

Stephen King - The Fifth Quarter

The Fifth Quarter
by Stephen King

I parked the heap around the corner from Keenan's house, sat in the dark for a moment, then turned off the key and got out. When I slammed the door, I could hear rust flaking off the rocker panels and dropping onto the street. It wasn't going to be like that much longer.

The gun was in a bandolier holster and lay against my ribcage like a fist. It was Barney's.45, and I was glad of that. It lent the whole crazy business a touch of irony. Maybe even a sense of justice.

Keenan's house was an architectural monstrosity spread over a quarter-acre of land, all slanting angles and steep-sloped roofs behind an iron fence. He'd left the gate unlocked, as I'd hoped. Earlier I'd seen him calling someone from the living room, and a hunch too strong to deny told me it had been either Jagger or the Sarge. Probably the Sarge. The waiting was over; this was my night.

I walked to the driveway, staying close to the shrubbery and listening for any strange sound over the cutting whine of the January wind. There wasn't any. It was Friday night, and Keenan's sleep-in maid would be out having a jolly time at somebody's Tupperware party. Nobody home but that bastard Keenan. Waiting for the Sarge. Waiting -- although he didn't know it yet -- for me.

The carport was open and I slipped inside. The ebony shadow of Keenan's Impala loomed. I tried the back door. The car was also open. Keenan wasn't cut out to be a villain, I reflected; he was much too trusting. I got in the car, sat down, and waited.

Now I could hear the faint sound of jazz on the wind, very quiet, very good. Miles Davis, maybe. Keenan listening to Miles Davis and holding a gin fizz in one manicured hand. Nice for him.

It was a long wait. The hands on my watch crawled from eight-thirty to nine to ten. Time for a lot of thinking. I mostly thought about Barney, and that wasn't strictly a matter of choice. I thought about how he looked in that small boat when I found him, staring up at me and making meaningless cawing noises. He'd been adrift for two days and looked like a boiled lobster. There was black blood encrusted across his midsection where he'd been shot.

He'd steered toward the cottage as best he could, but still it had been mostly luck. Lucky he'd gotten there, lucky he could still talk for a little while. I'd had a fistful of sleeping pills ready if he couldn't talk. I didn't want him to suffer. Not unless there was a reason for it, anyway. As it turned out, there was. He had a story to tell, a real whopper, and he told me almost all of it.

When he was dead, I went back to the boat and got his.45. It was hidden aft in a small compartment, wrapped in a waterproof pouch. Then I towed his boat out into deep water and sank it. If I could have put an epitaph over his head, it would have been the one about how there's a sucker born every minute. Most of them are pretty nice guys, too, I bet -- just like Barney. Instead, I started trying to find the men who capped him. It had taken six months to find Keenan and to ascertain that Sarge was, at least, somewhere close by, but I'm a persistent little pup, and here I was. At ten-twenty, headlights splashed up the curving driveway and I lay on the floor of the Impala. The newcomer drove into the carport, snuggling up close to Keenan's car. It sounded like one of the old Volkswagens. The little engine died and I could hear Sarge grunting softly as he fought his way out of the little car. The porch light went on, and the sound of the door clicking open came to me.

Keenan: "Sarge! You're late! Come on in and have a drink."

Sarge: "Scotch."

I'd unrolled the window before. Now I stuck Barney's.45 through it, holding the stock with both hands. "Stand still," I said.

The Sarge was halfway up the porch steps. Keenan, the perfect host, had come out and was looking down at him, waiting for him to come up so he could after-you him into the house. They were both perfect silhouettes in the light spilling through from inside. I doubted if they could see much of me in the dark, but they could see the gun. It was a big gun.

"Who the hell are you?" Keenan asked.

"Jerry Tarkanian," I said. "Move and I'll put a hole in you big enough to watch television through."

"You sound like a punk," Sarge said. He didn't move, though.

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"Just don't move. That's all you've got to worry about." I opened the Impala's back door and got out carefully. The Sarge was staring at me over his shoulder and I could see the glitter of his little eyes. One hand was creeping up the lapel of his 1943-model double-breasted suit.

"Oh, please," I said. "Get your fucking hands up, asshole."

The Sarge put his hands up. Keenan's already were.

"Come down to the foot of the steps. Both of you."

They came down, and out of the direct glare of the light I could see their faces. Keenan looked scared, but the Sarge might have been listening to a lecture on Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance. He was probably the one who had jobbed Barney.

"Face the wall and lean on it. Both of you."

Keenan: "If you're after money..."

I laughed. "Well, I was going to start off by offering you a cut-rate deal on Tupperware, work my way up to the big stuff gradually, but you saw through me. Yeah, I'm after money. Four hundred and eighty thousand dollars, actually. Buried on a little island off Bar Harbor called Carmen's Folly."

Keenan jerked as if he'd been shot, but the Sarge's dipped-in-concrete face never twitched. He turned around and put his hands on the wall, leaning his weight on them. Keenan reluctantly followed suit. I frisked him first and got a stupid little .32 with a three-inch barrel. A gun like that, you could put the muzzle against a guy's head and still miss when you pulled the trigger. I threw it over my shoulder and heard it bounce off one of the cars. Sarge was clean -- and it was a relief to step away from him.

"We're going into the house. You first, Keenan, then Sarge, then me. Without incident, okay?"

We all trooped up the steps and into the kitchen. It was one of those germless chrome-and-tile jobs that looks like it was spit whole out of some mass-production womb in the Midwest somewhere, the work of hearty Methodist assholes who all look like Mr. Goodwrench and smell like Cherry Blend tobacco. I doubt if it ever needed anything so vulgar as cleaning; Keenan probably just closed the doors and turned on the hidden sprinklers once a week.

I paraded them through into the living room, another treat for the eyes. A pansy decorator who never got over his crush on Ernest Hemingway had apparently done it. There was a flagstone fireplace almost as big as an elevator car, a teak buffet table with a moosehead mounted above it, and a drinks cart stashed below a gunrack loaded with premium artillery. The stereo had turned itself off.

I waved the gun at the couch. "One on each end."

They sat, Keenan on the right, Sarge on the left. The Sarge looked even bigger sitting down. An ugly, dented scar twisted its way through his slightly overgrown crewcut. I put his weight at about two-thirty, and wondered why a man with the size and physical presence of Mike Tyson owned a Volkswagen.

I grabbed an easy chair and dragged it over Keenan's quicksand-colored rug until it was in front and between them. I sat down and let the .45 rest on my thigh. Keenan stared at it like a bird stares at a snake. The Sarge, on the other hand, was staring at me like he was the snake and I was the bird. "Now what?" he asked.

"Let's talk about maps and money," I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sarge said. "All I know is that little boys shouldn't play with guns."

"How's Cappy MacFarland these days?" I asked casually.

It didn't get jack shit from the Sarge, but Keenan popped his cork. "He knows. He knows!" The words shot out of him like bullets.

"Shut up!" the Sarge told him. "Shut up your goddam trap!"

Keenan moaned a little. This was one part of the scenario he had never imagined. I smiled. "He's right, Sarge." I said. "I know. Almost all of it."

"Who are you?"

"No one you know. A friend of Barney's."

"Barney who?" Sarge asked indifferently. "Barney Google, with the goo-goo-googly eyes?"

"He wasn't dead, Sarge. Not quite dead."

Sarge turned a slow and murderous look on Keenan. Keenan shuddered and opened his mouth. "Don't talk," Sarge said to him. "Not one fucking word. I'll snap your neck like a chicken if you do."

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Keenan's mouth shut with a snap.

Sarge looked at me again. "What does almost all of it mean?"

"Everything but the fine details. I know about the armored car. The island. Cappy MacFarland. How you and Keenan and some bastard named Jagger killed Barney. And the map. I know about that."

"It wasn't the way he told you," Sarge said. "He was going to cross us."

"He couldn't cross the street," I said. "He was just a patsy who could drive." He shrugged; it was like watching a minor earthquake. "Okay. Be as dumb as you look."

"I knew Barney had something on as early as last March. I just didn't know what. And then one night he had a gun. This gun. How did you connect with him, Sarge?"

"A mutual friend -- someone who did time with him. We needed a driver who knew eastern Maine and the Bar Harbor area. Keenan and I went to see him and laid it out for him. He liked it."

"I did time with him in the Shank," I said. "I liked him. You couldn't help but like him. He was dumb, but he was a good kid. He needed a keeper more than a partner."

"George and Lennie," Sarge sneered.

"Good to know you spent your own jail time improving what passes for your mind, sweetheart," I said. "We were thinking about a bank in Lewiston. He couldn't wait for me to finish doping it out. So now he's underground."

"Jeepers, this is really sad," Sarge said. "I'm gettin, like, all soft and mushy inside."

I picked up the gun and showed him the muzzle, and for a second or two he was the bird and it was the snake. "One more wisecrack and I'll put a bullet in your belly. Do you believe that?"

His tongue flickered in and out with startling quickness, lapped across his lower lip, and disappeared again. He nodded. Keenan was frozen. He looked like he wanted to retch but didn't quite dare.

"He told me it was big time, a big score," I resumed. "That's all I could get out of him. He took off on April third. Two days later four guys knock over the Portland-Bangor Federated truck just outside of Carmel. All three guards dead. The newspapers said the robbers ran two roadblocks in a souped-up '78 Plymouth. Barney had a '78 up on blocks, thinking about turning it into a stacker. I'm betting Keenan put up the front money for him to turn it into something a little better and a lot faster."

I looked at him. Keenan's face was the color of cheese.

"On May sixth I get a card postmarked Bar Harbor, but that doesn't mean anything -- there are dozens of little islands that channel their mail through there. A mailboat does the circuit, picks it up. The card says: 'Mom and family fine, store doing good. See you in July.' It was signed with Barney's middle name. I leased a cottage on the coast, because Barney knew that would be the deal. July comes and goes, no Barney."

"Musta had a terminal hard-on by then, kid, right?" Sarge said. I guess he wanted me to be sure I hadn't buffaloed him.

I looked at him remotely. "He showed up in early August. Courtesy of your buddy Keenan, Sarge. He forgot about the automatic bilge pump in the boat. You thought the chop would sink it quick enough, right, Keenan? But you thought he was dead, too. I had a yellow blanket spread out on Frenchman's Point every day. Visible for miles. Easy to spot. Still, he was lucky."

"Too lucky," Sarge almost spat.

"One thing I'm curious about -- did he know before the job that the money was new, all the serial numbers recorded? That you couldn't even sell it to a currency-junker in the Bahamas for three or four years?"

"He knew," the Sarge rumbled, and I was surprised to find myself believing him. "And nobody was planning to junk the dough. He knew that, too, kid. I think he was counting on that Lewiston job you mentioned for ready cash, but whatever he was or wasn't counting on, he knew the score and said he could live with it. Christ, why not? Say we had to wait ten years to go back for that dough and split it up. What's ten years to a kid like Barney? Shit, he would have been all of thirty-five. I'd be sixty-one."

"What about Gappy MacFarland? Did Barney know about him, too?"

"Yes. Cappy came with the deal. A good man. A pro. He got cancer last year. Inoperable. And he owed me a favor."

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"So the four of you went out to Cappy's island," I said. "A little nobody-on-it named Carmen's Folly. Cappy buried the money and made a map."

"That part was Jagger's idea," Sarge said. "We didn't want to split hot money -- too tempting. But we didn't want to leave all the swag in one pair of hands, either. Cappy MacFarland was the perfect solution."

"Tell me about the map."

"I thought we'd get to that," Sarge said with a wintry smile.

"Don't tell him!" Keenan cried out hoarsely.

Sarge turned to him and gave him a look that would have melted bar steel. "Shut up. I can't lie and I can't stonewall, thanks to you. You know what I hope, Keenan? I hope you weren't really looking forward to seeing in the new century."

"Your name's in a letter," Keenan said wildly. "If anything happens to me, your name's in a letter!"

"Cappy made a good map," the Sarge said, as if Keenan were not there at all. "He had some draftsman training in Joliet. He cut it into quarters. One for each of us. We were going to have a reunion on July fourth, five years later. Talk it over. Maybe decide to wait another five years, maybe decide to put the pieces together right then. But there was trouble."

"Yes," I said. "I guess that's one way of putting it."

"If it makes you feel any better, it was all Keenan's play. I don't know if Barney knew it or not, but that's how it was. When Jagger and I took off in Cappy's boat, Barney was fine."

"You're a goddam liar!" Keenan squealed.

"Who's got two pieces of the map in his wall safe?" Sarge inquired. "Is it you, dear?"

He looked at me again.

"It was still all right. Half the map still wasn't enough. And am I gonna sit here and say I would have preferred a four-way split to a three-way? I don't think you'd believe it even if it was true. Then, guess what? Keenan calls. Tells me we ought to have a talk. I was expecting it. Looks like you were, too."

I nodded. Keenan had been easier to find than the Sarge -- he kept a higher profile. I could have tracked Sarge all the way down eventually, I suppose, but I'd been pretty sure that wouldn't be necessary. Thieves of a feather flock together... and the feathers have a tendency to fly, too, when one of the birds is a vulture like Keenan.

"Of course," Sarge went on, "he tells me not to get any lethal ideas. Says he's taken out an insurance policy, my name in an open-in-event-of-my-death letter he'd sent his lawyer. His idea was that the two of us could probably dope out where Cappy'd buried the money if we put three of the four pieces of the map together."

"And split the swag fifty-fifty," I said.

Sarge nodded. Keenan's face was like a moon drifting somewhere in a high stratosphere of terror.

"Where's the safe?" I asked him.

Keenan didn't say anything.

I had done some practicing with the .45. It was a good gun. I liked it. I held it in both hands and shot Keenan in the forearm, just below the elbow. The Sarge didn't even jump. Keenan fell off the couch and curled up in a ball, holding his arm and howling.

"The safe," I said.

Keenan continued to howl.

"I'll shoot you in the knee," I said. "I don't know from personal experience, but I've heard that hurts like a mad bastard."

"The print," he gasped. "The Van Gogh. Don't shoot me anymore, huh?'" He looked at me, grinning fearfully.

I motioned to Sarge with the gun. "Stand facing the wall."

The Sarge got up and looked at the wall, arms dangling limply.

"Now you," I said to Keenan. "Go open the safe."

"I'm bleeding to death," Keenan moaned.

I went over and stroked the butt of the .45 up the side of his cheek, laying back skin. "Now you're bleeding," I told him. "Go open the safe or you'll bleed more." Keenan got up, holding his arm and blubbering. He took the print off its hooks with his good hand, revealing an office-gray wall safe. He threw a terrified glance at me and began to twiddle the dial. He made two false starts and had to go back. The

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third time he got it open. There were some documents and two wads of bills inside. He reached in, fumbled around, and came up with two squares of paper, about three inches on a side.

I swear I didn't mean to kill him. I planned to tie him up and leave him. He was harmless enough; the maid would find him when she got back from her lingerie party or wherever it was she'd gone in her little Dodge Colt, and Keenan wouldn't dare poke his nose out of his house for a week. But it was like Sarge had said. He did have two. And one of them had blood on it.

I shot him again, this time not in the arm. He went down like an empty laundry bag. Sarge didn't flinch. "I wasn't crapping you. Keenan jobbed your friend. They were both amateurs. Amateurs are stupid."

I didn't answer. I looked down at the squares and shoved them into my pocket. Neither one had an X-marks-the-spot on it.

"What now?" Sarge asked.

"We go to your place."

"What makes you think my piece of the map is there?"

"I don't know. Telepathy, maybe. Besides, if it isn't, we'll go where it is. I'm in no hurry."

"You've got all the answers, huh?"

"Let's go."

We went back out to the carport. I sat in the back of the VW, on the side away from him. His bulk and the size of the car made a surprise play on his part a joke; it would take him five minutes just to get turned around. Two minutes later we were on the road.

It was starting to snow, big, sloppy flakes that clung to the windshield and turned to instant slush when they struck the pavement. It was slippery going, but there wasn't much traffic.

After a half hour on Route 10, he turned off onto a secondary road. Fifteen minutes later we were on a rutted dirt track with snow-freighted pines staring at us on either side. Two miles along we turned into a short, trash-littered driveway. In the limited sweep of the VW's headlights I could make out a rickety backwoods shack with a patched roof and a twisted TV aerial. There was a snow-covered old Ford in a gully to the left. Out in back was an outhouse and a pile of old tires.

Hernando's Hideaway.

"Welcome to Bally's East," Sarge said, and killed the engine.

"If this is a con, I'll kill you."

He seemed to fill three-quarters of the tiny vehicle's front seat. "I know that," he said.

"Get out."

Sarge led the way up to the front door. "Open it," I said. "Then stand still."

He opened the door and stood still. I stood still. We stood still for about three minutes, and nothing happened. The only moving thing was a fat gray squirrel that had ventured into the middle of the yard to curse us in lingua rodenta.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go in."

Surprise, it was a dump. The one sixty-watt bulb cast a grungy glow over the whole room, leaving shadows like starved bats in the corners. Newspapers were scattered helter-skelter. Drying clothes were hung on a sagging rope. In one corner there was an ancient Zenith TV. In the opposite corner was a rickety sink and a stark, rust-stained bathtub on claw feet. A hunting rifle stood beside it. The predominant odors were feet, farts, and chili.

"It beats living raw," Sarge said.

I could have argued the point, but didn't. "Where's your piece of the map?"

"In the bedroom."

"Let's go get it."

"Not yet." He turned around slowly, his dipped-in-concrete face hard. "I want your word you ain't going to kill me when you get it."

"How you going to make me keep it?"

"Fuck, I don't know. I guess I'm just gonna hope it was more than the money that got you cranked up. If it was Barney, too -- wanting to clean Barney's slate -- you did it, it's clean. Keenan capped him and now Keenan's dead. If you want the bundle, too, okay. Maybe three-quarters will be enough, and you were right -- my piece has got a great big X on it. But you don't get it unless you promise I get something, too: my life."

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"How do I know you won't come after me?"

"But I will, sonny," the Sarge said softly.

I laughed. "All right. Throw in Jagger's address and you've got your promise. I'll keep it, too."

The Sarge shook his head slowly. "You don't want to play with Jagger, fella, Jagger will eat you up."

I had dropped the .45 a little. Now I lifted it again.

"All right. He's in Coleman, Massachusetts. A ski lodge. Is that good enough?"

"Yes. Let's get your piece, Sarge."

The Sarge looked me over once more, closely. Then he nodded. We went into the bedroom.

More Colonial charm. The stained mattress on the floor was littered with stroke-books and the walls were papered with photographs of women who appeared to be wearing nothing but a thin coating of Wesson Oil. One look at this place and Dr. Ruth's head would have exploded.

The Sarge didn't hesitate. He picked up the lamp on the night-table and pried the base off it. His quarter of the map was neatly rolled up inside; he held it out wordlessly.

"Throw it," I invited.

The Sarge smiled thinly. "Cautious little pencil-neck, aren't you?"

"I find it pays. Give it up, Sarge."

He tossed it over to me. "Easy come, easy go," he said.

"I'm going to keep my promise," I said. "Consider yourself lucky. Out in the other room."

Cold light flickered in his eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"See that you stay in one place for awhile. Move."

We went out into the main room, a nifty little parade of two. The Sarge stood underneath the naked lightbulb, back to me, his shoulders hunched, anticipating the gunbarrel that was going to groove his head very shortly. I was just lifting the gun to clout him when the light blinked out.

The shack was suddenly pitch black.

I threw myself to the right; Sarge was already gone like a cool breeze. I could hear the thump and tumble of newspapers as he hit the floor in a flat dive. Then silence. Utter and complete.

I waited for my night vision, but when it came it was no help. The place was a mausoleum in which a thousand dim tombstones loomed. And the Sarge knew every one of them.

I knew about Sarge; material on him hadn't been hard to spade up. He'd been a Green Beret in Vietnam, and no one even bothered with his real name anymore; he was just the Sarge, big and murderous and tough.

Somewhere in the dark he was moving in on me. He must have known the place like the back of his hand, because there wasn't a sound, not a squeaking board, not a foot scrape. But I could feel him getting closer and closer, flanking from the left or the right or maybe pulling a tricky one and coming in straight ahead.

The stock of the gun was very sweaty in my hand, and I had to control the urge to fire it wildly, randomly. I was very aware that I had three-quarters of the pie in my pocket. I didn't bother wondering why the lights had gone out. Not until the powerful flashlight stabbed in through the window, sweeping the floor in a wild, random pattern that just happened to catch the Sarge, frozen in a half-crouch seven feet to my left. His eyes glowed greenly in the bright cone of light, like cat's eyes.

He had a glinting razor blade in his right hand, and I suddenly remembered the way his hand had been spidering up his coat lapel in Keenan's carport.

The Sarge said one word into the flash beam. "Jagger?"

I don't know who got him first. A large-caliber pistol fired once behind the flashlight beam, and I pulled the trigger of Barney's .45 twice -- pure reflex. The Sarge was thrown back against the wall with force enough to knock him out of one of his boots.

The flashlight snapped off.

I fired one shot at the window, but hit only glass. I lay on my side in the darkness and realized that I hadn't been the only one waiting around for Keenan's greed to resurface. Jagger had been waiting, too. And, although there were twelve rounds of ammunition back in my car, there was only one left in my gun.

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You don't want to play with Jagger, fella, the Sarge had said, Jagger will eat you up.

I had a pretty good picture of the room in my head now. I got up in a crouch and ran, stepping over Sarge's sprawled legs and into the corner. I got into the bathtub and poked my eyes up over the edge. There was no sound, none at all. The bottom of the tub was gritty with flaked-off bathtub ring. I waited.

About five minutes went by. It seemed like five hours.

Then the light nicked on again, this time in the bedroom window. I ducked my head when it glared through the doorway. It probed briefly and clicked off.

Silence again. A long, loud silence. On the dirty surface of Sarge's porcelain bathtub I saw everything. Keenan, grinning desperately. Barney, with the clotted hole in his gut, due east of his navel. Sarge, standing frozen in the flashlight beam, holding the razor blade professionally between thumb and first finger. Jagger, the dark shadow with no face. And me. The fifth quarter.

Suddenly there was a voice, just outside the door. It was soft and cultured, almost womanish, but not effete. It sounded deadly and competent as hell.

"Hey, beautiful."

I kept quiet. He wasn't getting my number without dialing a little.

When the voice came again, it was by the window. "I'm going to kill you, beautiful. I came to kill them, but you'll do fine."

A pause while he shifted position once more. When the voice came again, it came from the window just over my head -- the one above the bathtub. My guts crawled into my throat. If he flashed that light now...

"No fifth wheels need apply," Jagger said. "Sorry."

I could barely hear him moving to his next position. It turned out to be back to the doorway. "I've got my quarter with me. You want to come and take it?"

I felt an urge to cough and repressed it.

"Come and get it, beautiful." His voice was mocking. "The whole pie. Come and take it away."

But I didn't have to, and I suppose he knew it. I was holding the chips. I could find the money now. With his single quarter, Jagger had no chance.

This time the silence really spun out. A half-hour, an hour, forever. Eternity squared. My body started to stiffen. Outside, the wind was tuning up, making it impossible to hear anything but rattling snow against the walls. It was very cold. The tips of my fingers were going numb.

Then, around one-thirty, a ghostly stirring sound like crawling rats in the darkness. I stopped breathing. Somehow Jagger had got in. He was right in the middle of the room...

Then I got it. Rigor mortis, hurried by the cold, was rearranging Sarge for the last time, which was all. I relaxed a little.

That was when the door rammed open and Jagger charged through, ghostly and visible in a mantle of white snow, tall and loose and gangling. I let him have it and the bullet punched a hole through the side of his head. And in the brief gunflash, I saw that what I had holed was a scarecrow with no face, dressed in some farmer's thrown-out pants and shirt. The burlap head fell off the broomstick neck as it hit the floor. Then Jagger was shooting at me.

He was holding a semi-automatic pistol, and the innards of the bathtub were like a great percussive hollow cymbal. Porcelain flew up, bounced off the wall, struck my face. Wood splinters and a single hot spent slug rained down on me.

Then he was charging, never letting up. He was going to shoot me in the tub like a fish in a barrel. I couldn't even put my head up.

It was Sarge who saved me. Jagger stumbled over one big dead foot, staggered, and pumped bullets into the floor instead of over my head. Then I was on my knees. I pretended I was Roger Clemens. I pegged Barney's big.45 at his head.

The gun hit him but didn't stop him. I stumbled over the rim of the tub getting out to tackle him, and Jagger put two groggy shots to my left.

The faint silhouette stepped back, trying to get a bead, one hand holding his ear where the gun had hit him. He shot me through the wrist, and his second shot ripped a groove in my neck. Then, incredibly, he stumbled over Sarge's feet again and fell backward. He brought the gun up again and put one through the roof. It was his last chance. I kicked the gun out of his hand, hearing the wet-wood sound of breaking bones. I kicked him in the groin, doubling him up. I kicked him again, this time in the back of the head, and his feet rattled a fast, unconscious tattoo on the floor.

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He was as good as dead then, but I kicked him again and again, kicked him until there was nothing but pulp and strawberry jam, nothing anyone could ever identify, not by teeth, not by anything. I kicked him until I couldn't swing my leg anymore, and my toes wouldn't move.

I suddenly realized I was screaming and there was no one to hear me but dead men. I wiped my mouth and knelt over Jagger's body.

He had been lying about his quarter of the map, as it turned out. It didn't surprise me much. No, I take that back. It didn't surprise me at all.

My heap was just where I had left it, around the block from Keenan's house, but now it was just a ghostly hump of snow. I had left Sarge's VW a mile back. I hoped my heater was still working. I was numb all over. I got the door open and winced a little as I sat down inside. The crease in my neck had already clotted over, but my wrist hurt like hell.

The starter cranked for a long time, and the motor finally caught. The heater was working, and the one wiper cleared away most of the snow on the driver's side.

Jagger had been lying about his quarter, and it hadn't been in the unobtrusive (and probably stolen) Honda Civic he'd come in. But his address had been in his wallet, and if I actually needed his quarter, I thought there was a pretty good chance I could find it. I didn't think I would; three pieces should be enough, especially since Sarge's quarter was the one with the X.

I pulled out carefully. I was going to be careful for a long time. The Sarge had been right about one thing: Barney had been a dope. The fact that he'd also been my friend didn't matter anymore. The debt had been paid.

In the meantime, I had a lot to be careful for.