

# The Needle and the Damage Done

*by* Ron Earl Phillips

“She never knew her, you know?”

Chief Jack Gardner, retired, said to the duty officer absently, thumbing a well-worn photo in his rough calloused hands. His gravelly voice cracked a bit when he said it, catching his throat.

“A girl ought to know her mother, don't you think? Ava didn't. She was just a babe when Alice clocked out. Her mother took the H Train, if you know what I mean?”

He choked, holding back a spasm, and cleared his throat. The old Chief's hands trembled.

The officer noted Gardner's condition. Judging by the oxygen tank and the audible wheeze when he breathed, Chief Gardner was a sick man. Little was left of the man who was feared from one end of the valley to the other.

He was a withered man holding onto a past that was dead and gone.

“This here picture is the only one of the two together. At least that I have.”

He showed it to the young officer who regarded the candid photo of a mother and daughter, Ava a newborn and fresh to the world. Alice looked as if she were ready to let go, relinquish everything. Still she managed a smile, a glimmer of hope.

“Alice gave me that photo when she was done with this world. The girl too.”

His eyes watered near to bursting. He fought, refusing to shed a tear.

“I told her mother once, after one of our indiscretions, that she reminded me of Ava Gardner. An actress way back when I was a kid. You wouldn't know her. She was a beautiful brunette and I told Alice

she could be that gorgeous if she'd just get off the needle. She'd be able to find her a good man.

"I didn't know I was setting myself up, setting her up. I didn't think. After two wives, one dead and one divorced." Gardner shook his head, clearing the thoughts. "I didn't need that responsibility. I couldn't be that man. I rejected her. Alice vanished."

The old officer peered through the one-way glass, into the other room. Disgusted by what he saw, grimaced. "Bastard!"

"What was that Chief?"

"Nothing, just talking to myself. I do that a lot now. You don't need to call me chief. That Whitmore kid's the one in charge now. I'm just an old man."

"Sir, you're still vital ..." the younger officer started to rebut.

John Gardner waved off the comment when his chest seized, curled over with a raking cough. It was wet, gurgling as it rose up through his lungs. He leaned against the wall, forced his throat to clear and wiped the sputum from his mouth with a napkin. It came back pink.

"Sir, are you alright? Can I get you something?" The officer panicked.

"Fine. I'm fine." He insisted, "I could use some water though. The cough tears my throat up something fierce."

The officer rushed off leaving the retired officer alone. Gardner decided not to take the time alone to rest.

He stared at the man intently in the room on the other side of the glass. The guy, Roger Rocket, as he was known on the street, was a twice convicted Meth dealer. From the looks, Rocket was also a habitual user. Packets of crystal found with Ava linked back to Roger Rocket. He probably thought it was clever branding putting rocket stickers on product.

He pushed the interrogation room door open and shut it behind him.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Chief Jack Gardner, retired, pulled out a .38 from inside his jacket.

“Whoah, whoah, old man? Don't go all Charlie Bronson on me. I ain't done nothing”

He slammed the gun into the side of man's head.

“I'll tell you who the fuck I am, before I blow what little brains you have out the back of your skull.”

He placed the well-worn photo on the table close enough for Roger's bloodshot eyes to see.

“You killed my baby. My Ava. My Daughter. She was all I had left, and you took her a way.”

“Dude, I don't mess with kids. You got the wrong guy. I'm a business man. Legit.”

Jack pressed the barrel to the Rocket's forehead. “Then I've got some business to share with you.”

“Don't do it Jack. I don't want to shoot you.”

He recognized the voice. “Whitmore, it doesn't matter. I was dead when I walked in. With the cancer and the damage done, you'd only be doing me a favor.”

Jack pressed harder against the Rocket's head. He smelled piss. It made him smile.

The gunshot drummed through the station. The damage done.

