

The Soak

Patrick E McLean

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PART ONE — MEAN OLD MAN

One

Three Months After.

“Hey, the dead guy woke up.”

These were not words Hobbs had expected to hear. He had not expected to hear anything ever again. He was supposed to be dead, and he felt like he was.

He opened his eyes and regretted it. He turned his head and regretted that even more. He saw that he was in a room like a hospital room, but dirtier and more lived in. In the bed to his right was a fat, round-faced old man with an idiot’s leer and an oxygen tube in his nose. To his left was the door. Hobbs had no urge to punch the door.

“Hi there, roomie, have a nice nap?”

Hobbs didn’t answer. He leaned to the left and tried to get out of bed. Pain and nausea overcame him. “Water,” he said. Then he lay back on the bed, drained. He closed his eyes and heard his roommate say, “They don’t really have room service here.”

Then he passed out.

The next time he woke up, someone was shaking his shoulder. “C’mon buddy. Wake up there.”

Hobbs opened his eyes. A young man in shabby clothing presented some credentials and said, “I’m Mr. Upshaw, the social worker assigned to your case. What’s your name?”

Hobbs asked, “What am I doing here? What is this place?”

“This is The Clover Street Senior Living Facility, if you call this living.” He flipped through his paperwork. “You were found wadded up behind a dumpster, with two gunshot wounds, about an inch and a half away from death. You were treated, but when they couldn’t get you out of a coma — or find anybody to claim you, they parked you here. Shady Acres. That’s all I got. What’s your side?” The man closed his mouth and looked at Hobbs. Hobbs wondered if this was

his strong-arm technique.

Hobbs reached for the plastic pitcher of water on the nightstand and drank from it. When he had drained it, he set it back down, trying not to let his hand shake. He sighed.

“Nothing?” said the Social Worker, “You give me nothing? What did I drive all the way out here for?”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“Really? That’s your story. You mean amnesia, like in a bad TV show?”

Hobbs looked at him.

“You wake up from a coma that nobody thought you would come out of—”

“I was prayin’ for him. I knew Jesus wouldn’t let him down,” interjected the roommate.

The social worker continued, having had lots of practice ignoring crazy people, “—so I’d say you’ve got something worth living for. Something pretty important. Not the kind of thing you forget. Looks like somebody tried to kill you. You want to tell me anything about that?”

Hobbs stared at the social worker with his sunken eyes, dark circles and exhaustion adding 20 years to his already old and weathered face. He said, “Livin’? You come lay down in this bed and you tell me that the view doesn’t look like hell.”

The roommate piped up again. “Accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and ye need not fear even the Fires of Hell.” As he recited this verse from Imbeciles 21:13, spit flew from his lips with the words “fear” and “fires.”

Hobbs said, “See?”

He closed his eyes and heard the social worker say, “I can’t help you if you don’t help me. And the cops don’t want to help you at all.”

Hobbs fell asleep. The next time he woke up the social worker was gone.

Over the next week, a little of his strength returned. But when he used his wheelchair as a walker, he felt like someone had

smashed a pint glass and stitched it into his stomach.

“Easy friend,” said the roommate, taking his eyes off the TV to watch Hobbs struggle. “It’s a rest home after all.”

Every time Hobbs lay back down in the bed he was afraid he would never be able to get out again.

By the end of the second week, Hobbs felt well enough to reconnoiter. No cops had shown up to question him, and why should they? As far as they knew he was just another John Doe. A nobody. They didn’t know who he was, where he had been or what he had done. They’d gotten his prints, but that wouldn’t get them anywhere. Maybe they’d get a juvvie hit from California all those years ago, but that was under another name, and he doubted those prints would be in any computer. He marveled to think it, but that was the last time anybody had put the pinch on him.

By the time anybody got around to checking up on him, he would already be gone. The only thing in question was how.

Two

First, Hobbs tried to walk out. Glimpses out of the dirty windows revealed that he was on the 4th or 5th floor of whatever building he was in. The doors to the stairwells were locked and alarmed. But it didn't matter. He didn't think he could manage five flights of stairs in his condition.

The elevators were in the center of the floor, behind a door that the staff had to use keycards to get through. This was a minimum security prison for geriatrics. Hobbs was locked in here with the rest of the feeble, washed-out, discarded people. The coffee tasted like burnt piss. The food, regardless of the color, all had the same pasty texture and the same vague aftertaste of stale oatmeal.

He watched the security door from the cafeteria area for two days before he tried to make it through to the elevators. He was still using the wheelchair as a walker, but it was an act. He didn't feel whole, but he thought he could move without it. He hadn't tested how far, but he was certain he was getting better.

So when a white-haired female inmate stood up, pulled her shirt over her head and started screaming about "Secret Martian Niggers," coming to rape her, it was just the distraction he was looking for. The staff rushed to contain her, including the nurse from the front desk.

When she passed, Hobbs got up a little too quickly. There was a twinge in his stomach, and a sharp pain. He broke out in a sweat, but pressed on. One foot in front of the other, quick, but not looking like he was in a hurry. He walked directly to the nurses' station, without looking back.

Inside, he rifled through several of the drawers, looking for a magnetic pass-card but came up empty. Then he took a chance and leaned down to peer under the desk. As his head swam, he saw the well-worn button that opened the magnetic lock on the main door. He stood up again, and held on to the counter, as the floor pitched

underneath him. Maybe he had been too ambitious. Jesus Christ, bending over without passing out was an ambition now?

He stood there trying not to throw up. The underpaid, overworked Jamaican Nurse appeared in the doorway.

"What are you doin' in here?"

"I was scared." He said, shocked to find that it was true. He had never thought about getting old, well, maybe old, but never infirm. He was a little over 60 and had thought he had years before he needed to worry about being out of breath while climbing stairs, or about turning forgetful or anything like that. But here he was, surrounded by the walking dead, old before his time. Needing to save himself and unable.

He knew men didn't cry, but right now he had the urge.

"Don't let the crazy woman worry you none, Handsome," said the nurse, seeing the distress on Hobbs' face. "She just a mean ol' wo-man."

"You really a Martian?" Hobbs asked with a wan smile. She chuckled and shooed him away.

That night, after lights out, Hobbs got out of bed and opened the room door. He looked out into the hallway.

The roommate said, "Oh no, you don't want to do that. Mr. Ray is on tonight. You don't want to mess with Mr. Ray. He hurts you if you don't behave."

"Go back to sleep," said Hobbs.

"He that seeketh evil, it shall come unto him," said the roommate, adding, "Proverbs," as an apology and explanation all in one.

Hobbs thought, even when you don't seeketh, evil comes anyway.

Mr. Ray was a night nurse with something to prove. He liked to throw his weight around with the inmates, a bully of the worst kind, preying on the most defenseless. A lot of people in here weren't even lucid enough to remember that they should be afraid of him.

A few days ago Mr. Ray had introduced himself by coming down on Hobbs. Hobbs had been watching the shift change at the

end of the day, and shuffled into the nurses' station to get a cup of coffee.

"Yo, Grandpa. The hell you think you're doing?" Mr. Ray barked.

Hobbs didn't look at him. He knew that baiting this guy was a bad idea, but he didn't care. He'd been here too long and was going stir-crazy. Besides, what was this clown going to do? Inside, this bully nurse had to be a coward.

Hobbs grabbed a cup in a shaky hand, and poured some coffee. When he turned, he was faced with Mr. Ray, red-faced and sputtering. Hobbs took a sip and looked at him.

He saw the slap coming, but couldn't move fast enough to get out of the way. Mr. Ray's meaty palm slammed into Hobbs' ear and the side of his face. As Hobbs clung to the counter and struggled to keep his feet underneath him, the ringing started in his ears.

Mr. Ray looked down at where coffee was splattered on his scrubs. The wet stains called attention to the fact that the big man had been running to fat as if it was a race he meant to win. The pressure built inside Mr. Ray and his face grew redder. He leaned in to Hobbs and spoke quickly and softly. Hobbs turned his deaf ear to him, hoping that the ringing would drown out this guy's bullshit. It didn't.

"Old man, you know who I am? I am *Mister* Ray. You try that shit again, I will slap the wrinkles off of you. Now get back to your room while I am still in a charitable frame of mind."

Hobbs had to hold a hand to the wound in his leg to straighten up. To weak and shaky, he now added a sharp pain. With effort, Hobbs stood and looked Mr. Ray in the eye. The nurse was mad, but not mad enough. Not yet. Over his shoulder he saw the head nurse coming back from her rounds. Maybe this would be the play. Or, at least, the play before the play.

Hobbs spat in Mr. Ray's face.

It almost got Mr. Ray to pop. But he was a smart, institutional bully. He wiped the spit off his face just as the nurse supervisor said, "What's going on here?"

Mr. Ray turned around, sweet as a Valentine's Day card and said, "Mr. Doe has gotten a little confused, I was just taking him back to his room."

"This area is for staff only, Mr. Doe," the nurse supervisor said, in the same tone of voice she would use for a three-year-old. Hobbs nodded.

Mr. Ray took Hobbs' arm and guided him down the hallway. As soon as they were out of earshot, Mr. Ray whispered. "You're gonna pay for that, Grandpa."

"I don't have any kids."

"Shut your wrinkle hole. I'm gonna come for you, sometime in the middle of the night. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow night, maybe next week, but soon. I'm gonna fuckin' kill you, man. Sooner or later, maybe just slip a needle in your IV and give you a little something, something. Maybe just an air bubble the size of my dick, you know. Whatever it is, ain't nobody gonna care. You wouldn't be up in here if you had some people to care for you. Shit, nobody would. So who's gonna investigate me? Who's gonna care one ol' Cracka strokes out in the middle of the night?"

"Beside, don't nobody believe that John Doe bullshit. Wheeling you in here with a GSW in your gut and that withered up ol' leg. Who knows what bad shit you done? Maybe I be doing the world a favor. Maybe I be doing you a favor. Maybe the cops be the least of your worries, your former associates likewise, cause now you on the wrong side of Mr. Ray Ray."

As he spoke, Mr. Ray squeezed Hobbs' arm harder and harder. But when Mr. Ray looked for fear and pain on Hobbs' face, he could find none.

"Don't matter how tough you act. You know old people doze off, Grandpa? You gotta sleep sometime," Mr. Ray said, giving Hobbs a shove into his room that caused him to stagger and grab for the railing on the wall.

Mr. Ray raised his voice so it would carry all the way back to the nurses' station. "You sleep tight, Mr. Doe."

Hobbs staggered into the bathroom and closed the door. He

lowered himself onto the toilet riser, an industrial steel and plastic contraption that lifted the toilet seat to a height that the infirm could more easily manage. It was old and yellowed and cracked. The plastic screeched under his weight as he sat down.

Hobbs sat there for a moment, catching his breath, then he stood and dropped his pants. He checked the puckered scars to the right of his belly button and on the front of his left thigh. The doctors had said the leg wound was lucky. The bullet had gone in, grazed the bone and passed through. Lucky? He felt like someone had filled his hip joint with cold sand. And he was weak, so weak. He sat on the toilet again. He cursed as the plastic moved and pinched his ass. A millimeter of skin caught in a tiny crack on the side of the seat hurt so badly that it brought tears to his eyes.

Was this to be the end of it? The end of him? Was this the way he went out? It had all been in his hands and that bitch had taken it away from him. From all of them.

He reached down and grabbed the side of the aged plastic. With all the strength he could muster, he pulled up. He groaned, he strained, then, with a crack, a long, sharp piece of plastic came free. He put the point against the wall and pressed. It bent, but didn't break.

When he climbed back into bed, the roommate said, "I warned you not to mess with Mr. Ray."

Three

Four hours later, he heard a faint jingling of keys. Mr. Ray was coming down the hallway. The man's comfortable shoes made no sound, but the keys on his belt loop, softly clinking together, made just enough noise to give him away.

Hobbs had lain in his bed patiently, waiting like a professional does. Not waiting for something to happen, not even wanting something to happen, just watching and listening for what did happen.

Hobbs looked over and saw the wide eyes of the roommate looking at him. Hobbs said, "Turn the other cheek. Pretend to be asleep." The roommate did not look away. Suit yourself, thought Hobbs. He heard Mr. Ray shutting the door of the room and trying to be quiet about it. Hobbs closed his eyes.

This was the hard part.

He heard the footsteps grow closer to the bed and fought a battle not to flinch from an imagined blow he couldn't see. Hobbs needed the man close. Even though Mr. Ray was a fat, greasy shit, Hobbs was in no condition to run him down. He'd get one shot. If he could get him close.

He smelled bad cologne, and felt the man's breath in his ear as he said, "I can kill you whenever I please, but not today."

Hobbs opened his eyes.

Mr. Ray said, "Yeah, that's right..."

Hobbs turned quickly in the bed and drove the plastic into Mr. Ray's kidney. Ray's face, an inch from his, lost all color. His mouth made a large, round circle but no sound escaped. Mr. Ray tried to breathe in and failed. He clawed at the side of the bed and then collapsed in a heap along the wall.

Hobbs threw the bedclothes to the other side, and regained his feet.

"You're going to hell," whispered the roommate.

Hobbs snapped the keycard off Mr. Ray's belt with a brutal jerk. "Not tonight."

The roommate looked at Hobbs with wide eyes and shook his jowls as if the momentum could make the whole thing a bad dream. Hobbs knew that the roommate was going to scream before the fat man realized it himself. Hobbs rolled across his bed, and staggered to his feet. The roommate sucked in air to scream. Hobbs got to him before he could let it out.

Mr. Ray's scrubs were too big for Hobbs. He cuffed the pants, and tucked the shirt in as best he could. He tore his hospital gown in half and stuffed half into each of the nurse's shoes. They were uncomfortable, but they stayed on his feet.

Hobbs walked calmly past the nurses' station without looking. The trick to doing something wrong and getting away with it, was to do it like you did it all the time. Hobbs flashed the card at the sensor and pushed through the doors into the elevator lobby. He pressed the button and looked around as though he was bored. Only then did he risk a glance at the nurses' station. It was empty.

In the parking lot, he found Mr. Ray's car by walking around and clicking the key fob until he heard a chirp. It was a beat-up Pontiac Firebird with an aftermarket alarm system and a plastic scrotum and balls dangling from the rear bumper. Big nuts with nothing to back them up. Hobbs thought that summed up Mr. Ray's life in a nutshell. And then he never thought of him again.

The majority of the cars in the lot had North Carolina license plates on them. He had made it that far north? He was tougher than he thought. Tougher than he felt for sure. He really didn't remember much of the end of it. Inside the car he checked Mr. Ray's wallet and saw that his address was indeed Charlotte, NC. It had been years, nearly 30, since he had been here. And he didn't remember much about that either. Just a payroll job at a mill on the North End of town that he had bailed out of when it had gone wrong.

He smiled. Maybe that job could come to something good after all these years. A plan began to take shape in his head. He felt weak, but good. He went through the glove box and checked under and

behind the seats. No firearms. No cellphone. All clear. He had \$120 in cash from Mr. Ray's wallet and he figured he had until morning, if his luck held, before word was out on the Firebird.

Cameras would make him leaving the nasty, five-story Brutalist building he had just escaped from. Rest home? Hobbs snorted. He turned the engine and the headlights leapt across the badly kept lawn. That was a prison. A slow motion death row with no appeals. Better to be hunted than to be caged.

Four

Detective Mazerick looked at the crime scene and couldn't stop chuckling. The nursing home administrator hovered outside the door and shot Mazerick a dirty look every time he snickered, but Mazerick couldn't stop himself. And why should he care about that dink? He didn't know what it was like to be murder police. He especially didn't know what it was like to have your partner catch it. Not from a shootout or cancer or any dramatic T.V. bullshit like that. Nope, just running a red light while drunk and getting T-boned by a Caddy.

All well and good for Jimson, his troubles had come to an end. Mazerick was the one who was left behind, still holding down a full case load, one man doing the work of two until a suitable replacement could be found. He was buried in the grind of a job that would burn people out with an ordinary case load. So Mazerick took his yuks where he could get them. And *this*? This was *funny*.

He chuckled again and heard the administrator sigh with exasperation. That made him chuckle some more. It was a grim sense of humor that kept you going in this job.

He sucked his teeth and asked the uniformed cop at the door, "You ever hear of anybody breaking out of a rest home before?"

The cop shook his head.

"Can you blame him?" Mazerick asked.

The cop shook his head again.

"You ever want to make detective?" Mazerick asked. The Uniform, a young kid with a shaved head, nodded. Of course he did. "Then step in here and help me talk this through."

The Uniform asked, "What happened to your partner?"

"See that, a natural detective — he had an accident. I just need somebody to talk at, so, you know... shut up. Okay, so Mr. Doe, former occupant of this bed, is brought here in a coma, three weeks ago. Severely dehydrated, two gunshot wounds, a concussion, and

injuries consistent with a,” here he flipped open the file and read, “vigorous physical beating.”

“Who’d he piss off?” asked the Uniform.

“Whom, had to be multiple guys — the GSWs were already treated when he was picked up... behind a dumpster behind a Bojangles on S. Tryon.”

“Who is a plural.”

“What?” said Mazerick, looking up from the file.

“Who or whom doesn’t make a difference.”

“Seriously, you’re correcting my grammar? That’s just obnoxious. It’s not going to help you rise in the ranks, that’s for sure.” He turned back to the empty bed. “So our guy, who is evidently popular with a range of unknown persons, wakes up from his coma, takes a few days to get his legs under him. Then kills a nurse and escapes.”

“What about the guy in the other bed?” the Uniform asked.

“I questioned him downstairs in the clinic. But it’s a pain-in-the-ass to get information out of a guy with a broken jaw. Says he saw the guy kill the nurse, but other than that he doesn’t know anything. Except that Mr. Doe was the devil and he was most certainly going to hell.”

“Why doesn’t Mr. Doe just walk out?” asked the Uniform.

“Good question, wrong question, but a good question. He doesn’t just walk out because they won’t let him. But the better question is, why doesn’t he just stay?”

“What?”

“Kick back, enjoy the Ensure, rest and heal. Why is he in such a hurry?”

Mazerick looked at the room again to give the Uniform time to figure it out.

“Somebody was after him!” said the Uniform.

“That’s one,” said Mazerick, “What’s the other one?” This time Mazerick waited so long, he ran out of patience. So he answered his own question, “Or he was after somebody or something and was worried about running out of time,” said Mazerick.

“He could just be angry,” offered the Uniform.

Mazerick squinted and waggled his open hand side to side, “Kinda weak.”

“So who is this old boy?”

“Yeah,” said Mazerick, “That’s the thing. Who is this guy? And right now we don’t know. And we’ve got no way of knowing. All we got is a stolen car maybe six hours old, some prints that don’t match anything, some pictures and some shitty surveillance cam footage. Unless he’s stupid and we catch him, we may never know who he is or what he wants.”

A female voice from the doorway said, “I know who he is.”

Mazerick and the Uniform turned to see a woman in a dark blue suit. Mazerick immediately thought, *naughty librarian*. And a split second after, he thought, *there goes that sensitivity training the city paid for*. Screw them, this lady was one of those suits that managed to turn the line between professional and sexy into a demilitarized zone — a place where you knew action should happen, but if it ever did, that meant the shit sure had hit the fan.

Thick dark hair, white blouse, straining to hold its contents in, dark red nail polish and, at the very end, the badge and ID wallet that read ‘FBI.’ He tried not to let his biological reaction show, that was just a sure way to piss off a broad like this. And he had an overwhelming urge to try and make her happy.

“Great,” said Mazerick, “but who are you?”

“Special Agent Wellsley, FBI,” she said. Mazerick loved the way she pronounced all three syllables. F. B. I., her upper teeth pinning her lower lip as she enunciated the F.

“FBI,” joked Mazerick, “You gonna take over this domestic rest home terrorist case? Snatch this nurse-murder from my plate.”

“Actually,” Agent Wellsley said, displaying a humility that Mazerick did not expect from an FBI agent, “I was hoping for a little co-operation.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Mazerick, “but by the time I’m done, we’ll probably have him in the bag. He’s a feeble old man, we got the car he’s driving, he doesn’t have any credit cards. He’s gonna leave a trail like he’s dropping glowing breadcrumbs.”

“I hope you’re right, Detective...”

“Mazerick, Ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” asked Wellsley, playing at being offended.

“Eh, sorry, I moved down here from New York a few years back, it just kinda rubbed off.”

Agent Wellsley smiled. Mazerick liked it.

Five

Hobbs had started north on little more than instinct. When he saw signs for the interstate, he jumped on the superslab. It was forty-five minutes of drone and wind before he saw what he was looking for. It came in the form of a train station. At 4:45 am he pulled into the Amtrak parking lot in Salisbury, North Carolina. He eased the Firebird into a spot in the back and killed the engine. There weren't many lights in the lot, and back here the illumination came from a couple of old-fashioned frosted globe streetlights with a tree growing around them. Hobbs sat in the darkness until his eyes adjusted to the light.

He had to fight off the urge to sleep. He knew he sorely needed it. But he needed to make one more move before he could rest for a while. Still, he felt fatigue pulling him down. When one eye drooped he snapped upright in his seat, asking himself, "You want to rest in jail?"

He scanned the lot until he found something that would work. Four spots over, an ancient, but well-loved pickup truck. Ancient, thought Hobbs. He remembered when that model was new. It was back when he was new. He reached up and clawed the plastic dome off the Firebird's cabin light. Then he pulled out the bulb so he wouldn't call attention to himself or ruin his night vision when he opened the door.

He got out of the car and groaned with the effort of unfolding. He stepped into the landscaped median that separated the rows of parking spaces. He stood motionless in the shadows. The only thing he could hear in this town was his breathing. Then he heard the stoplight change on Main Street.

He saw a light play across the store fronts on the far side of the street. Then he fell down. He had meant to kneel gently by one of the trees, but there was a pain and his leg gave out. He heard something crack and hoped it was just one of his old joints.

It was bad to move fast. The eye is attracted to fast-moving things, especially in low light. Nothing for it now. So he lay on the ground and watched the police car glide past. Was he looking for something in particular? Couldn't be. Sure they had to have him on cameras, but had they gotten the word out that fast? He was sixty miles away. They couldn't have gotten the word out that fast. But, as Hobbs had slowed and aged, there seemed to be no limit on how fast everything around him could become.

The police car disappeared at the far end of the street. Hobbs decided the cop was just bored and on a regular patrol.

He got up slowly and it hurt. He limped to the old truck and tried the driver's side door. Locked. Then he pressed his hand against the window and slid it down. Old truck meant old parts. Old parts meant sometimes that trick would work. But not tonight. Then he tried the triangular little window at the front of the door, but it didn't budge either.

Hobbs worked his way around to the passenger side, stopping to feel the top of each tire and the well under the rear bumper. He came up empty, but then he tried the window trick on the passenger window, and it slid down about three inches. He worked his hand and arm in the door, then pulled up on the lock mechanism. The door was well-greased and opened without a sound. Somebody was going to miss this truck.

He switched off the interior light and waited. He thought he heard something, so he pulled his head out of the pickup and listened for a long time. A sharp pain went through his skull, reminding him that he was tired, too tired. There wasn't even wind. The air on this hot southern night just hung in place and sweated.

He reached underneath the dash and made a sharp jerk. He came up with three wires. He squinted at them for a second, but couldn't make the color. He stripped them, one at a time, with his teeth, making sure not to ground himself against any of the metal in the mostly metal cab. After everything he'd been through, there was no need to take 12 volts in the mouth. When he had them stripped, he cupped the overhead light and turned it back on. He only needed

a sliver to see which wire was which.

He slid in behind the wheel and closed the passenger side door behind him quietly. He wondered, wait for the cop to pass again, or chance it? Better to be active than passive. Besides, if he were that cop he'd be asleep somewhere by now.

Before he touched the wires together, he felt around and found the manual choke knob. It wouldn't need much on a hot night like tonight, but a little wouldn't hurt. He pulled it out halfway. Then he twisted the red and the blue wires together. When he touched the black to them, the engine sputtered and tried to start. He gave it a little gas and the good old truck turned right over and purred.

He dropped the column shift into place, and eased it out of the lot. There was a lot of life left in this old truck, and for the first time since he'd woken up in that rest home, he felt some hope for the future.

As he merged onto I-85 again, this time headed south, he flipped open the triangular window in the front of the door and let the air rush across him. He chuckled an evil, phlegmy, old man chuckle. Yeah, he thought, a nap and a couple more good moves, and he'd be back on the right side of this thing.

Six

It took Mazerick and Wellsley less than 24 hours to find the dead nurse's Firebird. By the time the two of them were looking through the video surveillance footage from the Amtrak station in Salisbury, NC, Wellsley had learned more about Detective Mazerick than she had ever wanted to know.

She had had to tell him about her partner. Not the whole truth about Barry, of course. But enough to explain why she was in a rental car. Why she was on "administrative leave". Why she didn't have the full might of the FBI behind her. She put tears in her eyes when she told him the part about working the case on her own because she needed to redeem herself. Because she needed to make it right for her dead partner.

The flabby fuck ate it up with a spoon. Jesus Christ, thought Wellsley, between the time *Sleeping Beauty* had been written and the present day, not a damn thing had changed. Not one damn thing. She didn't let the anger show. And wasn't that the best kind of feminism — making all this bullshit work for you? She wasn't going to waste too much time thinking about it. There was more at stake here than some transplanted prick from New York.

She knew everything she needed to know about Mazerick when he picked her up in the hotel lobby. At the rest home, he had been wearing a wedding ring. As they headed north, he wasn't. The guy had no idea he was a caricature of himself. Means to an end, she kept telling herself, he's a means to an end.

They set up in a back office of the train station where the security footage was located. On the monitor, they had playback — agonizingly slow even at double speed — of the main lobby camera. A tech with a ratty neckbeard was copying the video surveillance drives to a laptop.

"So," said Mazerick, managing to piss her off with a single syllable, "First train was 7:43, Northbound Carolinian. Nobody

matching his description bought a ticket. I got techs watching the footage, but I'm betting he didn't get on the train. So why was he here?"

"Do we have footage of the parking lot?"

"Not IR, too dark to see anything," said the shaggy tech.

"What about the afternoon before?"

"What do you mean, the afternoon before? You mean before he escaped?" asked Mazerick.

"Yes," said Wellsley. "Can you bring it up?"

The tech shrugged. Of course he could bring it up. Was he not an elder of the neckbeard tribe? One of the elite whom computers feared and recognized as their master? A few keystrokes and a window popped up. On the screen they saw a parking lot shimmering in the heat of a hot July day. A yellow dog, tongue hanging out, trotted from one shadow to another, knowing enough not to directly cross the expanse of blacktop.

"Pause it," said Wellsley, her voice stern. She looked at the frozen image for a moment.

"You know that dog?" Mazerick joked.

She left the room.

"Where's she going?" Mazerick asked the neckbeard. The tech answered with a jowly shrug. "She's pretty hot, though, right?" Mazerick asked.

Without looking up, the neckbeard said, "She's gonna put your nuts in a vice."

"Rowr," said Mazerick.

"That's not a good thing," the neckbeard muttered. He turned his attention back to the computers. He liked them better anyway. They were productive and reasonable.

Wellsley came back into the room and scrutinized the picture again.

"Special Agent," said Mazerick, "Would you mind cluing the rest of us mere mortals in?"

She pointed to an old, powder blue F-100 pickup truck on the screen. "I think he stole that truck."

“Hey, don’t touch the screen,” the tech said, defensive of his equipment.

“I want you to watch the footage for the truck. Tell me when somebody drives it off.”

“So he drove all the way up here, to a train station, to steal a truck?” asked Mazerick.

“That’s right. Long-term airport parking lots used to be the best place for this kind of thing. Vehicles won’t be reported stolen for a while. He’s buying time.”

“Well, at least now we know he’s headed north,” said Mazerick.

Seven

He parked the truck behind a church and slept for a while. By 9:30, the heat of the day woke him. He was dry and hungry and his joints didn't want to move.

He stopped at an old convenience store and got coffee, water, a map and a vile-tasting, microwaved breakfast sandwich. It was a mom and pop place in a bad neighborhood. It had once sold gas, but the pumps had been removed. The place did a brisk trade in lottery tickets and the holy trinity of the convenience store trade: condoms, smokes, beer.

As he laid the map on the counter, the light brown clerk spoke, in a sing-song accent, "Map? You don't have a smartphone?"

Hobbs just shook his head and kept it turned away from the camera behind the Plexiglas shield. "No, too smart for me."

Back in the truck he looked at the map and ate the sandwich. He wondered if it would still be there. Only one way to find out. He started the truck. Its throaty, big engined rumble was reassuring. He would be sad to part with it.

The neighborhood he was looking for had changed since the last time Hobbs had been there. After ripping off that textile mill payroll, he had never wanted to see this place again. Now that he had come back, he realized that nobody ever would.

The city had flourished, and this neighborhood of run-down mill houses on the North side of a booming city center had been gentrified. The mills here had been converted to high-end apartments. The theatre that had showed porn now booked bluegrass acts. The warehouse had been converted into a pizza joint. The artists who had moved in for the cheap living had painted the drab houses all kinds of crazy colors, then sold them to Yuppies, the kind of people who had to buy their cool at full retail. Later these Yuppies had knocked the colorful houses down and built new ones on top of the ruins. It was now a neighborhood of people who went antiquing.

It made Hobbs feel like an antique.

The house he was looking for was still there. It had been a shotgun shack. Now it was a two-story shotgun shack, with big windows and a fresh coat of lavender paint. He didn't need to go inside to know that the place had granite countertops.

He parked the truck down the street in the shade and watched the house. A guy came out on the front porch with a phone and a laptop. He spent a lot of time on the phone and he talked with his hands.

After two hours of this, Hobbs realized this guy wasn't going to leave. In the old days, he would have waited it out. Patience was a heister's best tool. The heavier the hit, the more of it you needed. But he had lost too much time, they'd make this truck sooner or later. As if to make the point, he saw a patrol car sliding along underneath the shadows of the oak trees the next street over. Always a cop when you didn't need one.

He stepped out of the Ford and shut the door behind him. On the porch the Yuppie was shifting his attention back and forth between the smartphone and the laptop screen, typing on one, texting on the other. Hobbs' legs shook as he walked. He told himself he was just playing the part of a frail old man.

The Yuppie didn't even look up until Hobbs was on the porch, and then, he held up a finger as if to say, "lemme just finish typing this." Hobbs said, "My truck broke down, and I'd like to use your phone to call a..."

The Yuppie looked up, evaluated the person he saw in front of him, and then an expression of concern crossed his face. "Of course," he said. Hobbs realized his mistake even as the Yuppie swiped the code on his smartphone. He handed it to Hobbs. Hobbs just stared at it. "Do you, uh, know how to use that?" the Yuppie asked.

Fuck it. "I don't really need your phone." That got the Yuppie's attention, but he wasn't yet afraid. Hobbs had been physically threatening all his life, so he wasn't sure how to play it when he wasn't. It was hard to grow old and learn new ways to do the old, old things. Maybe that's why people retired?

"I'll tell you the truth. My bladder is the size of a walnut. And I gotta take a leak, or I'm gonna whiz in my truck over there. So, I was wondering," he said, putting all of his limited acting skills into it. "If I could use your head."

The Yuppie's frown faded away into an understanding smile. "Same thing happened to my grandfather, towards the end. You should have heard him complain about it on fishing trips. C'mon inside," he said, leading the way.

Hobbs let him get in the door, then he dropped the heel of his fist into the back of the Yuppie's neck. It was a good shot, and the Yup dropped like a sack. Looking at him in a heap on the ground, Hobbs didn't feel so old and worn out. Then he realized that his bladder really was small, and he really did have to pee.

After, in the bathroom, he splashed water on his face and neck. When he was done patting his face down with a towel, he looked at it in the mirror and realized that, for some reason, the vain, unconscious fucker who owned this house had put up facing mirrors. So you could see all of yourself, and infinity, if you looked the right way.

He saw the number eleven on the back of his neck. The two tendons, standing up away from the skin and the muscle. He had known more than one old hard case who said that the when the eleven came up, a man was done for. He had known a jugger, a safecracker, one of the best he had ever worked with, who, when the eleven appeared on the back of his neck, was all washed up. Nerve gone, confidence shot, not worth a damn to anybody. If that jugger had been an animal, he would have had the sense to lie down and die.

He looked at his tendons. Maybe he was done for. Maybe he wasn't. Didn't matter. He needed to keep moving. Revenge didn't care what age you were. He'd roll a wheelchair to the ends of the Earth to get his revenge, strangle somebody with a colostomy bag if he had to. He promised himself, then and there, whatever happened to his flesh, his will would stay strong. Even as he did, he knew, somewhere, death was laughing at him.

Done with this foolishness, he stepped out of the bathroom and started looking for the cellar stairs. In the old layout, there had been stairs going down, but they had been removed. There'd still be some kind of access outside. Maybe the same door he'd used all those years ago.

Then he heard a noise behind him and realized his mistake. Was it the Curse of the Eleven?

He turned and saw the Yuppie struggling to stay on his feet in the middle of his own living room. When he saw Hobbs looking at him, the Yup said, "Old man, you fucked up now," like he was trying to sound like a movie. The play was to stay quiet, and not give Hobbs any sign. The Yuppie charged low, like a guy who had wrestled in high school, or an idiot.

Hobbs kned him under the chin. If Hobbs had been whole, the knee would have taken the guy out. But when Hobbs raised his good leg, the bad one gave out. His heel rolled like a hinge full of broken glass and they crashed to the floor together.

The Yup was expecting this even less than Hobbs. He tripped over Hobbs and put his head and part of his arm through the drywall. He fought his way free and dived on Hobbs.

"Fuckyoufuckyoufuckyou" he repeated as if it was some kind of blasphemous mantra. But he wasn't serious about the fucking. He punched ineffectually at Hobbs' ribs in a way that suggested hitting a man in the face was somehow impolite.

Hobbs didn't have this problem. He clawed at the Yup's face, trying to catch an eye socket and a lip in the same motion. He got the fishhook and with a grunt that was more annoyance than effort, threw the Yup off and into the butt-end of the sofa.

Hobbs tried to stand, but his ankle wasn't having any of it. He clawed his way up a book case, but at an altitude of three feet, the pain was waiting for him. The left side of his body went hot, then numb. All of the drive went out of his legs. As he collapsed back to the floor, he managed to grab a terra cotta statue of the Buddha from a book shelf. He and the Buddha crashed to the floor together. One of them shattered.

The Yup redoubled his attack, this time grabbing Hobbs' neck with both of his dainty hands. The Yup squeezed for all he was worth, which wasn't much. In his younger days, Hobbs would have laughed it off. Or maybe taken a nap. Waited for this man to wear himself out with his ineffectual choke. But now, this guy's "not much" was more than enough to do him in. Hobbs heard the roaring in his ears. He saw bright flecks off to the side of his vision. He tried to roll, but could not.

The yuppie gave a howl that he must have thought was terrifying and barbaric. To Hobbs it sounded like a kitten being strangled. Even as he blacked out, he couldn't believe that this jackass was going to choke him out.

"No," Hobbs croaked.

"Yeah, yeah!" said the Yup, who had finally gotten the idea to bang Hobbs' head against the floorboards. "Nobody comes into my house. You understand?" He stopped banging Hobbs' head against the floor so he could ask again, "You understand?"

Holy Shit, thought Hobbs, he wants an answer. He said nothing, but his right hand scrabbled in the fully and completely awakened shards of the Buddha on the floor next to him. His hand closed on a likely piece just as the Yup shrieked, "Hunh, who's the man now!"

With what was left of his failing strength, Hobbs jammed the shard of pottery deep into the yuppie's neck. The Yup said, "ow," like he didn't quite understand the whole thing. Then Hobbs pulled the shard towards him, ripping through muscle, tendon and artery alike. Blood sprayed across the refinished wooden floor. Choking on his fear, the yuppie clamped his hand to his neck, but it was no good. Instead of spurting out sideways, the hot yuppie juice shot up and down.

The Yup tried to stand but only stumbled backwards three steps. Before Hobbs passed out, the last thing he saw was the man falling backwards, bleeding out, into his own bathroom.

Eight

Hobbs woke up coughing. There was a raw patch in his throat where the yuppie had tried to choke him. He struggled to his feet and checked the window.

Outside he saw a cop peering in the window of the old truck, his cruiser parked behind it. He saw the cop trigger the radio mic on his vest and say something. Yeah, he'd been made. And here he was in the slaughterhouse, covered in blood. This was bad.

A sharp pain flashed through his head, followed by a wave of exhaustion. He felt that urge that men fighting fires on sinking ships knew, that siren song that only men making last stands could hear. Let it be over. Just lie down and die. Go to your rest and who cares what your "reward" is? Men who were so hopeless and exhausted that they'd trade in all of their tomorrows for a few minutes of peace and an eternity of black silence.

The older you got, the fewer tomorrows you had to trade and the better the deal began to look.

He shook it off. With effort he dragged himself into the bedroom. He stripped down, and once again put on somebody else's clothes. These fit a little better. A white button-down shirt and a pair of grey wool pants. The yuppie's feet were too small for him. Still he was shoeless, like a metaphor for a dead man in an artsy picture.

He found a ball cap with a golf logo on it and slipped it over his head. He used the man's sheet to wipe some of the blood off his face. He thought about going into the bathroom to clean up, but he didn't want to face that idiot's husk.

Mostly he was pissed at himself. It was Hobbs' fault that he had had to kill the Yup. If he had done it right at first, none of it would have been necessary. It was sloppy, fucking sloppy.

He checked the front window again. The cop was sitting in his car, typing away on a laptop. Lucky, thought Hobbs, he's waiting for

backup. Trusting to the technology. In the old days, that cop would have been knocking on doors and peering through windows. But more cops were on the way. That was the problem with cops, there were always more of them.

Hobbs moved as quickly as he could. Out the back door, down the steps. The back yard was different. Twenty years ago, there had been a creek back here. He had crawled along it, dragging a bag of money as cops swarmed around the mill a mile away and braced his idiot partner who had scotched the play.

All those years ago, he had slipped into the basement of this house and hid for two days. He got by without food and what little bit of water he could sneak from the tub of the old style, wringer washing machine tub. When he had left, he had stolen a set of work clothes — little more than rags — and stashed the payroll in a hole he dug in the foundation. He had replaced the bricks and had hoped for the best. Then he had slipped into that stinking little creek — nothing more than a community piss-rivulet — and followed it until he'd come to a train track.

Hobbs had hopped a slow-moving train and was grateful to have gotten out clean.

Money left behind like this was known as a spike, cash you stashed in a place that couldn't be traced to you. They were good to have. Even if you put money in a safe deposit box, or hotel safe, it was linked to some identity. If that identity got burned, then it wasn't safe to go back. Ever. So, throughout his career, Hobbs had hammered spikes in case he needed them.

Not many of them were left now. He'd never gotten back around to this one. After he had gotten clear of that payroll job, he had hit a good streak and hadn't needed money. When you are rolling in it, you don't want to crawl into a musty basement, or remember the taste of soap flakes in stale water if you don't have to.

Was it still there? Had it been noticed in the renovations? Maybe some home inspector had quietly pocketed it for himself? There was only one way to know, and he needed to be quick about it.

The door to the cellar had been replaced. The old one hadn't

had a lock on it, but this was a proper exterior door with a pattern of nine rectangular glass windows on the top. He rolled up the shirt sleeve around his elbow and gave the pane nearest the knob a pop. It didn't break when he hit it. It popped out of its mounting and landed on the floor. Hobbs reached through and switched the deadbolt.

The floor of the basement was still dirt. That was a good sign. As good of a sign as he was going to get on a shitty day like today. And the pane of glass hadn't broken. He was happy to spare his bare feet. He turned on the light and closed the door behind him. There was a whiff of gasoline from a push mower, but underneath it all, it was the same musty scent that haunted him from all those years ago. His lungs hurt as he pushed into the darkness.

This dank space didn't extend the whole length of the house. Twenty-five feet or so in there was a block wall. With effort, he crawled over that, into a crawl space maybe three feet tall. The space was thick with cobwebs and the dried husks of spider crickets. He had remembered those things crawling on him in the night, pale and bulbous, nothing like the small, dark, somehow reassuring crickets he had grown up with.

He felt around the base of the retaining wall, feeling for the stone he had placed there long ago. He shuddered a little as he thrust his hand into the darkness. He hadn't been a fearful man. What had changed?

It was still there. Old money in a canvas bank bag, the kind they didn't use anymore. As he pulled on the fabric, he heard it rip and felt the bundles of bills tumble into the dirt. He shoveled the money out with both hands, throwing it over the low wall into the basement space. As he hunched in the dust and mold spores, he felt something land on his neck. He clawed and crushed it and flung it into the darkness with a curse. He bent again and felt that the hole was empty. He took the time to replace the rock.

He gathered the scattered stacks of bills and found it was about \$12,000. Not much. Maybe enough. He looked out the window into the back yard. No cops yet. He hadn't heard anybody knocking at the door above, but it was only a matter of time. Sooner or later

that knock would come. A cop would waddle around the back of the house, shining his flashlight into the dirty window panes. See that one was missing. Hobbs shook off the fear and decided he was going to be a long way away when that happened.

He found an old backpack in the boxes and threw the money into it. Then he took a mountain bike that was hanging off the joists. Ah, yuppies. He scoffed at the helmet at first, but then realized it was perfect. He turned the baseball cap around backwards and slid the awkward hunk of plastic onto his head.

He wheeled the bike out and mounted it. The seat didn't have any padding. He felt his balls being separated and crushed, but when he pushed off and started pedaling, it didn't feel so bad. He managed not to fall over. He rode away from the house, deeper into the neighborhood. Ahead of him, another cop car turned onto the street and accelerated past him. Hobbs felt his nuts crawl up tighter against the hard bicycle seat, but he reached a hand out and waved to the officer anyway. Just a law-abiding citizen out for a bike ride.

The cop didn't even look at him. He must have been too excited about responding to the APB on the truck. Just wait 'til they found that dead Yuppie, thought Hobbs. That cop's hard-on will probably rip right through his tactical pants. Hobbs felt a pang of regret for killing the guy. Sure, the Yup was probably an asshole, but it was being sloppy that bothered Hobbs.

He shifted. The bike's gears ground and caught and carried him away.

Nine

He pedaled out of the neighborhood slowly, coasting more than anything else. When he was faced with a hill he had to get off the bike and lean on it, using it to limp his way along the sidewalk.

As he climbed the hill, he passed a mall with a parking lot that looked like it had been the target of strafing runs from a vengeful, far-eastern air force. The mall was occupied by the conquerors, every sign displaying a name rendered in strange squiggly characters. For a second, he thought he could read some of them, but that was from another life, long ago, and he put it from his mind.

He had a sack full of money on his back and there wasn't a thing he could buy. You might forget an old guy who paid for a pack of gum in cash, but an old guy in socks who buys a pair of shoes and counts out musty bills from an old backpack? You don't forget about that guy. Maybe not ever.

Hobbs pressed on, following the signs back towards the highway. The pain in his leg was worse now, and the exhaustion made his eyes twitch. He didn't know how much farther he could push it, but he wasn't going to stop just because it got hard. That was for the younger, weaker generations — or so he had thought. Until that kid came along.

A wave of emotion almost drove him to his knees. He hadn't thought of Alan since he had woken up. Hadn't thought of any of it, but all of it was driving him anyway. One foot then another, he pushed the bike to the top of the hill. Before he got there, he found some glass with his foot. This neighborhood was getting worse, much worse.

He cursed and sat on a bench to get the glass out of his foot. The sock soaked up blood. It didn't look too bad, but he had trouble standing on it anyway.

At the top of the hill, he got back onto the bike, nearly falling over, and started down the other side. Part of him, the old, weakened

part, wanted to fall asleep with the cool breeze of progress in his face and the droning lullaby of the spokes. He was so busy fighting it off, he rode right past what he needed.

"You lookin' for a good time baby?" the whore said, as if she had been on a motion-activated sensor. Hobbs wasn't looking for a good time, but he stopped anyway. He looked around, and spotted what he needed. An extended stay motel across the street from the tired whore.

Just like every hermit crab needed a shell, every whore needed a flop. That extended stay would be where she plied her trade. He leaned the bike up against a light pole and limped back to her.

She wasn't that old and she might have been pretty, once. But somebody had beat on her face one too many times. Her eyes were yellow against her chocolate skin and when she smiled and said, "Hey baby, you like to party?" she flashed a mouth of ragged teeth, some black, some eaten away from the gum line on up and the rest gone.

"Yeah," Hobbs said, pulling some cash from his pocket, "I like to party."

She looked at his feet and asked, "Somebody steal your shoes?"

He followed her back to the motel. It was four stories tall with exterior stairways and walkways for room access. She headed towards the stairs.

"Elevator," Hobbs said, trying to make it sound like a demand, but failing.

"Okay, baby. I'll make it nice and gentle," the whore said, "What's your name? I'm Shavonda."

"Elevator," said Hobbs.

"I ain't gonna call you elevator," she said, when she pushed the call button.

They rode up in silence. She tried to rub his shoulder, but Hobbs jerked it away and winced in pain.

"Okay, okay," Shavonda muttered.

She was in room 401. The room smelled like cheap air freshener. Below that was the musty funk of old, smoke-soaked carpet and

ceiling tiles. There was a king-sized bed and an old CRT television. It wasn't even bolted to the dresser it sat on. Its weight and age were its own security system. Probably cost more than it was worth to get somebody to carry it downstairs and throw it away.

Shavonda put a hand on her hip and cocked it to one side in an imitation of being sassy. "So what you want? You want me to suck you or fuck you or what? Gon cost extra you want any of that kinky shit, and I ain't gonna shit on you, no way. I gots standards," she said laughing at her own words as if she had said something funny. Maybe she had.

Hobbs stepped into the room and looked around. The door to the hallway had caught on a spot where the carpet had bubbled up. Shavonda shuffled past him to close it. She smelled awful. Body odor and a sick chemical reek that she had attempted to cover up with the cheapest of perfumes.

As Hobbs stared at the bed, he heard the door click shut behind him. He asked, "How much for the night? The whole night?"

"Ooh, you real lonely. You just get out of prison, baby?"

Hobbs threw a wad of cash at her and then sat down on the bed. "I need to sleep. There's more for you in the morning. Even more if you go buy me a pair of shoes — size 11." Hobbs wrapped his arms through the straps of the backpack and clutched it to his chest. He rolled over on his side and closed his eyes.

"Ooh, baby, don't you worry about me," the old-before-her-time whore cackled, "I be yo personal shopper."

Hobbs was already asleep.

Much later, he was awakened by a tearing sound. He opened his eyes, and saw the tip of a knife in his face.

"You just too old for the street life, you know what I'm sayin'? It ain't my fault. You shouldn't had been up in here in the first place. If it wasn't me, it done would have been somebody else," she said. "I just tryin' to get ahead, same as you."

She moved the knife down between his legs and held it there.

"Now you don't move. See, don't be thinking you gonna change your fate. I'm a old hoochie, and you, you just an old man got

robbed. Nothing gonna make you young again. Not one damn thing, you understand?"

Hobbs lay very still.

She flashed her hellish teeth in the imitation of a smile and backed out of the room, brandishing the knife.

Hobbs got up and walked over to the television. The door had gotten caught on the room carpet again, and he could hear the ragged clack of Shavonda's high heels in the distance. He embraced the television. With a grunt he lifted it free from the dresser. There was pain again, but this time it felt good. It felt right. Matched with what he needed to feel and what he needed to do.

He walked out of the room, cables and wires ripping out and trailing free behind him. He walked down the hallway, his feet making no sound in socks. A slight twinge of pain in his foot where the glass had gone in and come out.

He turned the corner and there she was, waiting for an elevator with a stupid look on her battered face.

"What the fuck?" she said, scrambling for her knife. She brandished it and said, "Hell no, Cracker I don't want that television. Go on before you get cut." She pressed the elevator button inanely, as if that would make the car come faster.

Hobbs lifted the television above his head.

"Get the fuck away from me old man. You got robbed, just deal with it. Call AARP or somebody who gives a fuck," she said as she backed into the stairwell. She kept the knife out in front of her as if it were a talisman, and backed down the stairs, not taking her eyes from him. He stood at the top of the open stairwell holding the old television above his head as if he was a participant in some kind of strange post-consumerist rite.

When she got to the landing, curiosity got the best of her. She looked up at him and had to ask, "What the fuck you gonna do with that television?"

Hobbs did not answer.

Hand on the railing, she edged her way around to the steps, eyes on Hobbs the whole time. She muttered, "My Money. Dis MY

money. Stolt it fair and square.” When her absurdly high heel rocked over the edge of the step, she caught herself with the railing and looked down.

Hobbs dropped the television.

She looked back up and saw it coming. She started down the stairs and almost got away. The TV caught her on the back of her ankle and she went down, bouncing and tumbling down the flight of stairs in a shower of broken glass and plastic.

Hobbs descended, carefully, one hand on the railing. At his age, he thought with a smile, it paid to be careful.

Shavonda was moaning and trying to clutch her head and the backpack full of money at the same time. It looked like she thought cash was the antidote to swelling. And why not? It was an antidote to everything else. And the cause of it.

Halfway down the flight, Hobbs stooped to pick up Shavonda’s knife. He rose and stepped carefully among the fragments of the shattered television, as if he had all the time in the world.

Through one, wild eye, peering out from beneath the bag and the mop of her hair, Shavonda saw him coming. She tried to get up, wobbled uncertainly and fell. She struggled to rise again.

Hobbs stuck the knife into her leg as if it was where it belonged. She moaned and tried to crawl away. Hobbs pulled the knife out and wiped it on her leg. Her blood looked like hydraulic fluid against her dark, sagging skin.

“Aw fuck man, you didn’t havta do that! Why you do that?”

“Stick to whoring, you’re no good at stealing.” She let go of the bag without a fight. He didn’t stab her again. It was almost civilized.

“You have a car?”

“Fuck you!”

He stabbed her in the leg again. This time she screamed for help. Hobbs hit her in the mouth with the fist that held the knife and managed not to fall over on top of her in the process.

She said, “Okay,” and spit a little blood out on the concrete. Hobbs looked up and down the stairs. Nothing moved, nobody cared. He had gotten lucky.

“Get up,” Hobbs said.

As Shavonda struggled to her feet, she reached out to Hobbs for a hand. When he didn’t help she said, “You ain’t nothing but a mean old man. That’s all you is. You mean old Cracka motherfucker!”

Hobbs was fine with that.

Back in the room, he cut the bedspread into strips. When she saw what was going on, she said, “Aw fuck no. No way.” Hobbs shrugged. Then he pressed the knife against her throat smooth and quick. He backed her up to the wall and when her head touched it, he hit her twice with his elbow. She went out.

He bound her and gagged her and threw her on the bed.

He picked up her bag, a wad of fabric that had once been decorated with sequins, but so many of them had fallen off that it now looked like it had been fashioned from a lizard with a skin disease. He found a foil packet with some powder in it and the keys to a Dodge. Old keys, with separate keys for the ignition and the trunk.

He took them and left.

Ten

It looked like a trunk key, but it was worse than a trunk key. It was a hatch key. In the lot, the whore's car stood out as the shittiest turd in the pile. A brown Dodge Omni with the rear bumper hanging half off. Hobbs thought there was no way the car was going to start. But it turned right over as if the future held hope.

The headliner was falling and the smell was so bad he rolled down the windows. Didn't matter much, it wasn't like the air conditioning worked. He drove until he found an expensive part of town. Big, old houses in a tree-lined neighborhood. He could smell the money. If he were a small-timer, he would have thought about knocking one of these off.

It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. It was a gigantic house in the style of a French Chateau. In the front yard, dwarfed by the expansive lawn and the size of the structure was a small blue real estate sign — For Sale.

He turned the next corner until he found what he was looking for. An alley in the back of all the houses. An overgrown remnant from a more civilized time. All these old Southern neighborhoods had them. Remnants of a time when it would have been unseemly to leave your trash in front of your house. When even the milkman knew that it was rude to use the front door when you came to fuck somebody else's wife. All deliveries to the rear.

He drove the car right over the saplings and scrub brush that had grown up in the disused alley. He parked the Omni and got out, leaving the keys in the visor.

He walked the rest of the way to the Chateau. When he peered through the slats in the gate, he couldn't see any sensors or cameras. He used the knife to jimmy the garden latch and let himself into the back yard. Somebody had spent a lot of money letting this yard go in the precise way that made it look like a French country garden. It was a riot of carefully overgrown vines and flowering plants and

pre-weathered antiques.

The sun, bright and hot, the crumbling plaster statues, the scattered wildflowers, all combined to make this yard seem like a ruined corner of some abandoned heaven. Hobbs didn't give it a second look. Heaven wasn't for him.

He headed for the three-car garage on the right side of the house. The door was unlocked. As his eyes adjusted to the cool darkness of the garage, his head spun. The emptiness and the faint smell of oil and gasoline made this room feel like the dead end of something. He put his hand on a wall and closed his eyes until the feeling passed.

The door into the house was locked, knob and deadbolt. Hobbs searched the garage. In an alcove he found garden tools and a potting bench and a rusted old mattock.

He swung the mattock until he'd made a head-sized hole in the wall beside the door. Then he reached through and unlocked the door. Before he opened it, he pressed his forehead to its cool surface and took three deep breaths. Hobbs was at the end of himself and he knew it. But he couldn't stop here. If he couldn't defeat the alarm...

He grabbed the knob in his left hand and held the mattock with his right. Then he opened and moved as fast as an old man with a limp could manage.

As soon as the door sensor opened, the security system began its urgent and ominous beeping. It led him right to the panel. He smiled at the twenty-year-old hunk of yellowing plastic. Then he hooked the blade of the mattock over the top edge of the panel and raked it off the wall. Bits of drywall rained down on the tile floor and the panel was left hanging by wires. Hobbs grabbed the wires and gave a yank. They led off to the left.

He threw open a coat closet, empty but for a few boxes, and found what he was looking for. A metal box mounted on the wall. He put the spike of the mattock right through the middle of the door. After a moment's struggle he got the box off of the wall. He dropped the mattock, cracking the tile, and took the box under his arm.

The beeping stopped, but Hobbs did not. With the mangled box under his arm, he searched until he found a bathroom. He raked the top off the toilet and dumped the box into the tank. The alarm well and truly defeated, he leaned against the wall and slid down onto the floor.

He sat there, panting, waiting for his heart to slow. He was safe, for now. He resisted the urge to sleep on the tile floor of the bathroom and went in search of a bed.

Eleven

"And then the son-of-a-bitch stabbed me in the leg wif my own knife and stole my money! Can you believe that shit?"

"Yes," said Mazerick, trying not to smile. His phone rang.

He answered, saying, "Hang on," and then stepped out of the room. That left Wellsley staring at the foul-mouthed, raggedy old whore in her hospital bed.

"You gonna catch that motherfucker, or what?" she asked.

"Ma'am, state and federal agencies are working to apprehend him right now," Wellsley said, on autopilot.

"You best better see I get my money back. Stacks and stacks of it. All I done saved during my life of hardship."

Stacks of money, thought Wellsley. Her heart leapt into her throat. But it couldn't be. He couldn't have gotten to it. Must have knocked somebody else off. Maybe that dead guy — but how did he know there would be cash there? That guy in the neighborhood had just been a civilian, a guy who flipped houses for a living.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Wellsley nodded. She let the autopilot drive. "Now this car, was there anything special about it, anything else of value that we should be on the lookout for?"

"That piece of shit never did run right. He ain't gonna get far in it, I promise you that. You let him keep it. Or you take it. I don't give a fuck."

Wellsley became concerned about the call going on in the hallway. She moved to the door and stuck her head out. Mazerick

was looking right at her with a curious expression on his face. He jumped a little when he saw her. *What did he know?*

Of course she hadn't told him the whole truth. What person ever really tells another person the whole truth? But never mind truth, Wellsley was worried about what was being whispered into his ear right now.

Mazerick covered the receiver and said to her, "Found the car." Then he asked the person on the other end of the phone, "and the rest of it?" Wellsley saw his eyes flick towards her and then away. The other thing was definitely about her. He covered the phone and said, "Hey, I gotta handle this, can you finish up with her and then we will roll."

He stepped back out into the hallway without waiting for her agreement. Typical male prick.

Wellsley looked back at Shavonda.

"You ain't got no more questions?" Shavonda demanded.

Wellsley shook her head.

"Well ain't you gonna go about catching this mans that did this to me? Or don't you care about one more black woman, more or less?"

Wellsley leaned in as close as she could stomach before she said, "Oh, I'm going to get him. But it's your own fault. If you're gonna steal from somebody, you do it right."

Shavonda's mouth hung open. "You ain't spoda do me like that!"

Wellsley said, "Sister, if you act like the weaker sex, you're gonna get treated that way."

In the hallway, Mazerick said, "Neighbor called it in. I've got patrol hanging back so we don't spook him. C'mon, Agent, I'm gonna show you the rich part of town."

Rich, thought Wellsley, letting the word reverberate in her brain. Rich. What really rich person would ever choose to live in this landlocked town, Wellsley wondered.

As he drove them to the scene, Mazerick let it fly. "I checked with a buddy of mine in the bureau."

Wellsley kept her eyes on the scenery sliding by, as she said, "Yeah."

"Yeah," said Mazerick. It was an old cop trick. Never ask until you knew the facts. The facts weren't what you wanted when you questioned somebody. What you wanted was the emotion, the reaction to the facts. Anybody could fake a fact. Almost nobody could fake an emotion. They could hide it or suppress it, but not fake it. So she just sighed, stared out the window and waited.

Mazerick broke first. "You want to tell me?"

"You say it."

"You've been suspended, removed from duty pending investigation. Why didn't you tell me that?"

She tried to get tears to come, but they wouldn't. Maybe she hated this guy too much. Maybe she just wasn't weak enough to cry anymore. So she turned and told the truth, eyes not wavering from Mazerick.

"I needed your help. And I thought, if I told you the truth, you wouldn't help me."

"Did you kill your partner?"

Wellsley got hot. "Yeah, I shot him dead. That's why I've come all this way to catch this bastard whose name I don't even know. It's not like this jackass killed my partner Barry and ruined my career. No, that's not what's driving me at all," she said, dripping with sarcasm.

"Easy, easy," said Mazerick, taking one hand off the wheel in a gesture of surrender. "Hold your fire. I'm not out to get you. I just like to know what I'm getting into. Especially when a pretty face tends to cloud my decision-making."

She looked back out the window to hide her eye roll. Fucking pig. The ugly side of the damsel in distress. It was all just a cover for taking advantage of a woman in a vulnerable situation. That old fairy tale was just a good-looking duvet on a thick comforter filled with centuries of rape.

"You seem like good people," he said, and put a hand on her knee. It was the kind of gesture a father might make, or an uncle.

Yeah, thought Wellsley, an uncle, the kind that liked to touch little girls when nobody else was around. She was proud of herself for not screaming. "I don't think any of my partners would have done this for me. Be lucky if any of those pricks showed up at my funeral. And if they did, it'd just be to bang my wife. So if they ask me, I don't know nothing."

She choked out the word, "Thanks."

When they found the car it barely qualified as hidden. As they drove by they could see the back of the ancient Dodge from the street. Mazerick pulled a U-turn and pulled up next to the patrol car.

"Haven't seen anything since we spotted it," said the cop.

"Thanks," said Mazerick. And to Wellsley, "You want to take a look?"

"Ladies first," said Wellsley.

Mazerick grinned.

As they approached the alley, Mazerick asked, "You got a piece?"

"No," she lied.

Mazerick stepped behind the fence and knelt. He pulled a wheel gun from his ankle holster. A hammerless, blued .38. He handed it to her low where the patrol cop couldn't see, saying, "It was my grandfather's. It's good luck."

No it's not, she thought.

"If you shoot somebody with it, we'll figure out a story," he said and winked with a leer.

She instantly thought of a story in which the man got a hold of Mazerick's backup piece and killed him with it. She ran it several ways quick in her head. Would it be better for the story if she said she got Mazerick's gun and killed the old man? Or would it be better if she said Mazerick got the shot off? It would depend on the scene, but it would be better if he got the shot off. The last act of a hero cop, killing the guy who shot him and saving her. Because, of course, she didn't have a weapon. She was on suspension. Yeah. That would be better. Make that damsel in distress shit work for you.

They each took a side of the overgrown dirt alley between the mansions. Guns out, stepping carefully, they advanced towards the car. Mazerick moved smooth and cautious. He wasn't great, thought Wellsley, but he was good, and, in contrast to his big mouth, he was careful.

The windows were rolled down. From opposite sides of the car they peeked in, guns first. Trash, and a terrible smell. On the back seat Wellsley saw an empty condom box.

She pointed to it with the tip of her weapon and said, "Classy."

Mazerick said, "Full-service."

Jesus, thought Wellsley. "So where'd he go?"

Mazerick looked around. "He holed up somewhere."

"Stole another car?"

"Has to be tired. He's an old man, and wounded," said Mazerick.

They walked around to the back of the car. As Mazerick peered through the dirty glass of the hatchback, Wellsley asked, "You wanna go a little further?"

Mazerick frowned.

She could see that he wanted to call for backup. That would fuck everything up. So Wellsley leaned in and kissed him hard. To keep the bile down, she thought about killing him. When she let him up for air, he was flushed and had a stupid look on his face. She could see that all the blood had rushed from one head to another, so she said, "He's an old man. Let's just go get him."

Mazerick smiled and nodded as if he was John Wayne. He was a dumbass, thought Wellsley. Just the dumbass she needed.

Twelve

Hobbs had crawled into the master bed and drawn the comforter around him like an animal. There were no sheets, but he was too tired to care.

When he awoke, he didn't open his eyes. He had slept so deeply that he couldn't feel his body. His thoughts drifted between waking and sleeping. Where was he? What did he have to do? And why?

As it came back to him in pieces, he had less and less desire to open his eyes. He wanted to sleep. To sleep forever. But he knew

that the growling in his stomach and the pressure on his bladder would force him to move sooner than he wanted.

How had it started? And now that it had started, how would it end? He thought of Grace, and her golden hair in the wind and the light off the lake. He thought of the wonder of having found her. He had told himself that he needed nothing and no one, so many times that he had almost believed it.

For an instant, he thought of seeing if there was a phone in this shell of a house. But he could not call her. He did not exist. And he could not be linked to Grace. Maybe a pay phone? To hear her voice again. To feel her soft touch and her silly whispers as they lay in bed in the early morning. He had always thought that these desires were weakness. But now, he drew strength from them.

He couldn't call. He couldn't go back. Not until it was done, one way or the other. And not until he was clear of it. When he got that money, what would Grace want to do? Could she even launder all of it?

He knew without having to ask her, as he knew the rhythm of her breathing while she slept and the spaces between her heartbeats as she lay still after they had made love. She wanted nothing else but the simple lake house and a life with him. But why was that not enough for him? Why was it that whenever he was with her, he wanted to be away? And whenever he was away, he wanted to be there?

He had been a fool not to be content with what he had. A more philosophic man would have seen a kind of justice in his predicament. Hobbs missed the irony, but recognized that he had taken a job he didn't need for more money than he could ever use. He just couldn't stop working. He was too old to do anything else. He had always believed that he was an old soldier who would die in the harness, come wind, come wrack. But now, during this pause in the action, he wondered if he could truly escape. If he could walk away, sidestep all of it. He recognized these thoughts as symptoms of weakness and fatigue, but he did want to talk to Grace. To tell her those things that he never had. To tell her that he was sorry that

he was the way he was. That he was undeserving of her. And that all he wanted to do was to come home.

But he would not be able to promise that when it was done, he would stay. That he would never work again. The call itself would only increase the chance of her being in danger. A stupid risk. By now she probably thought he was dead. What had it been – three months? Four? Theirs was a relationship out of time, as if from the days of sailing ships, one of long separations and happy reunions.

He had to see it through to the end. For Hobbs, there was no way out but through. Then he remembered how it had started. He had been shooting squirrels.

He heard a noise from downstairs and opened his eyes.