

When Brick Donovan pulled back into the lot at five o'clock the guy at the gate told him Junior Petiole wanted to see him. As he opened the metal door he noticed it didn't smell much better inside, but at least an oscillating fan in the corner churned the air.

Melanie, all three-hundred-forty-six pounds of her, sat at an old metal desk without a pencil drawer and a file that wouldn't close. The desk was ugly, but it was free. A lot like Melanie.

"Junior said he wants to talk to you," she said popping her gum.

"So I heard. So why don't you prance in there and tell him I'm here."

"Kiss my butt," she said mashing on an intercom button.

"Junior, it's Brick. Got your gun?"

"Tell him to get his sorry ass in here."

"Mr. Petiole said he would be happy to see you now, Mr. Donovan," she said as she took another swig of something brown in a yellow cup.

Brick ignored her and pushed open the door into Junior's office. Inside, a window air conditioner rumbled noisily in an effort to beat back the heat.

"What's happening?"

"Cop says you burned down the cabinet shop. That right?"

"If I did I'd be in jail now, wouldn't I? I go see what all the commotion is about and a deputy decides I look guilty. Only thing is, see, they got a problem. They ain't got no evidence, some little shit like that."

"He said you been tryin' to nail Sonny Thornton since High School. What's the deal?"

"He's the prick who got me thrown out of school and fucked up my knee. Then he testified against me so I get sent up for a coupla years. I figure he's got something coming."

"Well answer me this. Did you whack some kid named Donny Weber?"

"What? . . . What the hell you talkin' about? You better back up here, JP, and take it real slow, cause I am about to get pissed off."

"You do that and you get fired, do you understand me? Now sit down and shut up."

Brick looked around and spotted an empty orange bucket chair someone threw away years ago, and sat down. Blood vessels popped out on his neck and forehead. His face turned purple and the corners of his mouth twisted into a scowl.

"Don't ever threaten me, Junior. Not you or anybody else."

Without a word Junior opened the drawer on his right and pulled out a .44 magnum and thumped it down hard on the desk. His eyebrows twisted into knots and the fierceness in his face made Brick swallow hard.

"Save the goddamned hate face for somebody who cares, you sorry sack of shit, and listen real nice to what I am saying to you. Some of the things we got going on here, we don't need no cops snooping around. Do I make myself clear?"