

## GSW

Hopkins regretted the pulled pork sandwich as soon as he licked the last greasy dribblets off his fingers. The indigestion was ferocious. The rollicky ambulance ride was doing nothing to soothe him. He took a slurp of his Diet Coke, rubbing his chest.

*God, where's the Pepcid?*

The GPS had spun them off onto a dirt road somewhere outside Baker, California. The sunset was a bloody festival over the Mojave Desert.

Hopkins didn't like being out here. Not in this rickety deathtrap of a ride, with its shrieking rusty springs. And certainly not with the mother of all heartburns chewing at the ulcer in his stomach. He could smell the sour sweat leaking into his uniform.

"Tums?" Manderly offered him the candies with one free hand. The skinny fingers of his other hand kept a relaxed grip on the wheel of the ambulance.

Hopkins glowered. "I'm fine. I've got some Pepcid...well, *shit*." He patted down his front pocket, where he usually kept the pills. Nothing, no dice. "Gimme that," he said, snatching the Tums from Manderly. He chased two sugary tablets down with another slug of his Coke.

"You look like you're gonna keel over, man," Manderly spoke around the edge of a cigarette. "Nearest cath lab is a hundred twenty miles away."

"It's not my heart."

"Have you looked in the mirror? It's your heart."

"It's *not* my goddamn heart, Manderly. It's that fuckin' roadkill we ate from a gas station in the middle of the *desert*."

Manderly blew out a plume of smoke. The cigarette wobbled on his lips, but it snapped back to attention as he bit down with his teeth. "Just sayin', you're a big boy," he muttered. "Everyone thinks it's heartburn until it ain't."

"That's rich," Hopkins said. "Coming from the guy who smokes two packs a day. Real rich. You ever had *your* ticker checked out, Manderly?"

The skinny kid grinned. "I'm thirty-five, baby. I'm gonna live forever."

In response, Hopkins jammed the straw into his mouth and slurped down the last watery dregs of his Coke. He felt nauseous still, and somehow hungry still. How was that possible?

The GPS tracker put them thirty minutes out from their destination. It would be dark by the time they got there, and knowing these back desert roads, there would be no road signs, no gas stations, no one to help if they got lost. There was nothing out here but a couple rundown trailers stretched miles apart, the cold wind howling through the hills, and the creepy creaking of windvanes. A few mangy mutts howling from their doorstops. The rattling of metal signs on barbed wire fences. *NO TRESPASSING. PRIVATE PROPERTY.*

As if anyone needed an invitation to turn around.

"You think the kid is dead?" Manderly asked.

"God, I hope so."

"It's a long drive back to the hospital if he's still breathin'. An hour is a *long* time for chest compressions."

"I ain't doing chest compressions."

"Well, I ain't doing them neither."

Hopkins scowled. “*Someone’s* gonna do them. And you’re the idiot who forgot the LUCAS.”

He was referring to the automatic chest compression machine. The LUCAS was designed precisely to save medics like him from bouncing around like pinballs in the back of the truck—cursing the Bee Gees while they jammed down on sternums.

“The goddamn ER wanted to keep the LUCAS! What could I say to the Doc? I was outranked!”

“You *let* him keep it.”

“Look, that last guy we wheeled in was three hundred pounds—that’s bigger than you, hoss. Would *you* want to do CPR on a guy that size?”

“It’s the Emergency Room. It’s their job. They have staff in there; we *don’t* out here.”

Manderly shrugged. “Well, what’s done is done. There’s no LUCAS tonight. But, so what? I mean, what’re the chances we’re gonna need it?”

“Pretty fucking good, if you knew anything about the people living out here.”

“It’s usually suicide, right?”

“Usually.”

“So the kid’s probably dead, right? No sweat.”

Hopkins turned to stare out the window. He didn’t like the tone of the conversation. Not that he had any qualms speaking ill of the dead. That basically came with the job. After twenty years of running around like a donkey, hauling cadavers into the hospital—only to have them pronounced dead on arrival by some asshole in a white coat—one started getting tired of running bodies. Tired of the stupid futility of fighting the same battle. Resuscitating a corpse! What was the point of any of this? There was no reason for Hopkins to bust *his* hump all day and night just to spare these family the sight of their dead loved ones.

*But suicide...*

Suicide just hit differently. Hopkins didn't like thinking about it. It reminded him too much of his brother, Ford, who had swallowed his shotgun at the ripe young age of twenty-three. Just another dumb drunken kid with a dumb drunken impulse.

No, Hopkins wasn't going to speak ill of suicides. He could only hope that the body waiting for him at the end of this dark and dusty desert road was a failed gesture. Just another cry for help. Maybe some kid had swallowed some of his mom's Advil with a bit of Jameson and had puked it all up. Maybe by the time they got there, the kid would be sitting in a pile of vomit, sobbing and spilling his guts to his mother. And his mama would be stroking his head and saying things like, *I never knew, baby. It's okay. I love you. I really do.*

Wouldn't that be swell? Then Hopkins and Manderly would be cruising home through the cool desert night, their windows down, jamming to Creedence, and that would be a fine ending to the night.

Yes, that would please him mightily.

Hopkins felt the ache easing in his stomach, the gorilla climbing off his chest. The sky had blossomed lavender and was drenching the hills in dark red wine. He supposed it was a beautiful landscape, objectively speaking, but in truth, he found the desert unnerving at sunset. Everywhere, he saw swimming shadows and the ghosts of memories swirling up from sandy graves. Nothing was alive out here. What else was this place but an endless purgatory of sand and bone?

It did not help that he saw his dead brother everywhere. Young Ford, bent among the shadowed cacti like a crucified saint. Handsome Ford, crushed into pulp on the side of the street like roadkill. Kid Ford, alive and dead in his restless haunting.

The ambulance rattled its way past rusty mailboxes. Then past an empty fruit stand, a boarded-up pawn store. The road looked war-torn and bombed out. Large craters caught the wheels like landmines, eliciting a steady stream of curses from Manderly. But the truck was built to last. The ship would hold.

“Let’s get an update from dispatch,” Hopkins suggested. He thumbed the radio, but the static was bad. The dispatcher’s voice crackled in from outer space: “No news. Family hung up...could not be reached again...”

“He’s got to be dead,” Manderly said. “No way he’s still breathing.”

Hopkins thought his partner was right, but he kept this thought to himself. It was best to be prepared for anything. If you let down your guard for one *minute* out here, the clusterfuck was always biblical in nature.

He eyed the GPS and pointed ahead. “Hang left at the next intersection.”

Manderly obeyed, careening them onto Wayland Road. Except it wasn’t a road, truly; it was a dirt path clipped by motorcycle tracks and the heavier treads of another vehicle. Hopkins prayed that the cops had already arrived on scene, but he saw no flashing lights on the horizon. His frown deepened. A violent suicide—a self-inflicted gunshot wound—*should* prompt a rapid police response in any sane county in America. But the police were slow to respond out here. *Too* slow. More often, the paramedics got there first.

Hopkins clipped the radio again, asking Dispatch if police were on scene. The response was a garbled mess of unintelligible sounds, like a dump truck unloading a ton of gravel.

“No cops means No-Go,” said Manderly. “I ain’t getting shot out here.”

“Me neither,” Hopkins said. “We standby until the police—*Christ!*” They struck a pothole so hard they nearly went

into orbit. "Watch the road, man!"

"What fuckin' *road*?" Manderly cried. The cigarette had flown out of his teeth, and he was stamping his boot on the floorboards, crushing it out. The ambulance lurched as he fought it back under control—the greasy sandwich in Hopkins' stomach lurching with it.

"Fuckin' suicides," Manderly snapped. "Fuckin' depressed dumbass rednecks—"

"Cool it, kid!"

Manderly pouted, his pointy face drawn long and lean in shadows. "It's a horror show out here, all I'm sayin'."

"And I said *cool* it!"

A gust of wind rocked the truck, bringing with it the musical chimes of sand and rocks. A small cyclone whirled past the headlights. For a moment, they were blinded by a sea of dark sediment, like a submarine plunging into oil-slicked water, and then they emerged onto a flat plain that stretched for miles and miles. There was just enough light left in the sky for them to see the endless road. The ragged hills. The lonesome trailers flickering with blue television light.

And then more wind howled, and more blinding dust enveloped them, and from Manderly's lips came the quiet curses of a captain sailing dangerous waters.

Ten minutes later, the truck's GPS announced their arrival at their destination. They came to a rumbling stop in the middle of the road while the two men frowned out the window at two trailer homes directly opposite one another. The houses were identical. There was no sign of life outside. Battered Chevy pickups was parked in each driveway, but Hopkins couldn't see police cars anywhere, and God—damnit if there was a mailbox or house number to guide them.

"Which house?" Manderly asked.

"How should I know?"

“What does the GPS say?”

“It says we arrived in Hell.”

Manderly slipped a fresh cigarette into his mouth and rolled down his window, flicking his Zippo lighter to life. He sighed and sucked in a fresh hit, all in the same breath. “We wait for the cops, then?”

Hopkins stuck his head out the window, gazing slowly across the landscape. No police lights on the horizon. No help coming anytime soon. He ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Do you want to sit here all night?”

“Sure. We’re still on the clock.” Manderly was playing with his Zippo, snapping it open and closed. *Click, click.*

The sound irritated Hopkins. *Everything* irritated him at the moment, but his partner’s nonchalance was particularly grating.

“The kid might still be alive,” he said.

“Come on, a GSW to the head?”

“That’s a secondhand report. Bystanders don’t know shit.”

“I think most people know a gunshot wound to the head.”

“Well, you *can* survive a GSW to the head. I’ve seen it before.”

“*Well,*” Manderly snapped, “we’ve got protocols, hoss. We don’t go inside until the scene is secured.”

“The cops could take hours.”

“Try Dispatch again.”

Hopkins grabbed the radio and repeated his query to the call center. This time, the response was audible, but shaky. *Police are en route. Twenty minutes out.*

Manderly’s cracked lips peeled back in satisfaction. “Hear that? Twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes. Fuck that, the kid could die.” Hopkins unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for the door. “I’m stepping out.”

“What? Hey, wait—”

“I’m just gonna knock on the door.”

Ignoring his partner’s protests, Hopkins lowered his bulk out of the truck, pleased to step on firm ground again. He stretched out his back and groaned, gritting his eyes against a sudden dusty breeze. The wind was cold, but the night air was a fresh relief from the stale, smoke-filled cabin of the truck.

Hopkins glanced at the western trailer home and began walking in that direction.

He made it ten yards up the long driveway before the raucous barking of a dog brought him to his heels. *Sounds like a bad dog*, he thought as his own hackles rose. The hellhound released another barrage of growls from the darkness, and Hopkins stepped backward. He couldn’t see the damned mutt, but the noise was coming from the shadows beside the house—and there was no way of getting to the doorstep without risking that *thing* lunging for his throat.

*Cujo’s pissed*, he thought.

It was not his own voice in his head, but his brother Ford’s. *Cujo’s pissed*—one of Ford’s favorite expressions. As kids, they had watched that Stephen King movie one night, and every barking dog thereafter became Cujo, the vengeful hellhound. It had been a funny joke back in the day, especially when the designated canines were small, toothless mutts. Ford would point at the smallest pups and utter his solemn warning. *Cujo!* An angry Chihuahua? *Cujo!* A Labrador puppy with a floppy pink tongue? *Cujo!*

But this was no joke. Hopkins had enough street smarts to back away from an unseen threat. The barking grew louder and more feral, and he knew better than to rely on a leash to keep that thing at bay. Not with all those *BEWARE OF DOG* signs banging on the fences.

Halfway back to the truck, Hopkins heard the creak of an



opening door, amplified in the wind, and he turned to see a figure standing across the street. It was the shape of a woman emerging onto the stoop of the opposing house and silhouetted in the neon zap of a mosquito light. She was watching him.

Hopkins raised his hand and called out to her, "Paramedics!"

"He's in here," she replied. Her voice carried in the wind. She sounded weary, defeated, and Hopkins knew from her tone that the kid must be dead. Dread flopped in his gut like another bite of that old rotten sandwich.

"Is he alive?" Manderly had climbed down from the truck and was shouting at the woman now.

"Yes."

Both ambulance men froze. Manderly's head swiveled toward Hopkins and then back toward the woman, his voice faltering. "Are you sure?"

"He's breathing," the woman said. Still, she did not move. Still, there was no sense of urgency about her.

"Who are you?" Hopkins called.

"The neighbor."

"You live over here? With this dog?"

"Yes, that's my dog."

"Does the patient have any *actual* family inside?"

"No."

"Do you know where the family is?"

"Mother's dead. Father left a year ago."

"Well, damn." Hopkins had now arrived back at the ambulance, and he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his partner, sizing up the situation. Manderly was reading his mind, because the younger medic began shaking his head.

"Huh-uh, hoss. We're *not* going in before the cops."

"He's still alive," Hopkins hissed. "Don't you want to fucking *save* someone for once? We can't sit here for twenty

minutes. He needs an airway.”

“It’s a GSW. We don’t know what’s waiting in that house. We don’t know who this lady is.”

“She’s the neighbor.”

“So she says.”

Hopkins threw up his hands, gesturing at the landscape around them. “Who the fuck *else* would she be, Manderly? Do you see any other human souls out here?”

“I don’t care. I’m not going in.”

Hopkins shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He walked to the back of the ambulance, where he snapped open the truck doors. Fluorescent light washed out over him, cutting a glowing tombstone on the road.

Manderly dogged after him. “*You’re* not going in either!” His voice was agitated.

“Have a smoke and calm down.”

“You don’t know what’s waiting in there. Medics get killed doing dumb shit like this.”

Hopkins reached for the huge satchel in the bed of the truck. Grunting, he swung it onto his shoulder. Fifty pounds of equipment pinched his lower back. He ignored Manderly’s voice and shrugged off his partner’s hand. Slowly, he began lurching his way up the long driveway toward the woman on the stoop.

“Stop! Hoss, stop!”

Manderly’s warnings diminished into a stream of vulgar words—and then Hopkins heard the crunch of footsteps following him. He smiled in satisfaction.

As Hopkins approached the house, the woman’s face came into view. She had the typical weathered mug of people living in the desert hills. Skin like hard dried dirt. No point in guessing her age: twenty-five or sixty-two. People aged quickly out here. He could smell the nicotine on her clothes

from a mile away, and he knew her face would be the same as all of their faces. Etched in stone.

“Do you know what happened?” Hopkins was struggling to catch his breath already. The squeezing returned to his chest.

“Heard a gunshot inside the house,” the woman said. “Came to look.”

“When was the gunshot?”

“Just before I called the police.”

“Which was when, exactly?”

“Don’t remember. Six-thirty. Seven o’clock, maybe.”

They were now an arm’s length apart. Hopkins detected no threat from this woman, but the doorway behind her was cloaked in darkness, and he didn’t like the idea of stepping blindly into that black shroud. Hesitating, he asked her where the body was.

“Living room. Right inside the door.”

“Anyone else inside?”

“No.”

Hopkins exchanged a glance with his partner and turned back to the woman. “Okay, we’re going to go check on him. Wait out here, ma’am. If you see the police, flag them down.”

The woman said nothing but stepped aside, allowing passage into the house. Hopkins re-adjusted the bag on his shoulder and paused to steady his breathing. He generally tried not to show fear in front of bystanders. But as he stared into the darkness of the house, his chest felt heavy again.

This time, it wasn’t just his indigestion. He was afraid because he knew it was not a stranger’s body waiting for him. It was Ford, his dead brother, and those old nightmares, and that old wound that had cracked open its bloody smile.

Hopkins found himself frozen in place, his legs like cin-derblocks as terror clenched his manhood. He could move no farther.

In the end, it was Manderly who pushed past him, and Hopkins who reluctantly followed, trailing his partner's cigarette smoke into the darkened den.

\*

The living room was small and stuffy and pitched in black. The smell of acrid smoke and blood was so viscous Hopkins could taste it. It was metallic, yes, but there was a cloying sweetness to it too, a kind of rancidness of excrement. He thought, *The kid shit himself.*

Then he thought, *The kid's dead. Must be dead.*

Neither medic commented on the blinding darkness of the room. Was it so hard to believe some poor lonely bastard would want to die in the dark, without looking at the relics of his old broken life?

Manderly found the light switch on the wall. A tepid bulb lit up the stinking den, revealing a squalid room as ugly as Hopkins had imagined. A mangled body was sprawled on the carpet in a puddle of gore—also as ugly as Hopkins had imagined.

Hopkins tried to imagine the hopelessness involved in choosing *this* place for one's last breath. A stale and filthy den surrounded by dusty junk. An old television set. A sagging couch with mildew stains. A few bottles of Jim Beam.

Ford had died like this, he thought. Alone in Mom's basement, right next to where they had played *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* as kids. The Sega controllers had been tangled in a knot of sticky blood and tiny flecks of bone when Mom found him.

Hopkins pushed away the memory. This wasn't Ford. It was another kid, about the same age but with raven-black hair and tan skin and lanky as a string bean. And he might still be alive.

The medics crossed the room and dropped to their knees.