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FOOTSTEPS OF THE HAWK

ANDREW VACHSS

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VINTAGE CRIME/BLACK LIZARD

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for Baby Boy E...

You took Death all the way through the last round.

And got jobbed by the judges.

Again.

No more fixed fights for you, little warrior.

Now it's—finally—time to play.

Acclaim for ANDREW VACHSS

"Vachss is in the first rank of American crime writers."

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Vachss seems bottomlessly knowledgeable about the depth and variety of human twistedness."

—*The New York Times*

"Burke is an unlikely combination of Sherlock Holmes, Robin Hood, and Rambo, operating outside the law as he rights wrongs....Vachss has obviously seen just how unable the law is to protect children. And so, while Burke may be a vigilante, Vachss's stories don't feature pointless bloodshed. Instead, they burn with righteous rage and transfer a degree of that rage to the reader."

—*Washington Post Book World*

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"Burke fills a void....With his soiled white hat, this Lone Ranger of the '90s asks difficult questions of readers, while also shining a light into the darkest recesses of their souls."

—*Chicago Tribune*

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To Alan Grant
a volunteer in a war not his own
to free all the Children of the Secret

FOOTSTEPS OF THE HAWK

In my business, if you're the last one to a meet you could end up being left there when it's over.

I watched the refrigerator–white Range Rover work its way around the broken chunks of concrete dotting the asphalt that used to be a parking lot. Those luxu four–bys cost big bucks—I guessed Saunders had come into some serious money since the last time we did business. The big rig nosed forward, came to a halt at the start of the pier, then reversed so its rear end was backed against the abandoned building.

I trained the binoculars on the driver's door, watching the man get out. It was Saunders all right, dressed in a suburban safari outfit, right down to a pair of gleaming black boots. The passenger door opened. Another man. Medium height, with a face too chubby for his build, wearing a camo jacket and combat boots, eyes covered with mirror–lensed aviator sunglasses. I climbed down from my perch atop a heavy crossbeam using a rope ladder dyed black. As I moved closer to the door, the ladder merged into the shadows.

The mid–afternoon light was strong, fractured by the wreckage inside the abandoned warehouse—I could see all the way across the grimy Hudson to the Jersey waterfront. The door swung open and the stepped inside.

"Burke," Saunders said, offering his hand. "Long time no see."

"You said business," I told him.

"Same old Burke," he chuckled, dropping his hand...but keeping it in view. "This is the guy I told you about. Roger Cline."

"That's Cline like Patsy, not Klein like Jew," the guy said, smiling with his mouth, his eyes invisible behind the mirror lenses. "Saunders here tell you what we need?"

"Yeah," I told the man. "Ordnance."

"*Heavy* ordnance, my friend," he said. "Can you do it?"

"Sure," I told him. It was the truth—with all the military base closings, it's easy enough these days

"What we need is—"

"You ever do time?" I interrupted.

"Huh?"

"You ever do time?" I repeated, watching my reflection in the mirror lenses.

The man turned his head slightly to his right, looking for an ally, but Saunders only shrugged, shifting his weight slightly to his outside foot, letting his body language tell the story.

The man turned back to me. "Yeah, I pulled some time," he said, a hostile undercurrent to his reedy voice. "So what?" He pulled off the sunglasses and glared at me all in the same motion—I guess it had worked better when he'd practiced it at home.

"Not so what," I told him. "*For* what?"

"What's it to you?" he asked.

"I like to know who I'm dealing with," I told him in a reasonable voice.

"Hey, I ain't asking your daughter for a date, man."

"Suit yourself," I said.

He was quiet for about fifteen seconds, still trying to stare me down—good fucking luck. Then he ran a palm over his close-cropped brown hair, bit into his lower lip for a split-second, said, "Armed robbery."

I nodded as if I was absorbing the information. "You go down alone?" I asked him.

"Huh?"

"When you went to the joint, your partners go with you?"

"No. I mean, I didn't have no partners."

I nodded like that made sense too. "All right," I told the man. "I'll see what's available. Take about three, four weeks. No guarantees, though."

"I thought you could—"

"What? Go over the wall and *steal* the stuff? Get real, pal. I got an inside man—that's the only way to pull off this particular thing. What's for sale is what he can get, that's the story. Whichever way it comes up, that's the way it is, that's the way it *stays*, understand?"

"Yeah. But..." He let it trail off, looking over at Saunders.

"Let me talk to you for a minute," Saunders said. "Just a little one-on-one, okay? For old times' sake?"

I nodded.

"Wait for me outside," Saunders told the other man. "Here's the keys."

Cline—like—Patsy started to say something, changed his mind. He took the keys from Saunders, walked out through the sagging doorway.

"What was that all about, Burke?" Saunders asked me.

"He's counterfeit," I told him. "A three-dollar bill."

"How do you know?"

"Nobody says they went inside for *armed* robbery—that's social-work talk. You say you went down for stealing, or you say you're a thief. You gonna rob, you're armed—how else would it be? And you see his face when I asked him about partners? He never *had* partners—not for what he was doing."

"So what do you care about his pedigree?"

"Look, this guy may be one of those lame Nazis or whatever they call themselves this week, but he's no white-tribe warrior—he's a fucking tree-jumper. And he ratted out a bunch of people when he went in."

"So?"

"So he's not reliable. You know it, and I know it."

"His money spends just as good."

"And you already got some," I said.

"Look, I—"

"Drop it," I told him. "You had an order for hardware, you would have come to me yourself—we do business before. Then you would have marked it up, sold it right over to the chump without me ever knowing."

"I—"

"But you wanted to stay out of the middle on this one, right? So it's one of two things: either you don't think this guy's good for the money or he's got you spooked."

"I don't spook," Saunders said, a hurt tone in his calm hustler's voice.

"How much did he pay you to set up the meet?"

"Five."

"Half's mine."

"How do you figure?"

"I'm not doing business with him, and neither are you. You stung him for five to make the meet."

Later you'll tell him I couldn't pull it off. He won't be mad at me—I didn't take any of his cash. So you figure it's harmless...a nice score for a few hours' work."

"If it was a score, it's *my* score," he said.

"You think I'm a fucking 800 number? Toll-free?"

"I was up front with you, Burke. Come on, no hard feelings. How does a grand strike you?"

"You told me five, he probably duked ten on you. Cut me a deuce we stay okay, you and me."

"And if I don't?"

"You never know," I said quietly.

Saunders reached into the side pocket of his safari jacket. Slowly, with two fingers. Pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Held it forward, offering me one.

"No thanks," I told him. "I don't smoke."

"The last time I saw you, you did."

"The last time you saw me, we were doing some real business."

"Ah...he mused, firing up his smoke. "Tell you what. I don't want hard feelings, all right? How about if I give you the deuce, but I throw in some information? Valuable information. You pay whatever it's worth, okay?"

"I'm listening."

He stepped closer to me, dropping his voice. "I've been working out of the city. Understand you were doing some work up there too. In Connecticut?"

I kept my face calm, waiting.

"A cop's on your trail, Burke. A lady cop. She was up there, asking around."

"That's what cops do."

"It doesn't concern you?"

"No. I never do anything to bother the locals."

"Okay. Whatever you say. Just trying to do an old friend a favor."

"I'll remember," I said, holding out an open hand. For the money.

The creep with the sunglasses hadn't gone to prison alone. I had—more than once. But I never come that way to a meet. Max the Silent dropped out of the shadows, disdaining the rope ladder, landing as softly as moonlight on dark water.

Max is my partner. If I'd lit a cigarette while talking to Saunders, Max would have dropped on him like an anvil on an egg.

I pocketed seven fifty off the roll Saunders had finally handed over, gave the same amount to Max. The extra five would go into our bank.

Max nodded his acceptance. I heard the Range Rover pull away. Max was in motion before I was—he can't hear, but the vibrations of that big rig on the rotting boards of the old pier were so strong even I could feel them. Max glided to the warehouse door, looked outside.

When he nodded again, I followed him out the door.

My old Plymouth was parked on the other side of West Street, looking the way it always does—abandoned. I unlocked it and we both climbed inside.

I keyed the motor and we took off, heading for the bank.

We cruised by the front first. The white-dragon tapestry was in the window—All Clear. I stopped in the alley behind the restaurant. The seamlessness of the dirty gray wall was broken by a pristine square of white paint. Max's chop was inside the square, standing out in meticulous black calligraphy. You didn't have to read Chinese to understand it: No Parking. Ever.

The steel door to the back of the restaurant opened as we approached. A pudgy Chinese man stood in the opening, wearing a white chef's apron, a butcher axe in one hand. When he saw who it was, he stepped aside. I heard the door snap closed behind us.

We walked through the kitchen, past the bank of pay phones. Took my booth in the back, sat down.

Mama left her post at the cash register and came over to our table, snapping out some instructions in Cantonese. The waiter was way ahead of her—he vanished, then reappeared with a large tureen of hot-and-sour soup.

Mama served me and Max first, while she was still standing. Then she sat next to Max and used the ladle to fill her own bowl. Max and I each took the obligatory sip, made the required gestures of appreciation.

"We got—" I started to say.

"Finish soup first," Mama replied.

Okay. We drained our bowls, sat for a second helping. Worked that one more slowly, mixing in some dry fried noodles. The waiter came and exchanged our bowls for a blue glass ashtray.

"So?" Mama asked.

I handed her the five hundred. "For the bank," I told her.

"From both?" she wanted to know.

I nodded. Mama made the cash disappear. Max and I would each get two hundred dollars' credit in Mama's bank—the remaining 20 percent was her fee. The score was really too small to go through all that—we turned it over as a gesture of respect.

"That girl call again," she told me.

I knew who she meant. The same lady cop Saunders told me about. Belinda Roberts. That was the name she'd told me one day in Central Park. I was tracking, setting up a job, had Pansy along with me for cover. Belinda was jogging along, a fine-looking woman with a careless mass of reddish-brown hair topping a curvy, muscular body. She said she liked my dog. Said she liked me too. Gave me a number, asked me to call.

I never did. When I saw her again, she was in the same place. It was Clarence who made her for a cop. She was in the park, working. Maybe undercover to catch a rapist, maybe on observation for a drug deal. Maybe working me. No way to tell.

No way...until she called the restaurant, asking for me. Asking for Burke. I'd never given her my right name, never gave her the number.

Lying Belinda. Persistent bitch. Whatever she wanted, she'd get tired before I would—I'm a sensei of patience, a Zen master at waiting.

Max coiled his fists, cocked his head—a boxer assuming his stance. Looked a question over at me.

I shook my head, tapped my watch. Too early.

"Good investment, Burke?" Mama asked.

I guessed Max had told her about the Prof's latest get-rich-legit scheme. Some fighter he was training in a converted warehouse in the South Bronx. I had wanted us to all pool our cash and get a racehorse—I've always coveted a trotter of my own. But convicted felons can't own racehorses—the authorities don't want the wrong kind of people in that game. They run an extensive background check, photo, prints, checkable references, all that kind of thing. That's for owning a racehorse—you want to open a nursery school, they don't care about any of that background crap.

"I don't know, Mama," I told her honestly "I never saw this kid work."

"Prof says maybe big money," she said, her dark eyes alive with the flame of cash. "You invest?"

"Yeah. He took me for five large."

"Max too?"

"Sure."

"Why no ask me?"

"It's *gambling*, Mama," I said, keeping even the slightest tinge of sarcasm from my voice.

"Not gamble, Burke. Invest, right?"

"If you say so."

"So! How big piece you get for five thousand?"

"I guess I never asked."

Mama made a clucking sound with her tongue. Then she turned and said something over her shoulder to one of the waiters. He bowed, disappeared. When he came back, he was holding a battered gray metal box. Mama opened the lid, reached inside without looking. Handed me a stack of hundred

"Five thousand," she said. "I get same piece as you and Max, okay?"

I nodded, awestruck as always with her ability to count money by feel.

Max and I played a few dozen more hands in our life-sentence gin game. Mama was more animated than usual, shouting advice at Max, once smacking him on the back of his head when he made a spectacularly boneheaded play. Max ignored the slap, but kept following her advice. As a result, I was up another three hundred bucks by noon. I made a steering gesture with my hands. Max flashed a smile—time to ride.

We took the FDR to the Triborough, exited at Bruckner Boulevard and motored peacefully until I found the block. It was dotted with Bronx burn-outs, abandoned buildings with that charred look they get after a while. The warehouse was set back from the street, past a concrete apron once used to load trucks. I pulled onto the apron, climbed out and activated the security systems. The Plymouth didn't look worth stealing and it came prevandalized—but even all that won't protect a car once you're into the Badlands.

Clarence was just inside the door, comfortable in an old easy chair, resplendent in a goldenrod silk

jacket over a black shirt. He's always dressed to the nines—as in millimeter. The young gunman got to his feet, said "Burke" to me, bowed to Max.

"He's here?" I asked.

"Oh yes, mahn. My father is in the back, working with our gladiator."

Clarence led the way through a maze of young men. Some were skipping rope, others working heavy bags or speed bags. A makeshift ring was set up in the far corner. Most of the fighters were black, with a mixture of Latins and a pair of Irish kids who looked like brothers.

"Put that iron down, fool. You training for a fight, not a goddamn pose-off." It was the Prof, drawn up to his full height, which put him right around this kid's chest. The kid was holding a barbell in both hands, waist-high, listening intently. A big kid, maybe six two and a piece, looked like he went right around two hundred pounds. He had Rome stamped all over his features, especially his nose, but his skin was fair and he had blue eyes under black hair combed straight back from his forehead.

"Sammy said—" the kid started to say, but the Prof was on him quicker than you could bribe a politician.

"Sammy? That chump's game is lame. You listen to that big stiff, you be seeing your name in the obituaries, not on the sports page."

"Okay, Prof," the kid said.

But the Prof wasn't done. " *This* is what wins fights, boy," the little man said, pounding his chest with a clenched fist.

"I know," the kid said. "Heart—"

"I ain't talking about heart, kid—you didn't have heart, you wouldn't get in the ring in the first place. I'm talking conditioning, see? Pure conditioning. A good heart is a nice start, but a bad lung will get you hung. Got it?"

"Yes," the kid said. Serious, not sulky.

"Righteous. Now drop that bar and shake hands with my man. Burke, this is Frankie Eye, do or die."

"That's what he calls me," the big kid said, smiling. "It's short for Ianello."

He had a powerful grip, but he wasn't trying to impress anybody with it. His eyes were clear and direct, his stance respectful.

"And this here is Max the Silent. The life-taking, widow-making wind of destruction," the Prof told the kid, indicating Max. The Mongol warrior bowed. The kid had one hand stuck out but he quickly pulled it back, imitating Max's ceremony with a bow of his own. I didn't know if he could fight yet, but he was no dummy.

"Heavy bag's free," the Prof said to the kid. "Come on."

The kid followed the Prof over to the now-vacant bag, slipping on a pair of training gloves as he walked. He stepped up to the bag like a man going to work, started pounding it with alternating hands, left-right-left, a steady stream of hooks, breathing through his nose, well within himself. He had a perfect boxer's body—you couldn't see any muscle development until he moved.

The Prof stood to the side, watching the kid like an air-traffic controller with too many planes on the radar screen. The kid kept working the bag, steady as a metronome. When the Prof finally called halt, the kid didn't look winded.

"We need a hundred punches a round. *Hard* punches. *Every* round," the Prof told the kid, tossing an old terry-cloth robe over his fighter's shoulder. "This whole game is about conditioning, remember what I said? You get tired, you get weak. You get weak, you go down." The kid nodded—he'd obviously heard all this before.

"What you think of our boy?" the Prof asked me.

"Don't know yet," I told him. The Prof knew what I meant. The world's full of good gym fighters—it's when they get hit that you find out the truth.

Max stepped forward, shaking his head in a "No!" gesture, pointing at the kid. He bowed to the Prof, pointed at the kid, then at himself.

"Forget that!" the Prof snapped at him. "Ain't no way in the world you gonna spar with my boy."

Max ignored the Prof, stepped close to the kid, guided him back toward the heavy bag. I pulled the robe off the kid's shoulders as Max turned him so he was facing the bag again. Max stepped behind the kid, put one hand on each side of the kid's waist, fingers splayed around to just below the kid's abdomen. When he nodded, the kid started to throw punches, slowly at first, then harder and harder. Max stepped away, bowed again, and changed places with the kid.

"Put your hands where Max had them," I told the kid. He tentatively put his gloved hands on either side of the Mongol, confused but going along.

Max ripped a left hook, a jet-stream pile driver that actually rocked the bag.

"Look at your hands," I told the kid. The kid's left hand was dangling in the air, his right still on Max's waist. He put his hand back, bent his shoulders forward so he was closer to Max. The warrior fired several shots with each fist. The kid lost his grip again. Max stepped away, pointed to the kid's hips, made a maitre d's gesture, inviting the kid back to the bag.

Frankie got it then. He took his stance, started slowly, driving each punch by torquing his hips, increasing the tempo as he felt it working. The heavy bag danced, the blows much heavier than when the kid first worked it. When he stopped, he was smiling.

"I never realized..." he said, turning to Max, bowing his thanks.

"Yeah, yeah—the mope can smoke," the Prof said, reluctantly acknowledging Max's expertise, guarding his own territory. "But fighting's a mind game. It's all in the head, Fred."

"When's he gonna go?" I asked.

"Friday night," the Prof said. "We got this showcase gig. Over in Queens. Exposure's good, and the purse could be worse."

"How much?"

"One large."

"That's not a whole lot to get beat on," I said, dubious.

"Look here, schoolboy. It ain't about bucks, not at first. Way I hear it, one of the cable scouts'll be there—it's their show. National, get it? There's a big-time shortage of heavyweights. And *white* heavies...hell, you can write your own ticket. They so desperate for white, they settling for some of those Afro-mocha, too-much-cream-in-the-coffee brothers. The heavyweights? I tell you, there ain't no bop in that crop. The ones they got, they just nursing them along. You see these clowns, records like thirty-two and oh. But they never fight each *other*, see? They got to have that undefeated record to get a shot. Then they score, but there ain't no more. One fight, that's right. And then it's over, Rove. We not going that route. Frankie's gonna fight anybody wants to play, all the way. So when he gets his shot, he drops the hammer."

"But for a first fight..."

"Look, Burke. Frankie got a whole *bunch* of fights before this. Amateur, sure, but plenty of fights."

"How'd he do?"

"Ah, he was jobbed most of the time. He fights pro-style. Body punches, chopping down the tree, see? But the amateurs, it's all about pitty-pat. Slap each other like bitches in a pillow fight. That wasn't Frankie."

"That's where you found him? In the amateurs?"

"Nah. He was in this club over to Jersey. Fighting smokers. In the basement, you know how it works. You get paid to cook, but it's off the books. Don't go on your record, neither."

I looked over to where the kid was skipping rope under Clarence's watchful eye. "Speaking of records..." I let it trail away.

"Down twice," the Prof came back. "One in the kiddie camps, once upstate. Assault, both times. Kid's got a real nasty temper."

"Who's he been...?"

"Anybody, babe. He was a brawler. Half-ass burglar too. Booze was his beast. But now that's all done, son. My man don't touch a drop, and that's a Medeco lock."

I watched the kid spar for a while. Nothing spectacular—steady and dedicated, learning the fundamentals. I slipped the Prof the five grand from Mama, told him she was in. Then I signaled Ma

it was time to split. He would have happily stayed there all goddamn day, but I had work to do.

I pulled the Plymouth into the garage of the warehouse where Max lives. He pointed up, making a "come on" gesture, inviting me to say hello to Immaculata and the baby, Flower. I tapped my watch, held my thumb and forefinger close together, showing him I didn't have time.

I stood on the sidewalk, watched the Plymouth disappear behind the descending garage door. As soon as it disappeared, I walked over to the subway on Chrystie Street and dropped into the underground, heading uptown.

A small group of people clustered near the middle of the platform. Timid rabbits—knowing one of the herd would be taken, praying it wouldn't be them, never thinking that together they could have a fox for breakfast. I walked away from them, toward the rear. The end of the platform was deserted. I stood there quietly, settling into myself. A bird flew past my face, almost too quick to see. I was used to rats in the subway, but I'd never seen a bird before. I trained my eyes on where the bird had vanished. Nothing. Then I heard a chirping noise and refocused. A nest was neatly tucked into the hollow part of a crossbeam. The mother bird hopped about anxiously, trying to quiet them down. I walked a few feet back toward the center of the platform, turning my back. In a minute, the mother bird swooped by again. A sparrow, she looked like. Down here, the squatters aren't all humans.

The train finally rolled in. It wasn't crowded at that hour. I found a two-person seat at the end of the car. Two stops later, a pair of black teenagers got on, doing the gangstah strut. One of them sat next to me, bumping my shoulder slightly. I stiffened my left arm, ready for a move, but the kid said, "Excuse me, sir," in a polite voice. His pal took the seat facing us, and the two started a rapid-fire conversation.

"Ain't no way the bitch gets away from me," the kid next to me said. "My game is too strong."

"Why you gotta be referring to sisters like that?" the guy across from us said.

"What you mean?"

"I mean, man, what is all this *bitch* thing with you? You not showing no respect. Why you call your own woman a bitch?"

The kid next to me considered the question for a minute, then he leaned forward, said, "Well, what else I gonna call the ho'?"

His pal gave me a "What can you do?" look. I nodded to show I understood his dilemma. When the train rolled up to my stop, they were still going at it.

The private clinic was housed in a discreet brownstone on a quiet East Side block. I rang the bell, standing so the video eye could pick up my image easily. In a minute, the door was opened by a young woman in jeans and a white T-shirt. "You're Mr. Burke?" she asked. I nodded to tell her she had the right man but she had already turned her back to me and was walking away. I followed her into a small room just past a receptionist's desk, took the seat she indicated. She walked out without another word.

Doc showed in a couple more minutes. Medium height with a husky wrestler's chest, his eyes unreadable behind the glasses he always wears.

"Thanks for coming, hoss," he said.

"I owe you one," I told him. It was the truth. Hell, more than one, maybe. "Besides, I wanted to see how your new setup was working out."

"So far so good," he said.

"It's a long way from Upstate," I told him. Upstate—the prison—where we first met. I was a convict, Doc was the institutional psychiatrist. Later, they put him in charge of all the institutions for the criminally insane. I'd heard he packed it in. Quit cold. Moved down here to the city to open up this clinic for damaged teenagers.

"I'm still the same," Doc said, just a faint trace of Kentucky in his voice.

"Me too," I assured him.

Something shifted behind the lenses of his glasses. A microscope, focusing. "Heard you might have bought yourself a bit of trouble a while back."

"That wasn't me," I said.

Doc just nodded. I lit a cigarette. "I used to—" he started.

"I heard this before," I interrupted. It was self-preservation.

Doc's a great storyteller, has a real narrator's gift. But it doesn't work so well from a soapbox—I'd heard about his heroic triumph over evil cigarettes too many times already.

"Okay, hoss. Whatever you say. Here's the deal: we have a client who's expecting—"

He stopped talking when a teenage girl burst into the room. A brunette with long, thin hair flowing all the way down past her shoulders. Her face was a skeleton, her body too scrawny to cast a shadow. Her skin was that dull-orange color starvation freaks get from a heavy carrot diet—there's some bullshit going around about how carrots fill you up but have no calories—every teenage girl in the world seems to believe it.

"I'm not going to—" she started.

"Susan, I'm with somebody," Doc said mildly.

"I don't care! They can't make me—"

"Nobody is going to *make* you do anything, Susan. But if you don't—"

"I *won't*. I know what I'm doing. I..."

Doc held up a hand, palm out like a traffic cop, but it was no good. The girl just charged ahead. "Just let me *explain*, all right? Let me tell you *why*. Please?"

"As soon as I'm finished with—"

"No! *Now!* I don't care if another shrink hears—"

"Burke isn't..." Doc started to say. He caught my eye. I nodded, He went with it, settling back in his chair, spreading his arms, palms out and open. "Tell me," he said.

"There's a *reason* for it," the girl said, standing with her hands on what should have been her hips. "I don't have anorexia. I mean it's not an addiction or anything. I'm not like Aurora."

"Tell me the reason," Doc said, gently.

The girl's face contorted. She shook off the spasm, wrapped her arms around herself, whispered: "I don't want to look sexy."

"Susan..." Doc tried.

"I *won't!*" the girl lashed out. "You can't make me."

"How old were you when it happened?" I asked.

Her face whirled around toward me. Only her head swiveled—her body was still facing Doc. "What?"

"How old were you when...?" I repeated, holding her close with my voice, cutting off the exit road.

Her eyes screamed at me, but her voice was low-pitched. "Nine," she said.

"You have a lot of curves then?"

"What?"

"Did you look sexy then, Susan? Like a woman?"

"No..."

"You keep starving yourself, you end up looking like a child again. No curves, no shape. All flat lines, right? Like a skinny little girl again."

"I..."

"They don't want grown women," I told her, sharing the truth—we both knew who "they" were. "They want *little* girls," I said quietly. "You're not keeping them away, Susan—you're playing your tapes."

"I *hate* you!" she shrieked at me. Then she started to cry. Deep, racking sobs. Her bird's-wing ribs looked like they were going to snap from the pressure and Doc was on his feet in a split-second, arms around the girl, crooning something soft in her ear, patting her back until she stopped holding herself so rigid, walking her out the door.

I finished my cigarette, looking around the office, someplace else in my head. But I wasn't that far gone—I used the time to slip a couple of Doc's Rx pads into my pocket.

Doc was back in a few minutes. If he noticed the missing pads, he didn't say anything. "You should have been a therapist, hoss. We've been discussing how we could confront Susan with her real agenda for weeks now."

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't be sorry. I wasn't kidding you—that was what she needed. I guess it was better hearing it from a stranger. She was sent to us for anorexia, but we weren't getting anywhere. Another week and she'd have had to go on IV."

"Who sent her?"

"Her dad."

"The same one who..."

"No. It was her grandfather. Happened maybe ten, twelve years ago. They never did anything about it. Oh sure, they kept her away from him, but that was it. They thought everything was fine until she just stopped eating."

"The weight she's trying to lose, it's got nothing to do with calories, huh?"

"Right on the money, hoss. But now we got ourselves jump-started. And Susan got herself a chance." Then he leaned back in his chair and told me what he wanted.

I told Doc I couldn't handle a 24-7, but he promised that his client's daughter would be on the midnight bus out of Cincinnati. That was the job—a runaway. At least that's what *she* thought. The kid's parents made the arrangements with Doc. She'd go right into his clinic. And she wouldn't have to go home if she didn't want to. If you wanted Doc to treat your kid, you had to sign that last part. Notarized.

I didn't ask Doc anything else. I got up to leave but he stopped me, using the same traffic-cop gesture he'd used on the girl with the carrot skin.

"You know, Burke...the way you handled that thing with Susan...I don't understand why you live the way you do."

"You don't know how I live," I told him, trying to shut this off.

"I've got an idea," Doc replied. "Look, I know *you* —I know you a long time. Even back...inside... you were always studying something. Reading, asking questions. You've got an amazing vocabulary—it's almost like you're bilingual—sometimes you sound like a mobster, sometimes you sound like a lawyer, sometimes you—"

"I do have a great vocabulary," I interrupted. "It's so fucking big, I even know what the word 'patronizing' means.

Doc nodded—like he'd tried his best, but the case was hopeless.

When I walked in the Eighth Avenue entrance everyone was in their places. The Prof was sitting on his shoeshine box, industriously working over a pair of alligator loafers. Clarence was in the loafers, eyes sweeping the terminal. Max was slumped on a bench, his body disguised under a filthy old raincoat, a battered felt hat shielding his eyes.

I was wearing one of the suits Michelle had made me buy. Gray silk, fall weave. Carrying a black anodized-aluminum attaché case in my left hand.

I strolled past a bank of pay phones, listening to a United Nations babble—all kinds of people, calling home. Calling home is a big business in this city. You can find special setups in any heavy ethnic neighborhood—phone centers, they're called. They set them up almost like tiny apartments—nice comfortable chair to sit in, couple of spares in case you want to crowd the whole family in too. Some of them have desks, shelf space, writing paper. And their rates are cheaper than you could get on your own phone, because the guys who run it buy blocks of trunk time to specific locations. In Flushing, it's Korea, India, Southeast Asia: two seventy-nine for the first minute, then seventy-five cents for each additional minute. In Jackson Heights, it's Colombia: a buck twenty-six for the first, forty-nine cents after. People who use the centers, they're not thinking of a quickie call—some of them stay for hours.

Down in the Port Authority, they have the low-rent version—you make your call with someone else's credit card. Thieves rent the credit-card numbers—all you can use for twenty-four hours, one flat fee. The Port Authority is the best place to use them—plenty of pay phones always available, impossible to stake out, anonymous.

My watch said it was eleven-forty. Plenty of time even if the bus was on schedule. The Port Authority cops were all around, watching for runaways. No shortage of pimps either, trolling for the same fish, using different bait.

It went so smooth I almost didn't trust it. While the predators hovered, I walked straight on through. I met the bus, told the girl I was with Project Pride, a safe house for runaways. Promised her a nice private room, free food, and counselors to help her find a job. She told me she was going to be an actress. I told her lies of equal weight. She got into my Plymouth. I drove her to the clinic, half-

listening to her stream of chatter, hating how easy anyone could have gotten this little girl to come along with them.

I found a place to park, rang the bell. The door opened. I left the kid there.

The next morning, I went back to work. Ever since I got back from Connecticut, I've been bottom-feeding, picking at carrion. I run my scams in the Personals—promising whatever, delivering never. I also use my P.O. boxes—offering losers a real pipeline to "mercenary opportunities." The only mercenary they'll ever meet that way is me. Kiddie-porn stings don't have much bite to them today—the freaks all want to sample the merchandise over a computer modem before they buy. Or they want you to fax a teaser. And even the pedophiles who want hard copy insist you use FedEx so the *federale* can't bust you for trafficking through the U.S. mail. But that's okay—there's never a shortage of targets who can't go crying to the cops when they get fleeced.

I deal with citizens too. Every time the government adds a new tax to cigarettes, the market for bootleg butts goes bullish. And brand-name counterfeiting is always a sure thing: Mont Blanc pens, Rolex watches, Gucci bags—they're all best-sellers for street merchants. Most of it's made in Southeast Asia, where child labor is real cheap. In Thailand, the Promised Land for baby-rapers, it's so cheap that the freaks organize tours: for one flat rate you get round-trip to Bangkok, a nice hotel... and babies to fuck. The planes are always filled to capacity.

But even if hustling, scamming, and grafting all dried up, I could always sell firearms—hate never goes out of style. I only deal in bulk, like a case of handguns. And I won't touch the exotics—titanium crossbows that cost three grand, mail-order SAMs—that kind of stuff's for the borderlands, the far-out frontier where psychosis and technology overlap.

I sell to the usual suspects, mostly far-right dim-bulbs who sit in their basements stroking the gun barrels...the firearms equivalent of the inflatable women they sell in the freak-sex catalogs. Most of my customers are pretty easy to scope out, but when an unsmiling young woman in overalls and a flannel shirt wanted to buy enough *plastique* to level a high-rise, I raised my eyebrows in a question. She told me she was an animal lover, like that explained it all.

I passed on that one. I don't play much—and when I do, it's with my deck.

My bottom-feeding wasn't limited to business. I've known Vyra forever, met her when she was engaged to marry an architect. She didn't go through with that one. After working her way through another half-dozen guys, she eventually settled on an accountant. All throughout that, we'd get together once in awhile. We never had that much to say to each other—came together as smooth as chambering a round, parted as easy as firing it.

Vyra was a slim girl, not very curvy, with breasts way too big for her frame. The only bras she could wear had industrial-strength under-wires—when she took them off you could see the violent red marks where they had cut into her. They made her back ache too, she said. And sometimes her neck hurt so badly she had to have it braced.

"Why don't you get them fixed?" I asked once, lying next to her on a hotel bed.

"You mean like the rest of me?" she asked, not sure whether to try sarcasm or tears—she always had both on tap. I'd known Vyra before she started on the plastic surgery—hell, I knew her when she was still Myra—but I'd never tried to talk her out of it. She finally got her nose reduced, earlobes cut down, and an implant at the tip of her chin. All in one visit—I didn't see her for about three months. When I did, she was the same sweet bitch-on-wheels she'd always been, only with more confidence,

"Why not?" I replied. "You could get the best—"

"Men *love* them," she said. "I mean, they *worship* them. You have no idea..."

"But if it's going to keep you in pain all the—"

"Don't worry." She smiled, her perfectly capped teeth white in the afternoon dimness. "I make them pay for it."

When I first saw Vyra, she was a hat-check girl in a nightclub, wearing one of those imitation bunny outfits—a one-piece bodysuit cut high on the thighs with a deep V at the chest. A customer gave her ten bucks to reclaim his hat, watched hungrily as she stuffed the bill deep into her cleavage.

"I'll bet you could stuff a hundred bucks down there," the guy said. "All in singles."

"I don't play with singles," Vyra shot back, telling him the score.

She married a guy she met in the club. Or a guy she met in the club introduced her to the guy she married. Or the guy was married when she met him and divorced his wife over her. Or something like that...When Vyra tells her stories, I don't listen too hard.

Next time I ran into her, it was an accident. I was working a tracking job over in Jersey—she was sitting out in front of a café, at one of those little round tables with big Euro ashtrays, sipping something from a tall narrow glass. I sat down across from her, grateful for the vantage point and the cover.

Vyra told me about her life, flashing a diamond ring that must have cost five figures wholesale. She gave me her phone number, but the calling instructions were so complicated—only on Tuesday and Thursday, between two and four in the afternoon, but not if it falls on the first day of the month...cray like that—I never got around to it.

But when she called me, she caught me just right. I was in Mama's, not doing anything, and she was in the Vista Hotel, right across from Battery Park. It only took me a few minutes to get there. About the same time it took both of us to get done with the only thing there ever was between us.

She was good at it—a lifetime of faking passion blurred the line so much that, sometimes, she

actually thought she was letting go.

"You're the only one who ever made me come," she told me. It was a good line, as such things go. "You were the first" would have been deeper sarcasm than "I love you," but making a woman come for the first time in her life—hell, most men's egos would slip-slide around that credibility gap with ease.

Vyra's good at sex. Practiced, athletic, responsive...controlling enough so she does most of the work, but not so much so that you *feel* controlled. On a good day, she can bite a pillow hard enough to make you think you were driving steel like John Henry never dreamed, the Boss Rooster with his pick of the chicks. Vyra must have learned the truth early on in her life—faking love is a snap, but faking lust is a bitch.

Vyra's great at girl-gestures—whipping off an earring to make a phone call, tossing her hair off her face with a quick movement of her neck, walking with one hand on her purse, the other swinging in time with her hips, like a conductor directing musicians—not an original move in the lot, but all of them sweet, smooth and sexy.

Vyra's a good person too—just tell her about an abandoned baby or a wounded animal, her checkbook opens faster than a bagman's hand. She's one of those girls...I really can't explain them. It's like they're running parallel to you all the time. The lines never cross, but, sometimes, they get close enough to almost touch.

It was always hotel sex, except for one time in her car. She never asked to come to my place—never asked me much of anything. Sometimes we made a date on the phone, sometimes she'd just call when she was around...and if I was too, we'd get together.

It's as though our lives are checkerboarded—when our pieces land on the same square, we get together, take care of business, and move on.

Vyra wants something she can't call by name. I know what to call it, but I don't want it.

She offered me some money once. Real money, so I could go into a business or something. It was a sweet thing she was trying to do, maybe the only way she knows how. I didn't take it—told myself it was better to leave that kind of offer in the bank, for when I might really need it.

I didn't need Vyra, either. But when I called in, and Mama said there was a message from her, I aimed the Plymouth at the Vista without thinking much about it.

Vyra had a new pair of shoes. Blue spikes, with little red bows at the back. She liked them so much, she kept them on.

Afterwards, she wanted to tell me all about what she'd been doing—she was a volunteer counselor in some "therapeutic community" on the other side of the Hudson. I lay on my back, blew smoke rings toward the ceiling. She propped herself on one elbow, sprouting prepackaged wisdom—"there's no

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