ran three miles; and every night, after work at the Marriott, she did forty-five minutes of low-impact aerobics. She claimed she was ten pounds overweight. Called her hips the Fig Newton Reservoir. I couldn't see it, but weight—gain or loss—was a topic I avoided with women. Learned that lesson the hard way.

She curled down on the carpet beside the carefully patched secondhand sofa.

"I was offered the secretarial position in Marketing today." She smiled. "Not bad for three months on the job."

"You deserve it."

"I don't know whether I'm going to take the job or not, though. I know what I'm doing in Reservations. I've got that job wired."

"What's the worst that could happen if you took the transfer?"

"I can't do the job, and I get fired."

"Is that the worst?"

"Yes. Then I might end up working for you."

"Don't count on that. We're in the crapper, and the flush is coming soon."

"Don't worry, Bosco. I'll take care of you."

The Claibornes and the Prices had been neighbors since I could recall. When my father was transferred to Delaware, the Prices moved, too. My mother and Sierra's mother were best friends and had been since second grade. Sam, Sierra's older brother, and I were best friends until I went to school at Berkeley and he went career Navy. My youngest brother and Sierra graduated high school together.

I was eighteen when I headed west to college, Sierra was ten. That was the last time I had seen her until a few months ago. Mom had given her my phone number, and Dad told her to call. My sister dialed the phone.

She was recently divorced, Sierra explained to me, and needed a change. She'd always wanted to move to California, but she was nervous about being alone. Would I hold her hand until she was settled?

Sure. No problem.

A week later, clutching a lone carryall, she arrived at my front door. I loaned her my bedroom and took the sofa.

After four months, the arrangement was still the same. I could have said something but didn't. I liked having her around. She was my friend. My *closest* friend. It was that simple.

But the woman munching a pear in my living room was definitely not the little girl I had known. I remembered changing her diapers on a couple of occasions, and her puppy-dogging after Sam and me all the time. Once, when

I was fifteen, I participated in a Barbie tea party when she discovered my stash of Budweiser and Playboys.

I remembered when Sam and I “lost” her in downtown Philly, and the hunt with the police to find her. We found her three hours later, asleep in Silver’s Toy Shoppe, surrounded by stuffed bears and tigers. I remembered a little girl, and images of ribboned pigtails and filled diapers were etched deep.

Sierra shifted closer to the coffee table and appraised the slim steel container Wyatt had given me. She started to touch it then changed her mind as I sat down on the sofa.

“Have you looked inside yet?” she asked.

“No.” I opened the large envelope Wyatt had also given me and dumped a DVD and several papers onto the table.

“How could you not open it?”

“I had work to finish.”

“I would have opened it as soon as the lawyer handed it to me.”

“Go ahead, if you want.” I sorted the papers—mostly old newspaper clippings—across the table.

Sierra bit into her pear, thinking.

“It was left to you,” she said finally. “You should be the one to open it.”

I fished a cigarette out of my shirt pocket.

“Wyatt said to watch the DVD first.”

“Does she know what’s on the DVD?”

“Said she didn’t.”

“Who was Truman Claiborne?”

“My father’s older brother,” I replied, lighting my cigarette. “I barely remember him. He was pretty much disowned by the entire family. I heard he was a drunk who drifted from coast to coast, job to job. Then, suddenly, he

headed to Alaska and dropped out of sight. Only Aunt Temple kept in touch with him over the years.”

“I remember Temple.”

“Hard *not* to remember Temple,” I said. I held up a clipping.

BRINKS ROBBERY IN NY LARGEST IN U.S. HISTORY

Sierra pointed at another clipping.

K.C. MAN ARRESTED WITH ONE MILLION DOLLARS FROM BRINKS ROBBERY

There was a picture of Truman in handcuffs and leg shackles, two huge FBI agents leading him up the Kansas City courthouse steps.

I blew smoke toward the ceiling.

“Look here, Jess.” Sierra tapped a third clipping.

VICE-PRESIDENT AND HOLLYWOOD ACTRESS ALIBI BRINKS SUSPECT

All Charges Dropped By DA

This was incredible. The Vice-President of the United States had testified that Truman was at a fundraiser in Boston with him until eleven p.m. the night of the New York robbery. The Secret Service concurred.

Cassandra Adams, the perky novice nun in the TV comedy *The Bells of St. Mike's*, swore that Truman was with her

from eleven until after dawn the next morning. The testimony shattered her virginal image and ended her career.

I pressed a curled clipping flat on the table with my hand.

**CLAIBORNE WINS ONE
MILLION DOLLARS AT
CAESAR'S IN LAS VEGAS**

Sierra smiled and handed me another clipping.

**TRUMAN CLAIBORNE AND
HOLLYWOOD'S CASSANDRA
ADAMS MARRIED IN SUNRISE
WEDDING AT TAHOE**

"Your Uncle Tru has had more adventures than my whole family."

"More than both our families." I shook my head, amazed.

**CLAIBORNE DONATES HALL
FOR ETHICAL STUDIES TO
UNIVERSITY**

"This is the kind of stuff my family loves to talk about, and no one ever said a word."

Sierra peeled a final clipping from the back of the DVD case.

**CASSANDRA ADAMS AND
ADOPTED DAUGHTER**

VANISH DURING BOAT FIRE IN BAHAMAS

I stared at that clipping and twirled the cigarette in my fingers. Cassandra Adams-Claiborne and her five-year-old adopted daughter were believed killed in a midnight fire, which completely destroyed their yacht. Their bodies weren't recovered. Truman was in Los Angeles on business at the time of the accident.

"Look at the date," I said. "It happened about a month before Truman came to my kindergarten play."

Sierra unfolded a thick sheaf of papers and began to read.

"This is a letter from Tru to Dunn and Mercer. It's informing them that he's moving to the Alaska property to continue his research. He wants all his other holdings sold and the money donated to various charities. List provided. As necessary, more instructions will follow." She paused. "Good Lord, there's a list of how much to give to each charity. The total's eighteen million dollars."

I picked up another paper. "This is from Dunn and Mercer to Uncle Truman. The Meridian Group is again asking permission to send some of its members to join him at Fort Grace and assist in his research."

"What research?"

"Doesn't say."

"How long did Tru live in Fort Grace?"

"Wyatt said about twenty years."

"From thief to mogul to monk." Sierra shifted the clippings and letters around. "I guess that's it."

"No." I pointed at the sealed DVD and the steel container.

Sierra climbed onto the sofa and eased beside me. She had washed her hair with a strawberry-scented shampoo. I inched closer to her. Her fingers hooked around one of my rear belt loops.

“You call your folks yet?” she asked.

“I was gonna call Dad in the morning.”

“Do they know Tru’s dead?”

“Don’t know. I don’t think so. One of them would’ve called me with the news. This whole thing’s crazy.” I inhaled on my cigarette. “Wyatt said I was the only person Uncle Truman left anything to. Why not Aunt Temple? Or Dad? Why me? He left everything else to charity. Except what’s in that container. He left that to me. Why? And why was he keeping track of me over the years?”

Sierra rested her chin on my shoulder.

“Guess there’s only one thing left to do, Bosco.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Uh-huh,” she repeated softly. “Play the DVD.”

CHAPTER 4



As the videotape began, all we saw was a nothing room with a gray desk facing the camera. The walls were painted white. There were no pictures or decorations, only the empty, polished desk. To the right was an uncurtained window overlooking a snow-rimmed ocean. Icicles hung like daggers from the eaves. It looked cold outside. Very cold.

Sierra leaned past me and dropped her pear core on top of my smoldering cigarette in the ashtray.

A man walked slowly into view behind the desk, favoring his right side. He was tall, angular, with silver-gray hair and a closely trimmed beard. His white sweater and white pants amplified the dark tan of his exposed face and hands. As he sat down and faced the camera, I knew he was my Uncle Truman—or at least a Claiborne descendant. He had the ugly Claiborne pug nose. It was the same nose I'd

had until the captain of the guards played stickball with my head one afternoon in the prison courtyard.

The man smiled at the camera. It was a tired smile.

"It's been a long time since I've remade this tape, Jesse," he said in a husky voice that sounded like Dad after a good Eagles game. "I have a lot to tell you, and I'll try not to leave anything out."

He nodded to himself and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Is that Tru?" Sierra whispered.

"I think so. Why are you whispering?"

"It feels like I should."

"Okay."

The man was talking, and we'd missed it. I stopped the tape, rewound then started again.

He nodded to himself and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Do you ever think that everyone is finally going to learn the secret to happiness, and they're not going to tell you?"

No, I thought. *And I walk wide around people who do.*

"Where do I begin? I'm your uncle. Although we've only met twice, I feel like I know you."

Twice? I remembered the kindergarten play and that was all.

Sierra boosted the sound with the remote.

Truman rested his elbows on the desktop.

"Dunn and Mercer have been instructed to deliver this tape and the locked container to you within six weeks of my death. They won't fail me. They never have. More than likely they won't make the delivery themselves. A hireling will do it. My old friends are afraid of me. What was a gift in our youth has become a curse."

I shook my head. None of this rambling made any sense.

“You were one, maybe one and a half, when Uncle Abe died in Nova Scotia,” Truman said. “Abe was your Grandfather Claiborne’s older brother, a lighthouse keeper along the coast of Cape Breton. I never met the man. Uncle Abe left me what I’m about to leave you.

“I don’t know when this started. Abe’s letter to me said he didn’t know, either. I do know that the box is passed from uncle to oldest nephew, and that the chain must not be broken. Abe wrote that, supposedly, it had been broken once, in the thirteen-hundreds. In Malory Tennyson’s classic *World History of the Occult and Supernatural*, it says one Brittany legend claims the Black Plague began in the House of Claiborne. It goes on to say the entire clan was killed by the plague, except one uncle and one nephew.

“I don’t expect you to believe any of this. I don’t. Well, I say I don’t, but I’m passing the box on to you, aren’t I?”

I glanced at Sierra. She was staring, entranced, at the television.

Truman opened a desk drawer and removed a small box.

“Jesse, this is your inheritance. This is what’s inside the locked container. It’s not very big. A hardback copy of *Gone with the Wind* is larger and weighs more. The metal covering appears to be tarnished gold, but it isn’t. I don’t know what it is.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose again. “There are tiny vents in the covering, and inside you’ll see a soft white light. At various times, the light will turn bright blue or deep black. It can also turn dark red, but, believe me, you won’t let that happen more than once.”

I pulled the locked container closer.

Sierra shifted beside me.

“There’s writing on the box,” Truman continued. “I’ve spent the last twenty years trying to translate those inscriptions. There are six passages, one on each side of the box. Also, on the front and the back are two sets of numbers. One appears to be quinary and the other binary—”

Sierra stopped the tape. “Quinary. That’s the number system based on five. Binary is based on two. Right?”

“You’re asking me?” I responded. “I can’t balance my checkbook.”

Sierra frowned at me.

I pushed the PLAY button.

“Scholars have been enlisted from all over the world to help. Five of them are currently living with me. In twenty years, we’ve successfully translated four words out of one sentence.

“One theory, the Shinar Postulation, named after the plain where the Tower of Babel was built, is that this is the world’s original language. The current thinking is that the passages are pre-Sumerian and Egyptian, although some good cases have been made for individual words being in Sanskrit, Mayan, and Chinese. Dollar thinks the shortest passage is a combination of Ionic Greek, Ciceronian Latin, and Sumerian. I believe she may be onto something, but the others disagree.”

Truman traced his left fingers over the box.

“I won’t be surprised if we finally translate the passages and they say something like ‘Helen of Troy is an easy lay’ and the numeral equations are grocery scanner codes.”

I tapped the lock on the container.

“The four words we’ve translated are from the passage on the front of the box. The words are *piison*, *gihon*, *hid-dekel*, and *Euphrates*.”

“Claiborne, where are you?” a female voice said from off-screen.

Truman looked past the camera.

“In here.”

“What are you doing?” Still off-screen.

“Talking to my nephew.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know.” A shadow crept onto the desk. “Robinette fed the equations into that new computer program, and the results are coming back.”

Truman stood. “I’ll finish this later, Jesse.”

The tape turned to static.

“Bathroom run,” Sierra said, moving around me. “Don’t play anymore till I get back.”

I picked up the remote as the barren room flashed back on the screen. Snow was falling outside the curtainless window now, and Truman walked behind the desk again. This time he wore a dark chambray shirt and faded jeans, and was holding a huge coffee mug. As he sat down, I hit the PAUSE button.

He’d looked tired in the first part of the tape; now he looked exhausted. Dark circles were under his eyes, and he was moving more slowly, more painfully.

I stared at his right hand, clutching the mug. The thumb and index finger were clearly visible. The other three fingers were missing.

No.

I moved the tape ahead frame by frame. The three fingers were there, but they appeared to be seared and twisted together.

The wind whipped rain against my living room window. The toilet flushed; and moments later, Sierra sat back down beside me.

“Well, what do you think?”

I smiled. "I haven't decided who's crazier—my uncle or the morons helping him."

"Hope it's not us."

"Couldn't be us."

"Couldn't be us," she repeated solemnly.

I stabbed the PLAY button.

Truman sipped his coffee. "Not much to report, Jesse. The new computer program from MIT only confirmed what we knew five years ago. Both sets of numbers seem to have nine digits, but what each individual number is, and what it means, is still beyond us. The situation is disappointing, to say the least. The final disappointment, for some. Robinette and Nasaki are quitting. Pace and Mancuso are wavering. Once they've decided whether to stay or not, we'll notify Kate Guthrie at Meridian.

"This is the fourth group Meridian has sent here over the years. They've all given up. I'm beginning to believe we weren't meant to translate these inscriptions. Only Dollar's still enthusiastic. She's convinced the one passage is Greek, Latin, and Sumerian. We'll see."

Sierra pointed at one of the letters on the table.

"Have you ever heard of Meridian?"

"No," I answered. "But I'd never heard of Fort Grace, Alaska, either."

Truman set his mug on the desk and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Time to get to it, Jesse," he said finally. "Listen closely now. You are the master of the box. Lord, this sounds insane. I still remember how I felt when I read Abe's letter. You'll have to see for yourself, and for a while, even then, you won't believe."

Sierra slipped her hand over mine.

“You’re the only one who can use the box. If anyone else tries, they’ll die. It’s not an easy death, and it can’t be stopped. Believe me on this. I lost a close friend because I didn’t listen to this maxim.”

Sierra squeezed my hand.

“First, you have to make arrangements for the box to be sent to your oldest nephew when you pass on. I believe that’s Dalton.”

I nodded at the screen then quickly stopped. What was I doing?

“You can never see Dalton again. You can’t talk to him on the phone. There can be no contact of any kind. I don’t know why. Abe didn’t know why.” Truman held up his right hand and pointed at the withered fingers. “This happened to me when I attended the kindergarten play you were in.”

He stood and unbuttoned his shirt. The flesh on his right side, from the armpit to the waist, was scarred and scorched as if he’d been burned.

“Half my lung is gone, too,” he added. “This happened when I went to Mexico and convinced a warden that you’d done enough time. I saw you in the prison yard for maybe thirty seconds.”

I shifted uneasily on the sofa.

Truman buttoned his shirt. “Tell the box what you want.”

I leaned toward the television. Tell the box what?

“It’s that simple and that complicated,” he explained. “Tell the box what you want. Just say *I want* or *I wish*. Once you tell it, however, it can’t be undone. Remember that.”

A *wish box*, I thought. Truman was giving me a fucking wish box. Where was the Aladdin Rulebook?

“It doesn’t matter how big or how small the want. If it can be done, the light will turn blue; if it can’t, the light will turn black. At least once during every cycle of the moon, the box must be used. There’s no maximum, but if the box isn’t used at least once during each specified time the light will turn red, and the pain inside you will begin. The pain will feel like your gut’s being torched by a thousand burning needles, and it’ll increase until you use the box again.”

A thousand burning needles?

“There’s no set time limit for the want to occur. I had one want furnished within thirty seconds, and another took eight years to happen. Be careful how you phrase the want. Be as specific as possible. The box is devious. I wished for a million dollars in cash. Two days later, I found a suitcase with the cash in it. The money turned out to be from the Brinks robbery. Be specific. Don’t let the box accomplish the want according to its own devices.”

“Specific,” Sierra whispered.

“The box can’t do everything,” Truman said. “Peace on earth and the end of hunger are beyond its scope. It can’t reverse time or bring someone back to life or make them live forever. But within its limits, within the limits of your imagination, the world is now yours. I pray that you’ll do a better job than I did. I wish you the best, Jesse. I truly do.”

I watched as Truman sat silently in his chair for a long moment. Then, he stood and walked off-screen. A moment later, the picture went to static.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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