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FALSE ALLEGATIONS

ANDREW VACHSS

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Andrew Vachss



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for Ken Saro-Wiwa

ACCLAIM FOR Andrew Vachss

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

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—*Boston Herald*

*a warrior, murdered by jackals
whose voice, unstilled
scars their dishonor into our souls
marking our path*

FALSE ALLEGATIONS

"I have to do it the same way every time," the woman said, her voice full and steady even though she was deep into her workout on a stationary bike. She was wearing a set of dull-gray sweats with matching head and wrist bands of the same material, her face glistening under a healthy sheen of sweat.

"How long does it last?" I asked her.

"The whole performance is about fifteen minutes," she said. "I don't know how much of it he watches."

"And you're sure he—?"

"Yes! He's *nailed* to it. A bloody junkie he is, I tell you—he doesn't get his fix, he'll go mad." The woman stopped pedaling. She climbed off the bike, pulling the gray sweatshirt over her head in one smooth motion, leaving her torso bare. She was as relaxed about it as someone who did it for a living. "Let me take a shower," she said, "I'll only be a minute."

I leaned back in the red leather recliner, turning it slightly so I could see down the hall where she had disappeared. I slitted my eyes, breathing shallow through my nose, slowing my clock, dialing my mind to wait-state—I know what "Give me a minute" means in girl-speak.

Like most things I think I know about women, I was wrong again. In less than five minutes, I caught a blur out of the corner of my eye—she was padding up the beige-carpeted corridor toward the living room, not making a sound. When she spotted me in the chair, she flashed a smile.

The only thing she was wearing was lipstick. She had a fluffy pink towel in one hand, patting herself absently with it as she made a full circuit of the living room, her eyes flicking from the bookshelves to the complicated-looking stereo to a solid rectangular platform no higher than a coffee table but much bigger. The platform was covered in light-blue leather, about the size of a pool table, seamless and smooth. It stood in a niche a couple of feet back from a huge window, which was completely covered by a panel of brass mini-blinds.

"That's where I have to do it," she said, pointing to the platform.

"How could he—?"

"They're adjustable," she cut in. "With this..." showing me something that looked like a TV remote.

I held out my hand for it, but she pulled it away. "I'm not allowed to open the blinds until he calls," she said. "It wouldn't do for you to push the wrong button."

I let that one pass.

"Sometimes he wants the blinds open," she said. "Sometimes he wants them all the way up. If he wants it at night, I have these.... Look!" She hit a button on the remote and a trio of baby spots popped into life on the ceiling, each beam trained at a different part of the blue leather platform.

"What makes you think he—?"

A telephone trilled in another room. She held up a hand for silence, head cocked to listen.

Another ring.

Another.

Nothing more. I counted to ten in my head. She pushed both palms at me in a "Stay there!" gesture then she turned and ran out of the room.

She was back in a flash, wearing a red camisole with matching tap pants and spike heels, a white makeup case in one hand. She quickly crossed over to the blue leather platform and sat down, facing me. She put the makeup case on the floor, popped the locks, and opened the top. A quick eye-sweep satisfied her that she had what she needed. She pressed a finger to her lips, telling me to be quiet. Then she reached for the remote control and hit one of the buttons.

The mini-blinds slowly opened, angling down—you would have to be on a higher floor to see inside. The baby spots flashed into hot, focused light.

She did the whole performance without once leaving the blue leather platform, almost fifteen minutes to the second, just like she said. Once you got past the high-tech, it was standard-issue Tijuana Teaser, right down to the disappearing sausage act—she put it inside her, worked it back and forth, her face an ice-mask imitation of a woman scaling a steep orgasmic curve. Soon as she faked letting go, she pulled out the sausage, then licked it a few times before she bit off a piece and swallowed. The curtain closed on her lying facedown, spent and exhausted from the performance, her body zebra-striped from the mini-blinds, long chestnut hair crackling with pale sparks from the artificial light.

"I know what I have to do by the number of rings," she said later, a tall iced glass of orange juice in her hand. She'd taken another shower, wrapped herself in a white terry-cloth robe. The mini-blinds were closed.

"How can you tell if—?"

"It's his line, the phone," she anticipated my question. "Only his. He's the only one who ever calls on it. I'm not allowed to use it to make calls either."

"What if you...?"

"There's another phone. Two lines, separate from his. If I'm talking on one of those and I hear his phone, I have to hang up right away."

"But when you go out..."

"I can't just *go* out, can I?" she snapped.

"I don't know how it works," I said mildly.

She ran both hands through her thick chestnut mane, combing it back off her face. "I'm sorry," she said. "I get so cooped up here sometimes I feel like biting my own head off. You can't imagine how... trapped it makes you feel."

"That's okay," I said softly, not telling her that I wouldn't need an imagination. I grew up trapped—and not in some luxo-pad. "Tell me how it works," I urged her, still soft.

"Seventy-two hours," she said. "Three days, that's the key. Once I... finish, I don't have to do it again for seventy-two hours. It could be more—he could wait a long time to call me—he was out of the country once for almost a month—but it's never less, understand?"

"Sure."

"He used me," she said, her voice flat and hard. "He lied. He's a liar. Now he has to pay for it."

"What did he lie about?" I asked, moving my right hand in a sweep-gesture to cover the whole setup.

"Who needs to lie to a whore? Isn't that what you mean?" she faced me, bitter-voiced. "Sure, he pays for...this. But it's his, not mine. His name is on the lease. Everything's in his name, even the bloody electricity."

"He lied about that?"

"No," she said, her voice a hard sneer against my muted sarcasm. "What he lied about was love."

"Okay if I smoke?" I asked her.

She looked up in surprise. "Why would you ask? You see the damn ashtray right there, don't you?"

"You don't smoke, right?"

"No, I don't."

"So if he was over here, he could smell smoke...He'd know you had company."

Her laugh was a sad, dry thing. "Fat chance. He never comes here. Never."

"So how do you...?"

"It's an electronic affair, luv," she said. "Very Nineties, isn't it? I've got a PC in one of the bedrooms in the back. He pays my bills over a modem—anytime I want to see my balance, I can just call it up on the screen. Anything else you want to know?"

"Yeah," I said. "What kind of name is Bondi?"

A quick smile played around her lips. "It's from Bondi Beach. Right near Sydney. In Australia, where I'm from. My mom always said I was conceived on that beach, so she gave me that name. She was a young girl then, working square, before she went on the bash. All she could tell me about my dad is that he was a soldier. On leave he was. He left my mom something, all right."

"Tell me about the lie," I said. "The lie about love."

"Oh smoke your cigarette, then," she replied, a faint trace of the smile still playing on her lips. "I'll even get you a beer if you want, how's that?"

"I'm okay," I said, settling back in the chair again. "Tell me."

She got up, came over to where I was sitting. "That one's built for two," she said. "Move over." I slid as far as I could to the left. She plopped down next to me...a tight squeeze. I pulled my right arm out from between us. She nestled into my chest. I draped my arm over her shoulders. She reached across her body with her left hand, grabbed my right hand and pulled it down, the way you'd pull a blanket over your shoulders. "Give us a puff, then," she said, "I haven't smoked in years, but I remember how good it used to taste."

I held out the cigarette. She moved her mouth into it, took a quick, short hit. She exhaled powerfully, making a satisfied sound, closed her eyes, snuggled even closer.

A few minutes passed quiet like that. I was going to remind her of the question again when she started talking in a young girl's voice, the one they use for secret-telling.

"I was a dancer when he met me. Before that, I was a party girl. You understand what that is?"

"Yeah. You don't give your friendship to just anyone...but when you do, it costs a bit to maintain it."

"Un huh. That's about right. Anyway, he met me in a club. Where I was dancing. He was a real gentleman. Left me his card, asked if he could call me sometime. We had a few dates. Very, *very*, nice. Fine restaurants, a limo, flowers. You know how it goes. We got...close. But there was never any sex. I figured, maybe he was afraid of scaring me off. But, one night, he told me. Told me that he loved me.

"I thought he wanted me for a beard. You know, that he was gay and he needed some cover when he went out. But that wasn't it. He's...impotent, I guess. But not completely. I didn't really follow it all that well, but, what he's got, he can get aroused but he can't..." Her voice trailed off, as though she was expecting me to cut in.

I didn't. Another couple of minutes went by like that. She squirmed against me, as if she was seeking a more comfortable position. I moved as best I could in the squeezed spot, trying to help.

"He said he had a fantasy. A fantasy about me. That I would get so excited just *thinking* about him that I'd...well, what you just saw...before. Do that. He said he loved me. He knew how much I was...earning. At the club where I danced. He said he didn't want to insult me, but...he could pay me just as much. A salary, like. And if I would...do that, what you saw...for him, whenever he wanted, then he would get stronger. You know what I mean. And, maybe, someday, we could be together. Like for real together."

"I still don't see the lie," I told her.

"I haven't seen him since. Not once. It's all...like I said. Just that. He never even calls me on the phone. Not to speak to, anyway. I was...sad about it, I guess, but then a girlfriend of mine...from the old club...she heard about it. And she told me."

"Told you what?"

"He lets other people see it," she said, a catch in her voice. "He lets them bloody *watch*. That's why let you...before. I never would have let anybody see it. But...you know what he does? He invites friends over to his apartment. Like to play cards or whatever. And then he calls me. And I put on a show. Not for him. Not for love. For anyone who's in his apartment. He doesn't tell them he knows me—he just tells them there's this really randy girl who lives in the building across the way. A real bitch-in-heat slut, he tells them. Gets so flaming hot she does it to herself."

I thought she was going to cry then, but she nipped a jagged chunk of air and kept it down until she was calm.

"Tell me what you want," I said.

"I'll be right back," she said, sliding the freshly loaded condom off me in one smooth move. I heard noises from the bathroom but I kept my eyes closed.

I felt the bed react as she climbed back on. "Want another drag?" I asked, not opening my eyes.

"No," she said, "one's my limit."

"You're sure about the money?"

"Dead sure, honey," she said. "And it's cake too, I promise you—I've got it all worked out. I don't know if he even lives there, but he has to *be* there when I...do it. Soon as he calls, I can call you. It'd only take a second—he'd never know. I've got the key to the apartment—you could walk right in. Right in the middle of me...doing it. He'd never know what hit him."

"He might not be alone, right? You said—"

"I know the doorman. Bert, his name is. He's an Aussie too. I met him when I was still doing...you know. Anyway, I take care of Bert. He can always count on me for something, even though I never go to that place anymore. You know, the place where I danced? I tested him. Bert, that is. Twice now. I use this," she said, crawling over my chest to reach into a nightstand next to the bed. She held up a cellular phone. "See? It's perfect. I told Bert I wanted to surprise Morton—that's his name, Morton. So I ask Bert, when Mr. Morton comes in, would he give me a call? When he comes in *alone*, I say to Bert, giving him a wink, you know? And Bert did it. Twice. I gave him a hundred the next day. Both times. A hundred dollars, a wink, a little bit of hip...that's all it cost."

"So you want...?"

"He doesn't know I have this," she said, holding up the cellular phone again. "Bert can call me while he's still in the elevator. So we know he's alone. Then, when he calls *me*, when he wants his damn *performance*...that's when I call *you*. He's got a safe in there. In the living room. Behind a painting—can you imagine? He showed it to me once, early on."

"You know the combination?"

"No, of course not. He wouldn't trust me with something like that. But you can...*make* him tell you, can't you? It wouldn't take that long, believe me. He's such a weak man...."

"Fifty-fifty split?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said. "I'm going to have to leave as soon as it's done anyway. It won't take me an hour to pack—it's not like I ever needed a lot of clothes for *him*, right? He could never *prove* it was me, but..."

"So how do you collect your half?"

"You can mail it to me. At my girlfriend's place in the Village. He doesn't know about her. When we get the money, Sybil and me, we're going to take off. Rent a car, load up everything we can stuff into suitcases, drive right to the airport. It's a quick flight to L.A., then a nice jump over the water to home."

"What if the safe's empty?"

"I guarantee it won't be, honey. Believe me, this is a rich flower, just *begging* to be plucked, I tell you true. What do you say, then?"

"Let's do it," I said.

She threw me a mega-watt smile, turned her back, wiggled her butt gently as she rooted through the nightstand drawer for another condom.

"She's got the key, huh?" Michelle's voice, her creamy-silk trademark, the voice that made her a ton of green on the phone-sex circuit. She was perched on the edge of my desk, just past where I had my feet propped up on the battered surface. I was tilted so far back that all I could see was her flashy leg if I looked straight ahead.

"Sure does," I told her.

"And she wants you to go in when the guy's *home*?"

"Yeah."

"So you can make him open the *safe*?" she asked, a barely suppressed giggle in her voice.

"Un huh."

"And she's going to split the take with you fifty-fifty—?"

"Right again," I interrupted.

"And trust you to *mail* her share to her?" she asked, losing the fight to keep the laughter down.

"Yes."

"Oh baby, I don't mean to sound nasty, but...could she *really* think you were all *that* stupid?"

"No, I don't scan it that way. She's had a lot of experience. With men. Listening to them, sizing them up. That's the way she made her living, not just dancing. Her story's so bogus...it's like an open invitation to double-cross her."

"What...not give her an even split?" Michelle sneered.

"The best suckers are half-smart," I said. "I think that's the way she has me played. Let's say I believe *some* of her story—what do I do then?"

"Use the key when the *voyeur* isn't home," Michelle replied. "Duh-uh!"

"Yeah. Go in with my own safe man, pop the thing, and walk away with the cash. Only..."

"Only they'll have you on tape doing it. Or they'll walk in when you're red-handed. Or there's a dead body in the bedroom. Or...whatever."

"Sure," I said quietly. I interlaced my fingers behind my head, closing my eyes.

I went so quiet I could hear Michelle breathing, hear the faint rasp of her nylons when she shifted her position slightly.

Time passed. "You aren't any different," I said. "Even Pansy didn't notice anything."

"That mutant mutt of yours wouldn't notice Godzilla so long as the lizard left her Alpo alone,"

Michelle mock-snarled. "She's not exactly Rin Tin Tin."

I flicked my eyes open, shifted them to the left where Pansy reclined on the couch. Pansy's a Neapolitan mastiff. Long past the svelte hundred and thirty pounds she'd been when she was young, she tips the scales nearer to one sixty now. Sure, nobody'd confuse her with a genius—but Pansy would die for me as casually as she'd scarf down a quart of honey-vanilla ice cream, her personal favorite. And whatever she bites, God forgets.

"Don't mind her," I told Pansy. "Michelle gets cranky when she hasn't been shopping for a few days...you know how she is."

"I'll tell you what I *won't* be shopping for any more, baby," she said. "I'm done with all that."

"It really...worked?"

"Oh don't be so squeamish!" Michelle snapped. "Yes, it 'worked,' okay? Funny, all my young life, I thought it would be Denmark for me. And it turns out to be Colorado instead."

Michelle was a transsexual—a woman trapped in a man's body, she always called it. She wasn't the freak in her family—her scumbag bio-father filled that slot. So she ran. Ran *down*. First to the streets, then lower, always dropping deeper, fire-walking until she plateaued on pain. Once she got there, she did whatever it took to stay. It was dangerous as a subway tunnel full of psychopaths down there. And Michelle was scared all the time. But she was too high-instinct to touch any of the temporary trans—she saw what happened to the kids who go numb to escape the pain. So she spent every night surviving and every day crying.

I'd known her forever. She was my sister and I loved her, but I'd been hearing about the sex-change operation so long I'd stopped listening. Michelle would take it just so far...then some excuse would come up. She had to detox from the black market estrogen she'd been using. Or the doctors had to remove the cheesy implants from her chest first. Or the electrolysis destroyed the outer epidermis of her face so they couldn't risk surgery. Always something.

But this last time, she got it done. I went down into the Zero chasing ghosts—Michelle went over the wall. When we both got back, I was me, and she was herself. For me, it was a return. For Michelle it was the first time.

The real difference was: Michelle liked what she was.

"I'm walking it backwards," I told her, getting down to business. "But I can't see who's calling the shots."

"I got it from Harry," Michelle said. "He's never burned us."

"Harry the painter?"

"No, Harry the CPA. You know, one of my old customers from...before."

"Yeah. He profiles, right?"

"Yes, he *will* front a bit, baby—lots of *men* do that, yes? So he wants to tell the girls he knows a guy who knows a guy who...like that. So what? Harry's a sweetheart, Burke. He goes out, buys a monster stereo, pays *retail*, okay? Then he gives it to a girl, she says 'thanks.' So Harry asks me—I mean, when it comes to *l'amour*, what poor fool would *not* ask the Queen of Hearts?—why does he get treated so mean? Well, honey, I told him the truth. You give a spoiled little bitch an expensive present, she'll just trail *that* mink on the floor, you understand? But you give her something nice, and you tell her you got it *dirt* cheap, baby...'cause you know guys, guys in the know, know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I told her, telling the truth. She had the voice of the wiseguy wannabe down perfect. Michelle has a four-octave range—anything you want, from sandpaper to velvet. She has the purest heart of anyone I know, but she was born to steal. That proved she was my sister better than any DNA test could.

"Oh, *believe* it, sugar," she told me. "You give a girl a diamond, she'll be nice, but she'll have to fake it. You give her the same rock, tell her it was part of a jewelry heist, she gets her panties wet before she can get her dress off. Harry, he met this 'Bondi' in a strip bar. There's Harry, flashing his pinky ring, playing Moe Green, you know? So she tells him, she needs something done. And Harry tells her, sure, he can handle that. Let him talk to a few of the boys..."

"Now, as we both know, *I'm* the only 'boys' he knows," Michelle smirked. "But that's okay—we played his tips before. And we did okay, didn't we?"

"Sure, but—"

"So you went to see her," Michelle interrupted, "and it came up zircons. But you can't be the target, honey. I mean, no *way* this Bondi bitch knows about you. Especially about you and me—how many people know that?"

"She lied, Michelle. There's a game in this somewhere, and—"

"I know," she put in. "The way I see it, maybe she *does* hate this guy—the guy in the building across from her. I mean, *I'd* hate him if he was doing that to me. Or maybe she's gonna Pearl Harbor you both. Who knows? It's a pass, period."

"Right."

"You're not even curious?" she asked, dropping her voice a notch.

"About what?"

"Who's got you on their list?"

"That list is too fucking long," I told her, closing my eyes again.

I wasn't lying to Michelle. Chasing down clues is fine for books, but that doesn't work in real life. Down here, they solve the mysteries with autopsies.

I don't have a problem with curiosity. I learned everything about why people did things when I was just a little kid—they do things because they want to do them, because they *like* doing them. Some of those things hurt, a deep hurt you keep with you way after the scars fade. And the more I got hurt, the less curious I got.

I kept that hurt down, deep as I could bury it. But like the toxic waste it was, it bubbled to the surface once in a while.

People died then.

I could think of a dozen reasons why Bondi could have wanted me to go into that man's apartment, and every one gave me another reason not to do it. I could sell the job to a pro heister, but I never worked as a finger. There's too many ways to get cheated on your piece of the pie, too many ways your name comes up if the thief goes down.

"Don't take the call if you can't take the fall," the Prof always says. Prof stands for Professor and it stands for Prophet—you had to listen close each time to tell which role he was playing. That was a long time ago, standing on the prison yard, me listening, *using* the time instead of trying to kill it. Like the Prof said.

Could be I wasn't the target at all—accidents happen. Homicide happens too. Last time a woman thought I was the right man for the job, I almost got myself dead. Belinda. Belinda the cop. So patient so careful, she almost got it done. Got herself done instead. That happens too—you grab the wrong end of the knife, you get cut.

I'm real careful about things like that. I walk the cautious convict's string-straight walk, trying to blot in the darkness. I learned it in the juvenile joints, always keep my back against something solid. It wasn't until I got to prison that I learned people could be solid too. Then I spent a lot of years learning which ones.

I always take my half out of the middle. Looking up from ground zero, the tops of the city buildings lean so close together they almost seem to touch—a nice canopy to lurk under if you stay down. But if you stick your head up, the canopy can turn into a crossfire real quick.

For the next few days, I worked at keeping my head down—minding my own business even if someone else was too. Frankie was going in a ten-rounder down at Atlantic City, but I couldn't make myself interested. We still had a piece of his action, but we didn't expect to see any coin for years, even if Ristone's plans worked out and he could finesse the kid into a title fight. Besides, it was another setup, Frankie fighting some tomato can off the canvasback circuit, padding his record, waiting his turn. Before we sold his contract, the Prof had been bringing Frankie along the right way:

each fight a little harder than the last one, learning as he moved up, getting ring-wise. The Prof knew Frankie couldn't keep winning just by being tougher than the next guy—the prisons are full of tough guys.

But now Frankie was off that track, running parallel to a bunch of other young guys, all with their eyes on the same prize. They wouldn't get together until much further down the line. Frankie would make it happen then...if Ristone didn't decide there was more cash to be made from tossing him in the tank.

We knew what the deal was when we took it, and nobody was bitching. But Frankie wasn't proud of it anymore. The money was coming, but the jolt was gone. We promised him we'd be ringside when he got his shot—until then, we only saw him when he dropped by Mama's. Even though we didn't hold his contract anymore, he was still with us. He'd earned his way in the same way we all did. In the same places too.

So I was working at letting it go, but nobody was around to do it with. I headed over to Mama's. The white dragon tapestry was in the window—all clear. I docked my old Plymouth in the alley behind the restaurant, just underneath the pristine square of white paint that held Max's chop in black calligraphy—newly painted, the lines not as precise as usual. Flower's hand. Max's baby, a little girl now, growing up. But it said the same: Stay Away. And even the empty-eyed Chinatown gunslingers didn't cross that border.

The flat-faced steel door opened before I could rap. I didn't recognize the thickset young Chinese who let me in, but he knew me. One of Mama's new boys. I could see from the way he held the meat cleaver in his left hand that he was a real expert. And no cook.

I walked through the kitchen and took my booth in the back. Mama started toward me from her position by the cash register at the front at the same time a guy in a waiter's jacket moved out of the kitchen carrying a tureen of hot-and-sour soup. They arrived together. Mama ladled me a small bowl, prepared one for herself and sat down across from me.

"So?"

"I'm just hanging out, Mama. Nothing going on."

"Not working?"

Not stealing, she meant. "No," I told her. "I thought maybe Max'd be around and I'd give him a chance to get some of his money back."

"Max working," she said, a faint trace of disapproval in her soft voice. "No time to play cards."

Max is a courier. Gems, microchips, a tightly rolled rice-paper message...anything you don't want to put in the mail. Small packages only—Max had to have his hands free. And his feet. If he took your money, your stuff was as good as delivered. His life was the bond, and he posted it every time he carried a package. Everybody down here knows his word is sacred, even though he can't speak.

And that's not why they call him Max the Silent.

"He'll be back soon?" I asked.

I got an eloquent shrug in response. That and another helping of soup.

"Any calls?" I asked her.

"No calls. Very quiet. You not going to work?"

"Not for a while," I shook my head. I was kind of between professions. When I was younger, I was cowboy, never thinking beyond cash registers and guns. I shot a man when I was just a kid. Because I scared me. I never lost that last part, but I got smarter as I got older. Probably because I didn't get dead first.

And because I met the Prof in prison and got schooled. I'll never forget the first time I saw him, watching from a distance as he faced a black man half his age and twice his size. I don't remember what the dispute was about, but I know the big guy was holding a shank and calling the Prof's name. The Prof stood his ground, capturing the other man's eyes, cutting right to it:

"Kill me? Kill *me*? You can't kill me, boy—I've been dead forever. Get wise to the lies—I'm a ghou, fool. A spellbound hell-hound. I was here before you. I am a Black Man. I was here *first*. First on this earth. You can put me in the ground, but I'll always be around.

"You so dumb you be a slave to the grave, boy. The Man turn the key, you *still* won't be free.

"Here's a true clue, boy. Some news you can *use*. Me, *I'm* the Man. I'm the only one can shorten your sentence. How much you doing, boy? How much time you got? Oh, got it *all*, huh? Got took by the book. Doing life. Want me to shorten *that*? Come on with it, then!"

And as the Prof held the crowd at bay with the hellfire of his preaching, I saw a pair of the homicidal children he was constantly fathering behind the Walls move in from the wings, eyes on the big man, hands concealed under loose jackets. By the time the big man figured it out, he was where he said he was going to send the Prof.

Nobody saw anything.

When the investigation was done, they blamed it on the serial killer who haunts every max joint in America: Person or Persons Unknown.

I never took my eyes off the perimeter again. When I hit the bricks after that stretch, I shifted into hijacking. Stole a load of heroin from the mob and tried to sell it back to them. Got dimed instead, and ended up in a subway tunnel holding the cops at bay with a pulled-pin grenade in my hand, waiting for Max and the Prof and the Mole to make it out the other end.

Back to prison. I knew how to jail by then. I had a name. I had people on the outside. And I never called another man's name. Not out loud.

Prison wasn't so bad that time. Bad enough that I wasn't going back, though. I put away the guns then. No burglaries either. Dope's too risky. I came from the same place as the hookers did, so I didn't want to be a pimp. Never minded doing some work on one, though, and I had a little business built up

doing that until I shot one of them and he lived. I wasn't trying to wound him, and I guess he knew it, so he ran straight to the Law. A mobbed-up guy got me a pass on that one, and I paid him back by looking into something for him.

Turned out I was good at it: nosing around, working the edges of the angles, finding things out, keeping my mouth shut.

Then I discovered the freaks. Not "discovered," I guess—they were the ones who raised me. Them and the fucking State. I hate them both. All of us do. Children of the Secret, that's who we are. If we ever voted as a bloc, we'd elect the whole stinking Congress.

And if you ever put our hate together, this earth would shudder and spasm until it shattered like a spun-glass teardrop under a sledgehammer.

Baby-rapers. "Pedophiles" they call themselves now. Like it was a religion. They fuck their own children and call it love. Stalk other people's children too. Fondle them, sodomize them, torture them for fun. Freaks love their fun. Sometimes they take pictures of it. They hang around the playgrounds and the daycare centers. Get jobs in schools and orphanages. Volunteer as coaches or counselors. They lurk on the Internet. Marry women with children. Trade their Polaroid trophies like they were baseball cards. Fly to Thailand and rent children. They kidnap babies and raise them to *be* them. They make snuff films to order. Send kiddie porn over modems—you download to your laser printer and there's the sample. They bribe politicians. Lobby for changes in the law. They leave broken bleeding souls everywhere they walk. And when they get caught, they say they're sick and demand treatment.

I love that last part, treatment. They take some sex-snatcher and raise his self-esteem, teach him how to talk soft and walk careful. So when he gets out, he has the social skills to slide up real close to his victims before he strikes. Like putting a silencer on a rattlesnake's tail.

But the freaks are always easy. Real easy. I sell them promises. And it's not just their money I collect.

Oh, I do other stings too. I work as a mercenary recruiter, do S&M and B&D intros, traffic in credit cards, move counterfeit—only bearer bonds and certificates, never cash. And I sell guns.

And if I get paid, I find things out. Sometimes, I find kids. Mostly, I find what's left of them.

So I guess I'm an investigator. But I don't have a license. I don't have an address. I don't even have a name. I gave all that up, whatever it was. I live in a loft building, on a small piece of the top floor that doesn't appear on the building charts. The landlord knows I'm there. I know things about him too. I don't pay rent.

I don't have a phone, just a line connected to the trust-fund hippies who don't know they have an upstairs neighbor. I can make calls—real early in the morning while they're still sleeping off last night's soft dope and stupid music—but nobody can call me there. Anyone who wants me, there's a number to call. It rings over in Brooklyn, gets bounced a couple of times until it ends up at the last pay phone in the bank of three on the back wall next to Mama's kitchen. She takes messages.

Mama gets my mail too. Over at one of her joints in Jersey. A driver picks it up every couple of

weeks, drops it at the warehouse where Max lives with his woman Immaculata and their little girl. He has his dojo upstairs, but he doesn't teach anymore.

Unless you're stupid enough to try him in the street. And nobody ever comes back for a second lesson.

I own a small junk yard in the Bronx, but I'm not on the papers. The guy who's listed as the owner, he pays me a salary, like I work there. Pays Juan Rodriguez, actually. That's me, the name I use. Juan pays taxes, all that stuff. Even has a Social Security number. IRS wants to know how I survive, I got a story for them.

I live small. I have no real expenses. I can go a long time between scores. And I have. But I never put away enough to retire.

Mama came from the same place as the Prof. Different parts of the world, maybe, but the same place. That's why she raised her eyebrows when I said I wasn't working. Arguing with her was like waiting for Congress to vote itself a pay cut, so I told her I was going to check out some stuff and took off.

I found a pay phone in the street. The air had a sharp edge of cold coming on, but the sun was strong and I didn't mind standing out there for a while. I ran through the loops, looking for the Prof. Came up empty. What the hell, I decided to roll down to Boot's, see if he had any new Judy Henske tapes.

"Boot" is short for bootlegger. That's what he does, mostly from live performances, but he also steals from archives, vacuums off the radio, whatever. I heard he found a way to slip a recorder into the Library of Congress—I don't know if that part's true.

He runs a shop in the basement of a narrow building in the West Village, a couple of blocks off Houston. Boot deals only in cassette tapes: no 45s, no CDs, no 8-tracks. Whatever you want, he'll find it and put it on tape, but that's the whole deal. You can order a mix from him too, but he won't label it or break it down. Only way to crack the code is bring it back to him and play it on one of his machines. Then he'll tell you whatever you want to know. That's how I found a sweet, controlled hard version of "Trouble in Mind" by Big Walter Horton. And a different, much rougher take on Paul Butterfield's trademark "Born in Chicago." Not a studio edition, you could tell Mike Bloomfield wasn't there that night. Boot doesn't do Top 40, and he thinks rap should be against the law. But he's got the biggest collection of blues and doo-wop on the planet, so he pulls a wide crowd—anytime you visit his joint, you can find Army Surplus side-by-side with Armani.

There's no headphones—everything sounds like it was coming out of a radio speaker in the fifties.

I hit the long shot. The Prof was there, standing on a milk crate, treating a half-dozen guys and one Swedish-looking girl in floor-to-ceiling black to one of his lectures, holding forth like he used to do on the prison yard. He acknowledged me with a quick, sharp movement of his head. I got the message—he was having fun, not working.

"Hey Boot!" he yelled. "Here's Schoolboy. You know what my man wants, right?"

"I got a new one," Boot said, looking out from under the green eyeshade he always wears. "Live. From Dupree's, in San Diego. Not even a month old."

"How many cuts?" I asked him.

"A full cylinder," he said. "Six beauties. Clear like you was right there too."

"Boot," the Prof put in, a teasing tone to his rich voice, "you get many calls for that Henske broad?"

"Yeah, we get *lotsa* calls," Boot said, jumping to my defense. "She got many fans, man, all over the world. They call her Magic Judy. That's why it's only a half for the tape."

"Half" was half a yard, fifty bucks. The usual tariff for one of Boot's tapes was a hundred—you got a discount if the artist was popular enough to justify him running off a decent number of copies. I handed over the money, declining the offer to listen to it first. I knew Boot's stuff was always perfect. Besides, I only listen to Judy when I'm alone—what we've got, it's just between me and her.

"Do you have a No Smoking section?" a guy in a denim shirt asked, frowning at the Prof lighting up.

"Yeah," Boot told him. "It's right out front. Under the lamppost."

I stayed there a couple of hours, just listening. To the music and to the Prof getting it on with anyone who wanted to try him. Nice to be in a place where you could play the dozens without it ending up in blood.

A young guy with a Jewish Afro and granny glasses got into it about who was the strongest bass in all doo-wop. "Herman?" the Prof mocked. "Man, Herman didn't have no bottom. Herman's bass was Mosley's *false*to, chump!"

The music took over. The Mystics blending on "You're Driving Me Crazy," Son Seals wailing his pain about the loss of his spot-labor job, the Coasters with Doc Pomus' immortal "Young Blood," a crew calling themselves the Magic Touch doing all *a capella* stuff from the fifties, a nice soft blend. Charley Musselwhite's "Early in the Morning," Ronnie Hawkins and the Nighthawks with "Mary Lou," Koko B. Taylor, Marcia Ball, Elmore James, Janis, Big Mama...

Boot didn't just hold yesterday's treasures, he carried tomorrow's crop too. A back-country hard-edged band with a lead singer who knew all about pain pounded over the speakers. "That's Paw," a busty young woman in a white T-shirt with "DON'T! BUY! THAI!" blazed across the front in red letters said to me. "Mark Hennessy's singing. Don't you think he's amazing? That's where I got this shirt—at one of his concerts."

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