

Tuesday after shift, the Chariot seemed like a safe place to talk, although who knew? Maybe the Guthridge kid could hear them from across town or read their thoughts like the sports section of the *News-Record*. That was the damnable thing. You could never know.

Danny bought a round of pitchers. He sprang for the fancy ones from the brewery in Jackson Hole even though it shot his beer budget for the month and left a taste in his mouth like sucking on a penny. Danny let the other men talk. He'd planted the seed and could tell it had found purchase. Alvin McLaughlin brought printouts of blurry photos and typed witness statements. Marc Medina fancied himself an expert on DNA and the effects of gamma radiation thereupon.

"Imagine a string of letters, except only four of them, repeating," he told Scott Lipscombe. "This radiation slices right through them. GTT slice! Like that. Then you've got two loose ends floating around. And they can join up again wherever." He laced his fingers together, then bent them into a tangle. "Genetic mutation," he said.

More rounds got bought. Troy Potter, the weeknight bartender, caught a couple of sideways looks and found things to busy himself with in the back. Talk turned to the subject at hand. What to do about Sam. They all made a point of saying they liked Sam. They acknowledged that they were indebted to him. They owed him their lives for what he did.

"With his *abilities*," Danny added, throwing it out there. "What he did with his abilities."

He let the strangeness of the word do its work on them. Some of the men nodded. Others squirmed.

Lowell Tyler, the oldest rockbreaker at the basin, met Danny's eyes.

"I don't like where you're taking this conversation, Danny," he said. "Even if Tom's boy hadn't saved your ass, which he did. This kind of talk doesn't go anywhere good."

"It's talk," Danny said. He held his hands up innocently. "Situation like this merits discussion, don't you think?" He gave Lowell his best "we're all friends here" grin. When it didn't work on Lowell, he turned it on the rest of the room. People were eager to chime in with agreement.

Lowell had lost a kid in Iraq and trained Tom Guthridge when Tom wasn't much older than Sam was now. He took Tom's death harder than anyone. In the weeks after the funeral, Lowell would show up at the Chariot spoiling for it, daring the young bucks to take a swing at him, like he needed physical pain to match what he felt in his gut. No one stepped up and decked the old man even though they would have been doing him a favor.

"I'm having no part of what you're talking about," Lowell said. "I'll tell you, Danny. Put it down. And you two—" He pointed at Alvin McLaughlin and Joe

Sabine. “—don’t forget this asshole talked you into breaking into Antelope Valley’s locker room to shit in their helmets when you all were kids.”

“We won that game,” said Joe. His voice was a high whine.

“You two listened to it on the radio in county lockup,” Lowell said. “And Danny got himself off without a hitch. The three of you forget that part.” He held out a ten to Danny. “Here’s for the beers.”

“I got these,” Danny said.

“This is for mine,” said Lowell. Danny took the bill. He looked at it like Lowell had wiped his ass on it. They watched Lowell walk out, then turned to Danny. They weighed what Lowell said. They wondered if they ought to follow him out the door.

Danny slapped the ten down on the bar.

“Looks like Lowell stood us another round,” he said. It got the desired laugh. More important, it put Lowell Tyler’s blessing on them. Lowell said he had no part of it, but Danny had him buying the beers.

“The thing is,” Danny said, “there’s a risk this is the start of something. You can’t know where something like this is going to lead. That’s what we need to find out. The only way to do that is to go have a talk with Sam.”

There would be time later for all the survivors to reconcile their actions and their consciences. Although, as it turned out, not much time. For now they were resolved. And as Danny Randall said, “It might as well be tonight.”

Lucy Guthridge hadn’t been to bed since the incident. She drowsed on the sofa or in the armchair after the kids were asleep. When she answered the door in her gray uniform from the diner, she knew this was what had kept her up. A vision of this assemblage, this mob camped out on her lawn. *It’s a wonder you all aren’t sporting pitchforks*, she thought.

These men had visited Tom in the hospital, where Lucy had held constant vigil. They took up a collection to help Lucy and the four kids, and they kept quiet when Sam, too young to grow a patch of beard if you gave him a month and a miracle, applied for a job in the mine. They’d been at Tom’s funeral and come to the reception after at this same house whose lawn they were trampling over.

“It’s awful late, Danny,” Lucy said. She ignored the rest of them. “Is there something you’re needing?”

“We came for Sam,” Danny said, avoiding her eyes.

“Sam’s earned his rest. Don’t you think?”

Danny didn’t answer. He stepped past her into the living room. The other men followed, crowding in until Lucy was pressed against the wall. Woken by the noise,

the four Guthridge children stood in the hallway that led to their bedrooms. Sam was in a tee shirt and baggy shorts. He looked, Scott Lipscombe thought, like a boy. It was easy to miss that working alongside him, but now, thin limbs jutting out of clothes that were once his father's, Sam didn't look old enough to drive. His younger brother, Jeb, was in flannel pajamas, and the girls, Melody and Paige, were both in nightgowns. The three little ones huddled behind Sam, who held his hands stiff at his sides, fists clenched.

"Come with us, son," Danny said.

"Not your son," said Sam. He didn't move. Paige coughed, shaking off a cold she'd picked up at school. Little Jeb patted her back and rubbed it, then put his hands at his sides, fists tight like his big brother.

The room seethed with drunk energy. Marc Medina giggled nervously, and Alvin McLaughlin shushed him. Scott Lipscombe had his twelve-gauge hanging at the end of his arm, chambers full of rock salt. He felt a fat bead of nervous sweat roll down his temple, and he raised the gun to wipe it with his sleeve. That was when he saw it. He was sure he did. A blue glint in Sam's eye. He remembered the smell of rock burning as the light cut through it. He imagined himself sliced in two and wondered what burnt-meat smell his own body would give off. If the smoke would hit his nostrils before he died.

He emptied two chambers of rock salt into Sam Guthridge's gut.

Sam doubled over, the wind knocked out of him. Lucy pitched forward toward Scott, but Alvin McLaughlin grabbed her around the waist and spun her like a drunken dance partner. Paige, the littlest one, screamed. She held the side of her face where she'd been struck. She pulled her hand away to check for blood.

There was none. Where the salt crystals had hit, seven on her cheek and forehead, bright blue light shone through punctured skin.

"Shit," said Danny, "it's all of them."

When the fire burned itself out, the men dispersed. Most went home, where they lay awake next to their wives until dawn. Their minds were full of sounds that would wake them some nights for what was left of their lives.

A small knot, Danny and Joe and a couple of others, took bottles to the mouth of Shaft L. It was blocked off. The fence was a row of sickly teeth. It was the only time the men would talk about what had happened.

"Those lights in her head," said Scott Lipscombe. "They reminded me of a toy I had when I was a kid."

"Lite Brite," Danny said. "I thought that, too." He could picture the lights, the way they traced jagged lines in the dim room as Paige Guthridge's body hitched with sobs. Every time the men cut her, light poured out of the wounds. Danny Randall thought that when she died, the lights would fade like in a theater at the start of a movie. But they went out suddenly, like a candle.