

The Five (Excerpt)

ONE.

Nomad decided he would have to kill the waitress.

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How he would do it, he didn't know. But it would have to be done soon, because in another minute he was going to go off like that dude in *The Thing* whose alien blood bubbled and shrieked under the touch of a hot wire. His neck was going to grow six feet long and spikes would shoot out of his arms before he tore the room apart. The waitress was cheerful and talky. Nomad hated cheerful and talky. He wasn't a particularly good guy, nor a very bad one. He was a musician.

Besides, he wasn't worth a damn before noon, and here he was at ten in the morning sitting in a booth at a Denny's restaurant just off I-35 at Round Rock, about twenty miles north of Austin. Everything was too bright for him in here. Everything was yellow and red and the sun was blasting between the blinds of the east-facing windows. His sunglasses helped a little, but underneath them his eyes were tired. And now here came the fucking waitress again, her third swoop past in as many minutes. She was an old hippie chick somewhere in the human wasteland of her late forties, he figured. She looked like she'd been somebody's groupie, back in the day. She was too thin and too old to be wearing her copper-colored hair in braids like some kind of Pippi Longstocking wannabe. She was bringing the coffee pot, she in her goldenrod yellow uniform, smiling, a big-toothed goddess of breakfast. Her nametag said *Hi I'm Laurie*.

"Oh, my God," Nomad said, to no one in particular.

"Fill 'em up?" Laurie asked, coffee pot poised.

There were various noises of assent. "Thanks," Mike said, when his cup was brimmed, and then Laurie answered, "No problem," and Nomad looked at the ketchup bottle as a weapon of murder because she'd just stepped on the nuts of one of his worst pet peeves. Where that damned *No Problem* had started he didn't know, but he wished he had two minutes in a locked room with the sonofabitch who'd first said it. Like a waitress or waiter was saying *Oh it's no problem that you're asking me to do something that I'm fucking paid to do, and that is part of my job description, and that if I didn't do I would be kicked in the ass out the door by whoever pays me to do it. Oh no, it's no problem at all.*

Then Laurie took a long look at all of them, at Nomad and Ariel and Terry in the first booth and Mike and Berke in the one just behind, and she gave a lopsided little grin and came up with the familiar question: "Are ya'll in a *band*?"

Nomad, whose given name was John Charles, did not rate breakfast at the top of his daily needs. Some of the others liked it. Mike and Terry did, especially, and had wanted to stop here before they headed up to Waco. Usually they stopped at a barbecue joint just outside Austin called Smitty's, where the one-eyed ex-Marine cook put eggs and beef hash in a blender with hellacious homemade hot sauce and called it a Texas Tornado, but Smitty had closed up shop at the first of the summer and so Denny's got the vote. They had never been in here before and had never met Laurie, but of course she knew. Probably because if there were thirteen hundred and fifty-two guitar players in Nashville there had to be fourteen hundred and sixty-three bands in and around Austin, so seeing musicians sitting in a Denny's was no biggie. But more clues were the bracelets of green vines and music notes—the opening bars of 'Amazing Grace'—tattooed around Ariel Collier's wrists, or maybe Terry Spitzenham's soul patch and shaved skull, or Mike Davis's heavily-tattooed arms, or Berke Bonnevey's silver nose ring and in general her do-not-fuck-with-me attitude, or Nomad's own shoulder-length black hair, sunglasses designed to shut out the world, and his dark demeanor.

Take all that together and you had either a band or a freak show, and some would say there was very little difference.

"We are," Ariel answered, and she offered the waitress the encouragement of a direct gaze and a smile, which Nomad had known was coming because Ariel—sweet, simple child—could never turn her face from a

stranger.

“What’s your name? Your band’s name, I mean?”

“The Five,” Ariel said.

There was just the briefest of pauses, and then Laurie wrinkled her brow and cocked her head to one side as if she’d missed part of that. “The five *what?*”

“Aces,” Mike mumbled, into his coffee cup.

“Asses,” Berke corrected.

But Laurie’s attention was still on Ariel, as if she knew Ariel was probably the only person in this group who wouldn’t steer her into a ditch.

“Just The Five,” Ariel said. “We wanted to keep it easy to remember.”

“Oh, yeah. Like the Fab Five, right?”

“Fab Four,” Terry spoke up. The sunlight sparked off his round-lensed wire-rimmed glasses, which were suitably Lennonesque. “That was the Beatles.”

“Right, right.” Laurie nodded, and again she swept her eyes across the assembled Five, in all their glory of an early-morning saddle-up and an impending ride into the great unknown. “How come there are six of you?” She motioned with the coffee pot toward the place next to Berke where the sixth member had been sitting until about ninety seconds ago.

“He’s the manager,” Ariel replied.

“The slave driver,” Mike said. “Keeper of the keys and the money bags.”

“The *boss*, huh?” Laurie asked. “Well, I guess everybody’s got to have one.” She caught sight of another customer flagging her down for a refill, and she said, “Scuse me,” and moved away.

Terry started back in where he’d left off on his pancakes. Berke worked on buttered toast and a glass of water. Mike ate his scrambled eggs, Ariel sipped her apple juice and Nomad parted the window blinds a fraction so he could peer out against the glare into the parking lot.

The Little Genius was out there, talking on his cellphone. George Emerson by name, road manager, sound mixer, crisis mender, argument mediator, bean counter, and what have you. He was standing by their van, a battleship-gray 1995 Ford Econoline, three doors, with a U-Haul trailer hooked up behind. He was intent on his conversation, and he’d lit a cigarette. Nomad watched him, as he talked and smoked. George was five feet, six inches tall, had curly light brown hair—losing it on the crown a little bit, to be honest—and he wore horn-rimmed glasses and his usual button-down pale blue short-sleeved shirt and chinos. God only knew why George wore brown loafers with shiny pennies in them. Maybe it was for the shock effect. George was strolling back and forth now as he talked, trailing a plume of smoke. Not only was he a little genius, he was a little locomotive.

I think I can...I think I can...I think—

“Ya’ll playin’ here tonight?”

Laurie had returned, toothy and bright and braidy. She had posed this question to Ariel, who said, “We were at the Saxon Pub last night. Tonight we’re at Common Grounds in Waco.”

“Ya’ll are from around here, then?”

“Yeah, we’ve been living here...how long, Terry?”

“Years and years,” Terry answered.

“Our tour’s just started up,” Ariel said, in anticipation of Laurie’s next question. “That was the first show.”

“I’ll be. What do *you* play?”

“Guitar. And I sing some.”

“Oh, I would’ve known that,” Laurie said. “You’ve got a nice speakin’ voice.”

Nomad had let the blinds go and was drinking his bitter black coffee, but he was thinking about George and the cellphone and the smoke signals in the air.

“My daughter plays the guitar,” the waitress went on. “Just turned sixteen. She sings, too. Any advice I can pass along?”

“Stay sixteen,” Berke said, without looking up.

“Move to an island,” Mike offered, in his low raspy growl, “where agents and promoters are shot on sight.”

Laurie nodded, as if this made perfect sense to her. “One thing I’d like to ask, if I could. Then I’ll leave you guys alone. I’ve seen...like...musicians on stage do *this*.” She transferred the coffee pot to her left hand, balled up her right fist and did the heart thump and then the peace sign. “What’s that mean?”

Nomad studied her through his dark glasses. She was probably five or six years younger than she looked. It was the hard Texas sun that aged the skin so much. She was probably a little dense, too. Happy with her lot in life, and dense. Maybe you had to be a little dense to be truly happy. Or oblivious enough to think you were. He couldn’t help himself; he said, “Bullshit.”

“Pardon?” Laurie asked.

“It means,” Ariel said evenly, “solidarity with the audience. You know. We love you, and we wish you peace.”

“Like I said: Bullshit.” Nomad ignored Ariel, who likewise ignored him, and then he swigged down the rest of his coffee. “I’m done.” He slid out of the booth, put a buck down on the table, and walked out of the Denny’s into the hot sunshine. In this mid-July of 2008, the fierce heat was unrelenting, day after day. Drought scorched the land. The air was hazy and carried the acrid tang of a brush fire, maybe from the next county. But where was George? The Little Genius was not standing beside the Scumbucket, which was the name Mike had given their van. Then Nomad saw a wisp of smoke rise up and waft away, and he walked over to the edge of the parking lot where George was sitting on a low brick wall, still involved with his cell conversation. Or, really, George was just listening, and taking a drag off his cigarette every few seconds as cars and trucks blew past on the long straight corridor of I-35.

Nomad quietly came up behind him. George must have felt the presence of a black aura because he suddenly turned his head, looked right at Nomad, and said, “Hey, listen. I’ve gotta go, I’ll call you back, okay?” His phone buddy seemed hesitant to give it up, so George said, “I’ll let you know tomorrow. Right. Early, before ten. Yeah. Okay, then.” He put his phone away in its small clipcase on his belt, and then he drew the cigarette in as if it were oxygen to an air-starved man and spewed the smoke out through his nostrils.

Nomad said nothing. Finally George asked, “They ready yet?”

“No.”

George continued to watch the passing traffic. Nomad sat on the wall a few feet away from him without being asked, because it was a free fucking country.

They were both wearing their uniforms, Nomad thought. George’s was the uniform of the guy in control, the guy who met the accountants, if there were any accountants to be met. The guy who spoke to the banker about the loan for the new gear, if there was a banker and a loan and new gear to be had. Though George had three small silver rings in each earlobe, he still projected the conservative front, the voice of reason, the leash on these madmen and mad women who called themselves The Five. Nomad’s uniform was his Army-green T-shirt, his well-worn black jeans, his black Chuck high tops and his black glasses that cut the glare and shunned the world until he was ready to let any of it in. His was the uniform of the fighter, the rager against the machine, the take-no-prisoners bard and bastard. The teller of truths, if there were any truths to be told. As if he *knew* any real truths, which he doubted. But you had to dress the part of whatever play you were in, that was for sure.

He had turned twenty-nine two weeks ago. They’d given him dairy-free birthday cake and soy milk ice cream, since he was allergic to dairy. They’d taken him paint-balling. Everybody got a birthday celebration, that was part of the deal. Not a written deal, but one that was understood. Just as on stage, everybody got their time. Their appreciation, for what they did. That was an important thing, Nomad thought; to feel appreciated, like you meant something in the world and your life and work wasn’t just like a big busted-up truck spinning its tires in a mudhole. Like what you did mattered to somebody.

He was the good front man: six-one, lean and rangy, the hungry-as-the-wolf look. He could do the curled lip and the attitude as well as anybody on the knife and gun circuit. His nose had been broken in a bar fight in Memphis and he had a small scar on his chin courtesy of a thrown beer bottle in Jacksonville. He had been born in Detroit, and he had been down enough rough streets to know when to look over his shoulder and check what might be coming up on him from behind.

That was what he had decided to do now, with the Little Genius.

“Business call?” Nomad asked.

George didn’t answer, which told Nomad all he needed to know.

But in time—ten seconds, fifteen, whatever—George did reply, because he was a stand-up guy and part of the family. He said, “John, I’m thirty-three years old.”

“Okay.” That was no news; Nomad remembered George’s thirty-third back in April. “And?”

“Thirty-three,” George went on. “Ten years ago, I was ready to climb mountains. I thought I was going to have it all. You know?”

“Yes,” Nomad said, but it sounded more like a question.

“Ten years is a long time, man. In this business, it’s like dog years. And I’ve been on the road with somebody since I was twenty. First gig, with the Survivors out of Chicago.” George was a Windy City boy, born and bred. “They lasted about four months before they exploded. No survivors.” He didn’t pause to see if Nomad had cracked a smile, but that wasn’t going to happen anyway. “Then with the Bobby Apple Band, out of Urbana. Have I told you this before?”

“No.” There’d been many stories from George’s complicated past, but not this one. Nomad wondered if he’d been saving it.

“The band was lame, just frat boys really. Bobby Apple—Bobby Koskavitch—was a skinny computer geek at Illinois, but he could belt it like a fifty-year-old black dude raised on misery. I saw him lift the gigs on his shoulders and just fly with them. Just take off, and leave the band behind. He was in some other space and

time, you know?"

"Yeah." It was what every musician longed for: the rapture when nothing in the world mattered but the sound and it carried you away with a mindrush that was better than sex with sixteen women.

"They recorded two CDs in the drummer's basement," George said. "Solid songs, most of them original. Had some airplay on a local station. Swapped up musicians, people came and went. Tried a horn section for a bigger sound. But that force—the stage magic—in Bobby never translated." Not an uncommon thing, Nomad knew. If you didn't translate to CDs or mp3s or vinyl sooner or later the road would wear you out. "I mean, they had plenty of live gigs. We were making money, and Bobby was a trooper, and we had a few nibbles from A&R dudes but no bites. Then one day...he just woke up and asked me what town he was in, and he said he was going to do the gig that night at the Armory and to pay everybody up afterward, because he was going home. I tried to talk him out of it. We all did. I said, *Keep going, man. Don't give it up.* I said, *You've got a huge talent, man. Don't walk away from it.* But, you know, he was tired. He'd hit his wall. I guess I was tired too, because I didn't try harder. I guess I figured...really, there's always the next band." George took another draw from his cigarette and regarded the burning stub as if figuring it was time to kill it. "I've been thinking about him a lot lately. He went back to computer programming. Anti-virus shit. Probably mucho rich right now, laughing his ass off in Silicon Valley."

"Maybe." Nomad said, and shrugged. "Or maybe he lost his ass and wishes he was back in his old band."

"You ever wish you were back in *your* old band?"

"Which one?" Nomad asked, his face impassive.

"The one that made you the happiest," said George.

"That would be the current situation, so your question is null."

George pulled up a pinched smile. "I didn't realize how little it takes to make you happy."

"This isn't about me, or whether I'm happy or not, is it?" Nomad waited for George to speak again, but when the Little Genius did not, Nomad leaned toward him and said, "I *do* have eyes. I've got *some* sense. I've gone through enough bands to know when somebody's got the wanders. So be brother enough to tell me the truth. Who's making the offer?"

"Not what you think."

"Tell me."

A pained expression passed across George's face. He took in the last of his cigarette, blew out gray smoke that scrolled away like a banner of mysterious calligraphy, and crushed the butt into the bricks.

"My first cousin Jeff, in Chicago," George said, "owns a business called Audio Advances. They do the setups for auditoriums, town halls, churches...you name it. Mixing boards, effects racks, speakers, whatever they need. Plus training in how to run everything. He's doing real well." George stopped to watch a Harley speed past on the highway, its driver wearing a bright red helmet. "He needs a new Midwestern rep. He wants to know by ten tomorrow morning if I'm in or out."

Nomad said nothing. He was sitting in the frozen moment, thinking that he'd had it all wrong. He was thinking that George was being hustled—courted, if you wanted to put it that way—by some other band. That the GinGins or the Austin Tribe or the Sky Walkers or any of a hundred others they'd shared a stage with had fired a manager and come to steal George away with promises of bright lights, choice weed and semi-conscious nookie.

But no, this was worse. Because it was the real world calling, not this fiction of life, and Nomad could see in

George's eyes that ten in the morning could not arrive too soon.

"Jesus." Nomad's tongue felt parched. "Are you giving it up?"

George kept his face averted. He stared down at the ground. Small beads of sweat had gathered at his temples in the rising heat. "What can I say?" was all he could find.

"You can say it, or not. You're giving it up."

"Yeah." George nodded, just a slight lift of the chin.

"We had a good night!" It was said with force, but not with volume. Nomad was leaning closer, his face strained. He took off his sunglasses, his eyes the fierce blue of the Texas sky and intense with both anger and dismay. "Listen to me, will you? We sold some *tickets* last night! We rocked the *house*, man! Come on!"

"Yeah, we did okay," George agreed, his face still downcast. "We sold some tickets, some CDs and some T-shirts. Made some new fans. Put on a tight show. Sure. And we're going to do the same in Waco, and the same in Dallas. And after that, in El Paso and Tucson, and San Diego and L.A. and Phoenix and Albuquerque and everywhere else...sure, we'll do fine. Usual fuckups and miscues, broken strings, sound problems, lights blowing out, drunks looking for a fight and jailbait looking to get laid. Sure." And now George turned his head and looked directly into Nomad's eyes, and Nomad wondered when it was that the Little Genius had hit his wall. On the last tour through the Southeast, when two clubs had cancelled at the last minute and they were left to scramble for gigs, to basically beg to play for gas money? Was it in that grunge-hole in Daytona Beach, under the fishnets and plastic swordfish, where drunk bikers throwing their cups of beer had brought a quick end to the show and the appearance of the cops was the opener to a collision between billyclubs and bald skulls? How about the Scumbucket's blown tire on a freeway south of Miami, with the sick sky turning purple and the winds picking up and off in the distance a hurricane siren starting to wail? Or had it been something simple, something quiet and sudden, like a gremlin in the fusebox or the death of a microphone? A floor slick with beer and vomit? A bed with no sheets and a stained mattress? Had George's wall been made of gray cinderblock, with sad brown waterstains on the tiles overhead and the grit of desolation on the tiles underfoot?

Maybe, just maybe, George's wall had been human, and had been one too many A&R no-shows at the comp ticket counter.

Just maybe.

"Like I said, I'm thirty-three years old." George's voice was quiet and tired and small. He squinted against the sun. "My clock is ticking, John. Yours is too, if you'll be truthful."

"I'm not too fucking old to do what I *love* to do," came the reply, like a whipstrike. "And we've got the *video*! Jesus Christ, man, we've got the *video*!"

"The video. Yeah, we've got that. Okay. We've had videos before. Tell me how this is such a magic bullet."

Nomad felt anger twist south of his heart. He felt the blood pounding in his face. He wanted to reach out and grab George's shirt collar and slap that blank businessman's stare away, because he wanted his friend back. But he stayed his hand, with the greatest effort, and he said in an acid voice, "You're the one who wanted the video the most. Have you forgotten?"

"I haven't. It's a good song. It's a *great* song. And the video is great, too. We needed the visual, and it's worth every cent. But I'm not sure it's going to change the game, John. Not in the way you're thinking."

"Well hell, how about telling me that before we spent the two thousand dollars?"

"I can't tell you anything you don't already know," George said. "Everything's a gamble, man. You know that. Everything's just throwing dice. So we've got the great song, and the great video. And I'm hoping for the

best, man. You know I am. I'm hoping this tour is the one that lights the jets. But what I'm telling you *now* is that this is my last time out." He paused, letting that register. When Nomad didn't punch him or go for his throat in one of his infamous white-hot supernova explosions, which was what George had feared might happen when John heard it, George said, "I'm going to go for the rep job with my cousin. Until then, I promise—I *swear* to you, man, as a brother—that I will perform my duties exactly as always. I will jump when I need to jump, and I jump *upon* any sonofabitch who needs to be jumped. I will take care of you guys, just like always. Okay?"

There was a few seconds' pause, and then the person who'd come up behind them spoke: "Okay. Whatever."

George did jump a little bit, but Nomad kept his cool. They looked around—taking it easy, neither man showing surprise nor any hint of what they'd been discussing—and there was Berke, who offered them her own expression of absolute detachment. She wore faded jeans and a wine-red tanktop. She was twenty-six years old, born in San Diego, stood about five-nine, had short-cut curly black hair so thick it was a struggle to pull a brush through it, and eyes almost as dark under unplucked black brows. On the right side of her neck was a small vertical Sanskrit tattoo that, she'd told them, meant 'Open To The Moment', though her persona suggested more of a deadbolted door. She had sturdy hands with the strong fingers of the French farmers who swam in her blood. The veins carrying it were prominent in her forearms and wrists, blue channels beneath the white flesh. She was the drummer. Her arms were tight and sculpted, leaving no doubt her profession demanded physical exertion. She was a 'brickhouse', as Mike liked to say, due to good genes and the fact that she laced up her New Balances and ran a few miles every chance she got.

"Hey," Berke said, "Ariel wants to give our waitress a T-shirt."

George stood up, fished the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to her. "Tell her no free CDs. Got it?"

Berke retreated without comment. A couple of boxes of T-shirts and CDs were in the U-Haul trailer, along with the gear. In sizes of Small, Medium, Large and ExtraLarge, the T-shirt was red with a black handprint splayed across the front, fingers outstretched, and the legend *The Five* printed on the palm in a font that looked like embossed Dymo plastic label tape.

When Nomad put his sunglasses back on and got to his feet, George asked, "How much do you think she heard?"

"I don't know, but you should tell everybody before she does. Were you going to wait until the tour was done?"

"No." George frowned. "Jesus, no. I was just...you know...trying to figure things out."

"I hope they *are* figured out."

"Yeah," George agreed, and then he walked back to the van with Nomad following. Everybody else had already climbed in through the passenger door on the right side of the van except Ariel, who was coming across the parking lot from the restaurant.

"Those aren't freebies," Nomad told her, as George went around to get behind the wheel.

Ariel gave him a look that reminded Nomad of how the teachers in high school had regarded him just before banishing him to the office. "One giveaway won't break us. It's for her daughter. And you didn't have to be rude."

He climbed up into the shotgun seat beside George, who had retrieved the keys from Berke by way of Terry. Berke was sitting way in the back, with Mike; Terry was sitting behind George, and Ariel slid into the seat next to Terry. It was the usual arrangement, and only varied according to whose turn it was to drive. Jammed into every other available space were the suitcases, duffle bags and carry-alls of six individuals. George started the engine, switched on the air conditioning that stuttered and racketed and smelled of wet socks before it settled more or less into a hum, and then he pulled out of the parking lot and took the ramp back to I-35 North.

They were due at Common Grounds in Waco at three o'clock for load-in and sound check. It was Friday, the 18th of July. On a Friday night, the show would start about ten, give or take. First, though, they had the thing with Felix Gogo, up north of Waco. The instructions had been given by email to George: turn off I-35 onto East Lake Shore Drive and keep going west until he reached North 19th Street, turn right at the intersection and go past Bosqueville on China Spring Road about six miles, couldn't miss the place.

As they continued away from Round Rock, Nomad was waiting for George to come out with it. The Scumbucket rattled and wheezed across the flat landscape, passing apartment complexes, banks and stripmalls. Passing huge low-roofed warehouses with immense parking lots. Passing farmland now, cows grazing out in the distant pastures that seemed to go on forever.

Nomad was thinking that George might have changed his mind. Just in the last few minutes. That George had decided he wasn't going to give it up, no way. Give up the *dream*? After all the work they'd put into this? No *fucking* way. Nomad felt relief; George had decided to stick to the plan, no matter what lay ahead on what was—as always—a journey into the unknown.

And then, from the back of the van, Berke said casually, "Guys, George has something to tell us. Don't you, George?"