

**THE**  
**VENDETTA**



**MICHAEL TYLER**



# **THE VENDETTA**

A Novel

By

**MICHAEL TYLER**



**ArcheBooks Publishing**

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**MICHAEL TYLER**

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ISBN-10: 1-59507-174-1  
eBook Edition

**ArcheBooks Publishing Incorporated**

[www.archebooks.com](http://www.archebooks.com)

9101 W. Sahara Ave.

Suite 105-112

Las Vegas, NV 89117

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# Dedication

My first novel, and so many people to thank.

Mom and Dad, you're the real heroes. Thank you.

Christina, for years of patience with a man who requires...patience.

Ben, Megan, David, Dylan, and Griffin, my magnificent children, for making me complete.

Len, just for being Len, my little brother.

Lisa Alderson, my favorite Aussie, for countless reads, re-reads, and the occasional kick in the butt.

Victoria Dark, author extraordinaire and wearer of many hats, for being a light in the darkness, and Robert Gelinas of Archebooks, for having vision and rolling the dice.

And if this wasn't *all* fiction, which of course it is, I'd thank Magic, for the smiles and the motivation.

*Salud.*



# **THE VENDETTA**



## PROLOGUE

Painted in shadow, the killer surveyed his ugly work.

Awkward in its death-sprawl, the body lay crumpled against the sofa, one leg across the coffee table, head cocked absurdly, eyes open and dull. Near the fingertips of a manicured hand was a nickel-plated Beretta, a fancy-man's weapon. Blood-smell, bitter-copper and thick, mixed poorly with the underlying stench of ruptured bowels.

Despite the need to move, the killer lingered, distractedly studying the corpse without remorse, nor much of anything, in fact, rather a disconnected sense of satisfaction.

Finally nudging himself into motion, he inspected the scene, careful of where he stepped. The expended shell-casings could stay where they'd fallen—a false trail. His hands were gloved. The coveralls, tennis shoes, and gloves would disappear into distant dumpsters. He'd done it clean, he was sure,

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but knew the price of careless assumption—the details, the smallest, most insignificant tidbits, would *fuck* you into the ground. They were the difference between freedom and prison, and prison wasn't an option.

He turned on a light in the kitchen. Closed the blinds in the den. Set the thermostat to it's lowest setting, heard the air kick on with a muffled *thump*. One last look at the body—no longer a man, just a sack of meat wrapped in designer clothes.

*Good.*

The killer stepped into the night, a picture of nonchalance quickly swallowed by the darkness.

## CHAPTER ONE

### WEDNESDAY—JULY 18—7:00 PM

Basting in his own sweat, Griffin waited for Hillybilly and a pound of high grade zonk.

At the tail end of a long day, all he wanted was to do the deal, throw Hillybilly in the klink, and find his lonely bed after a couple—or ten—sweet shots of Kentucky bourbon. Betrayed by the idle moments, his mind turned for the hundredth time to three-weeks-gone Lisa and her not-so-lonely bed.

*How could she?*

*Why would she?*

Unrelenting, the questions gnawed at his core, ravenous little rats with no answers to appease them.

The battered old pickup snapped him back to the mission at hand. It came from the south, easing off Interstate 95 to cruise the cars parked down each side of the rest area. The

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driver, a Neanderthal-looking gent, studied each of the vehicles he passed before pulling into a space twenty yards beyond the faded yellow Jeep.

Griffin turned off the radio, silencing Molly Hatcher's *Flirtin' With Disaster*, and did one last touch-check of the Nagra stuffed into the back of his jeans. Despite his sweat-drenched body, the microphones were still taped in place, one at the front edge of each armpit where they didn't print too badly against the thin fabric of his ancient T-shirt.

*Game time.*

"Task force Narcotics Agent Michael Griffin," he said for the recorder. "Wednesday, Eighteen July." He glanced at his watch. "Time approximately 7:00 PM, Meth buy-bust. Target Billy. Rest area south of Stuart on Ninety-five."

Unknowing, he'd shifted into a purely operational mode. Adrenaline teased, but just enough to put him in the right frame of mind. No more thoughts of Lisa. No worries. He was in his element, focused, a predator primed for the hunt.

*Ready.*



Billy Hutchins continued his meth-enhanced scrutiny. He trusted nobody, but particularly distrusted strangers, and didn't feel good about this new man in the picture. Like every dealer, he hated meeting new people; like all meth-heads, hyper-paranoia was his normal state of mind. The Pig said this dude was cool, and maybe he was, but Billy would decide for himself. He'd done two long stretches in prison, and he sure-as-fucking-hell wasn't doing another. He hadn't spotted anything wrong on the way in, but still...he had an itchy little *something's-not-right* feeling, and it wasn't going away.

*Fuck it.* If the dude was wrong...well, he better not be wrong.



Observations joggled through Griffin's brain as he watched the man angle warily toward the Jeep. He'd tagged the guy right, he decided: *Hillybilly*. Filthy bib-overalls—no shirt—were stuffed into Farmer-John boots. Wild, matted hair hung in greasy ropelets across furry shoulders. A tangled mass of beard drooped onto hairy chest-thatch. But mostly Griffin was struck by the sheer *size* of the man. Leg-sized arms hung from slumped behemoth shoulders. The neck was a tree trunk; the head a keg. And the man was *crazy*. Insanity radiated from Hillybilly in almost visible waves. Twitchy, herky-jerky movements and eyes that shifted from potential threat to potential threat in a constantly swiveling head marked him as trouble, a man who used way too much of his own product.

He looked *electric*.

The Pig's Hillybilly information had been a little sketchy, Griffin decided.



Billy took his time. He watched the people in the rest area. He watched the cars. He watched *everything*. But mostly he watched the dude. Jeep was cool, he could like that, but the dude looked...what? *Clean*, maybe. A little *too* clean. And healthy. Maybe a little *too* healthy...



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Griffin watched the gorilla's skittish approach. He did everything but sniff the wind. Instead of climbing in, he leaned into the passenger window, still checking things out, and filled the Jeep with Hillybilly smell—*Eau de Roadkill*. Faded tattoos covered orangutan arms from shoulder to wrist. The hands were huge, scarred, and filthy. Electric blue eyes with pinprick pupils measured Griffin from either side of a crushed ruin of a nose. Marble-hard and cold, they were the emotionless eyes of a killer, which gave Griffin the first queasy hint things might not go so smooth.

*This guy could be trouble.* "I'm Mike. The Pig sent me," he said, deadpan.

The response was a bass rumble. "Yeah? Says *you*. Who the fuck are *you*? I ain't seen you nowhere." Aggressive paranoia pulsed with every Hillybilly heartbeat.

"Yeah, well, I ain't seen *you* nowhere neither, an' I got other stuff I could be doin'." *Never back down. Never be eager.* "I'm just doin' Pig a favor, y'know?"

"Mmm. Maybe. Maybe not. Don't much like this *favor* shit. The Pig always comes hisself."

Griffin could almost hear the wheels grinding and spinning in Hillybilly's meth-garbled mind. *Need to calm this boy down.* "What can I say? He was stuck on the crapper."

Hillybilly's eyes locked onto the Harley emblem hanging from the Jeep's key. "You ride?"

"Doesn't everybody?" Griffin forced a grin, not liking any part of what he saw.

"Whatcha ride?" Foamy spittle decorated the corners of Hillybilly's mouth, and his words flushed maggot breath into Griffin's face.

"Fifty-eight Pan in a rigid wishbone. You?"

"Uh, I got an old Shovel," Hillybilly mumbled, and ap-

parently deciding “bikes is good,” pulled open the door and climbed in.

The whole Jeep dipped to the passenger side, and a fresh wave of rotten armpit assailed Griffin’s tortured nostrils.

*I’m gonna kick The Pig’s ass.*

But the ice was broken. The rest should be simple. He’d make the exchange, money for dope, and when Hillybilly stepped out, the task force agents scattered through the parking lot would move in for the take-down.

He pulled a digital scale from the console, turned it on, selected the ounce mode, and set it between them. “Look, I don’t like sittin’ here, too risky, so let’s get gone, huh?”



Billy’s eyes flicked to the mirror and fixed on the Mustang. Nosed into the curb facing the bathrooms, there was a guy in the driver’s seat. He wasn’t doing anything, but wasn’t asleep and hadn’t gotten out. Relaxing, maybe, or waitin’ for his old lady. No problem. Tired from driving, probably. Maybe coming back from Florida. Yeah. Billy went to Daytona every year. Bike Week. Good times. Okay.

Liking Dude Mike’s “let’s get gone” idea, he pulled a freezer-bag of his *special blend* from the chest pocket of his overalls, dropped it on the scale, and watched as it tripped around before settling on 16.07 ounces.

“Where’s my bread?” he asked. Another glance out the back. Guy in the Mustang still there. Their eyes met in the rearview, and Billy felt a little jolt. *Eyefucking me. That fuckin’ dude was eyefucking me.* Billy had that itchy little somethin’-not-right tingle again. *Wrong wrong wrong, somethin’ wrong...*

Dude Mike still lookin’ cool—*too* cool? Gettin’ the bread

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out of an old McDonalds bag... Billy's eyes jumped back to the mirror and—*there!* It took a second for his brain to unravel the wrongness of what he'd seen, then *kaboom!* The asshole in the Mustang was talkin' into a *radio*. *Fuck!* Billy couldn't see the microphone, but he'd caught a glimpse of the coiled black cord, and for a man living on the edge, the sharpest, most treacherous edge, it was enough.

With no lag between idle and full throttle, Billy's meth-fueled brain shrieked into overdrive.



In the blink of an eye, the deal went south.

*"MotherrrrrFuckerrrrrrr!"*

The bass growl caught Griffin with his hands full of money, and he sensed as much as saw the danger as Hillybilly swung a boot-knife in a vicious backhanded arc. Reacting instinctively, he snapped most of his head out of the way, but felt the flashing blade's bite as it parted his eyebrow, slid off the bony ridge of his brow, and buried itself in the headrest. Blood flooded his right eye, but brought with it a fresh jet of survival-drive adrenaline. Still working from instinct, he pivoted left, latched onto the gorilla's wrist, and struggled for control of the knife as, with the fearsome strength of the crazy, Hillybilly pulled it free of the seat.

The cramped confines of the Jeep became even smaller as Hillybilly spun into a killing rage. Even the possibility of escape was forgotten as his chemically besieged brain received an unmanageable barrage of signals, all concerned with destroying the perceived threat.

Griffin's mind was clear and calm, almost clinical. He'd stepped into that special place from which good policemen and soldiers function during times of danger. Focused but de-

tached, he felt no fear; that would come after—if he survived. Sound didn't go away, but it faded, muting Hillybilly's grunts and snarls as they fought for the knife. Unlike his hearing, Griffin's eyesight became abnormally acute: he saw the blackheads that plugged the oversized pores sprayed across Hillybilly's forehead, nose and cheeks; wiry black hair sprouting from filth-encrusted ears; the sharp edge of the knife blade.

It took everything he had, but Griffin gained control of the knife-hand. Unfortunately, he paid for his two-handed effort: a sledgehammer blow from a ham-sized fist exploded against his blood-blinded eye and sent a shower of pain-filled lights blasting through his brain. The next insanely hard right broke his been-broke-before nose with that peculiar, hear-it-in-your-head *crunch*. Immediately, his eyes filled with tears and blood flooded the back of his throat.

On the brink of unconsciousness, unable to grab for the pistol under his seat without releasing the monster's knife-hand, Griffin reached deep into that reservoir of strength or stubbornness of whatever it was that made him *him* and made his move.

Using the thick wrist as a fulcrum, he swung his legs up and around toward Hillybilly, leaned back against the driver's door, and used the leverage of his entire body to lock the knife hand against his chest. Now the behemoth's size worked against him, and the clumsy, stretched-out position forced by Griffin's unexpected move placed him at a momentary disadvantage. Before he could recover, Griffin pinned him against the passenger door with his left leg, put everything he had into the right, and drove his boot into the tangled mass of beard where Hillybilly's jaw should be. Both jaw and passenger door-latch both broke with audible *craaackks*, and the

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Neanderthal flopped limply onto the steamy asphalt of the parking lot.



Fifteen stitches closed the wound in Griffin's eyebrow. Seven more decorated his chin. His nose was reset. The eyebrow throbbed, the chin hurt, and the nose ached, but it was his still-hyped mind that wouldn't let him sleep.

Four tall Black Jacks, and his brain still danced with images of homicidal Hillybillies and less-than-lonely Lisas. Eventually, Griffin knew, the post-adrenaline crash would catch up and drag him into a deep sleep, but without that relief at hand, he poured a fresh drink, lit a smoke, and wandered down the back-trail of his day.

It started like so many others...

## CHAPTER TWO

### WEDNESDAY—JULY 18—6:00 AM

*Beep beep beep.*

*Fucking pager.*

*Beep beep beep.*

Griffin glanced at the glowing numbers on the bedside clock: 5:56. Two hours. He'd slept for two hours. *Fuck.*

*Beep beep beep.*

*God hates me.*

He swung his feet to the floor, gathered his energy, and forced himself to a seated position. His head swam, then settled.

*Too much Jack.* His stomach burned and a headache flared between his eyes. *Or not enough.*

Deep breath. Shook out a Marlboro, spun the wheel of his battered old Zippo, and blew a thick stream of smoke into the dark.

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*Beep beep beep.*

He pushed the button, silencing the cursed beeper, gave serious consideration to ignoring the damned thing, then surrendered and dialed the “775” pay phone number.

“Griffeeeeee!” Sunshine. She danced a little, turned a few tricks, made extra cash feeding Griffin information. She sounded obscenely chipper.

“It’s six in the goddamn morning,” Griffin grumbled into the phone. “I just went to bed.”

“Honey, I been in bed a few times tonight, but no sleep for me, neither!” Her laughter hurt his ears.

“Sunshine, please tell me you have a good reason for making me suffer. I’ll never get back to sleep.”

“Oh baby, you just need some good Sunshine lovin’ to take you back to Dream Land,” she crooned.

A tired smile crept onto Griffin’s face. It hurt. “And spoil this beautiful thing we have? You’re too sweet and innocent to do that to.”

“Sweet and innocent? *God*, don’t I wish.”

Farfetched, maybe, but Griffin could tell she liked the notion. “You’re an angel of purity compared to most, so don’t sell yourself short. Now, my head is a mushmellon, so tell me what’s up before it explodes.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know about all that, Griffiee, but a man like you could make an honest woman out of me...”

She paused, and Griffin suspected it was to give him an opportunity to say something, but he held his tongue. After a few long heartbeats, she continued, a touch of disappointment in her tone.

“I got somethin’ for ya. Guy’s a real asshole, and he’s movin’ a buncha meth.”

“Tell me about it. Who? Where?”

“Biker guy. They call him Arnold-the-Pig. He lives by the tracks at the bottom of Fourteenth. You’ll know the house. He’s got a hog chained up out front, an old pickup parked on the side, and one of those *redneck* flags hangin’ on the porch.”

“And you say he’s got a *pig* chained up in front?”

“*What?*”

“You just said he had a pig chained up out front.”

“Wha—I did not! A *hog*, you ass! You know good-and-damn-well what I meant! A big old smelly bike!”

“Ah! And a *redneck* flag?”

“You know what I’m talkin’ about, *Griffin*. Now hurry up and ask me whatever it is you want to ask. I gotta go to bed—to *sleep!*”

Griffin’s laugh hurt his soggy brain. “What do you mean by ‘a buncha Meth?’”

“He only deals to smaller guys. No user weight. Word is he’s in a gang.”

“Okay. Arnold-the-Pig. Fourteenth Street. Gang. Anything else? Can you make a buy from him? Introduce me so I can make one?”

“Nah, nothin’ like that. Another biker-dude took me for a ride the other day, and that’s where we ended up. He and this Pig are asshole buddies or somethin’.”

“Keep usin’ bad words and I’ll wash your mouth out with soap. You’re a young lady, after all.”

“Baby, all the nasty you-know-what’s been in my mouth, you gonna need somethin’ stronger than soap.”

Griffin felt a rush of affection for the damaged girl. In his post-Lisa funk, it took a life-abused, burnt-out-at-nineteen streetwalker to bring some warmth and a smile. *Sunshine*. “Why you dimin’ this guy?”

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“Griffin! I always help you...”

“Sunshine, if you told me everything you ran across, I’d be working for eternity, so spill it.”

“The fat bastard wanted somethin’, and when he didn’t get it he slapped me around a little.” Her voice turned sullen and flat. “So now he’ll get what he deserves—The Griffin.”

“Ah, I see.” *The Griffin?* “Let me look into your Arnold-the-Pig guy. If I get something, I’ll take care of you.”

“You always do. You’re the only one who does. That’s why I look out for you. Y’think it’s all about the money?”

Griffin let her question hang. He was a cop. A married cop. What could he say to an infatuated hooker?

Her sigh carried quite clearly through the telephone. “Bye, Griffiee. Get some zee-time.”

The dial tone replaced Sunshine’s chirpy words and left Griffin a touch lonelier than he cared to acknowledge. *Sunshine*. Could a girl so badly damaged by life’s rockier roads ever be repaired? Probably not. Happy endings were seldom found outside fairy tales, and Griffin didn’t believe in fairy tales. He thought of Lisa, asleep in another man’s bed after sharing his for so long, and Sunshine, seeking her own after sharing so many.

Happy endings? *Bullshit.*



It only took a few calls for Griffin to get on top of Sunshine’s “Pig.”

Arnold Feldman sold Crystal (Methamphetamine) in ounce or more weight to freelance dealers slightly farther down the food chain than himself. He could also, Griffin was told, provide mind-altering pills—most of the time—several

different types of Acid—always—and Marijuana in pound or greater weight—usually—to his better customers. Arnold did his best to keep everyone supplied. He was, in his own way, a dedicated public servant. Unfortunately for Arnold, his entrepreneurial endeavors now held the attention of another public servant: Michael Griffin of the State Narcotics Task Force.

Footloose and searching for direction after six years in The Corps, Griffin took the police exam on a whim, but that impulse introduced him to a job whose hazards and unpredictability quenched an ingrained need for adventure. At thirty, he had seven years in, the last two working narcotics with the task force, an assignment he found especially satisfying. In addition to the obvious risks associated with narcotics work, however, Griffin discovered more subtle dangers less easily defeated than those presented by the criminal element.

Like nearly every agent on the task force, his alcohol and cigarette intake increased dramatically with the assignment, then increased again with his wife's unexpected departure. He fought the physical tolls of his addictions with demanding workouts and daily runs, but exercise couldn't mend the damage to his marriage. In keeping with the narcotics assignment, he wore shaggy, shoulder-length hair and a beard, more red than brown. Lisa didn't approve; she described the look as "thuggish."

Griffin's Scot-Irish blood showed in fair skin and green eyes, eyes that missed little and projected intelligence, good humor, and occasionally, fiery temper. Since Lisa's exit, stage left, they just looked tired.

The Pig's house squatted like an ugly duckling at the south end of Fourteenth, where it dead-ended at the tracks, and came with a scenic view of trash piles, a stripped down

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Chevrolet, and houses only minutely less decrepit. Water, electricity, and phone records for the dilapidated, pre-World War II clapboard returned to three variations of the name Anthony George Brown, with different combinations of birth date, social security number, and prior address. This was consistent with “dope house” and fit well into the search warrant affidavit assembling in Griffin’s head.

Feldman’s file documented affiliation with the *Southern Savages*, a notorious gang, who’s patch-holders fancied calling themselves the SS. A mixed bag of whackos, felons, and misfits dredged from murky pools of genetic confusion, they disproved Himmler’s dream of racial purity.

Surveillance of the decrepit house revealed a steady flow of short-term traffic consistent with drug sales, another fact to include in the search warrant affidavit. The full-custom Harley chained to the porch and the rebel flag tacked to the front wall were bold statements for such a crime-ridden, racially mixed neighborhood, solidifying Griffin’s belief The Pig would have weapons. Adding to this assumption was Feldman’s criminal record, which detailed a lifetime of crime with arrests for battery, narcotics possession, narcotics distribution, manslaughter, aggravated sexual assault, and indecency with a minor.

A class act.



With just over 200,000 residents, Stuart lay divided into four nearly equal parts by the intersection of Interstate Highways Forty and Ninety-five. The only major city in that part of Carolina, a short drive from sprawling military bases, Stuart reaped many of the blessings and all the curses of much larger

cities. Violent crime statistics were well out of proportion for a city of its size, and a rampant narcotics industry prompted Federal funding for the task force, comprised of investigators from Stuart's police and sheriff's departments under State Bureau of Investigation management.

Noon of the Eighteenth found Griffin preparing his warrant in the Task Force headquarters, half a run down strip mall where he shared an office with the City agents; Big Wade, Magic, and the Worm. The other investigators straggled in around noon, and finding the search warrant brief in their in-boxes, drifted into the muster room.

Six inches over six feet, clad in ragged jeans, a grungy "Show Me Your Tits" T-shirt, and lace up, steel-toed boots, Big Wade Branson defined what fathers fear their daughters might bring home. Nearly bleeding eyeballs gave testament to an alcohol-fueled night, and whether he survived the day seemed dependent upon the coffee he slurped from a most disreputable mug.

Looks aside, Big Wade's grunge and Coastal Carolina drawl concealed insightful intelligence, a big heart, and buckets of balls. He was well-spoken—when he chose to be—and well read. Though Big Wade's down-home mannerisms sometimes reminded Griffin of Sheriff Andy Taylor on the old TV show, he was an excellent investigator and Griffin's closest friend.

"Mornin', Grif" came out sounding more like, "Maaww-nin Gree-iff" in Wade-speak.

"Mornin', Wade. You look like roadkill."

"I must look better'n I feel."

"Not from where I stand."

Their friendly banter died with the arrival of Mark "The Worm" Downey. The Worm knew the *bows* of being a cop,

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but didn't have the *rest* of it. He couldn't grasp the convoluted logic of the "street." He lacked common sense, the true key to police work. A trash-talker, he wouldn't back up his caustic mouth. Brother officers shunned him. Criminals prospered. Informants went silent. But The Worm was destined for greatness—because he kissed ass with great enthusiasm. Rumor had it that when the boss farted, The Worm burped.

"Morning, Guys," The Worm slurp-lipped through the lake of saliva in the blowhole beneath his nose.

"Downey," Griffin and Wade responded in unison.

"Gonna do us a little search warrant, huh?" Spit dripped to the floor.

"Yep," they replied in synchronized monotone.

"First in the door, Grif?"

Griffin cringed at the familiarized use of his name.

"You know damn well Grif is *always* first in for his papers," Edward "Magic" Spellman said from the doorway. "Unlike other, less *adventurous* souls."

The Worm smirked, took his seat. "The case agent should be to the rear, where he can maintain proper control." Technically, he was right, but mainly he was ball-less.

Magic snorted. Athletically built, sharp-featured, and handsome, he was a native of The Bronx. He'd attended Stuart State on scholastic scholarship, then shelved his Accounting degree in favor of the less predictable life of a police officer. Magic usually partnered with Anton "The Stump" Grimes, the only other black guy in the unit. This was less from preference—though Grimes was a solid cop—than from the fact that two "brothers" on the street generated less heat than a salt and pepper team.

Finished diagramming the layout of The Pig's place on the chalkboard, Griffin surveyed the odd assortment of men

assembled for the warrant.

A tough man in any situation, Sergeant Peter “Petey” Boone looked out for his men. Tall and good-looking in an aging beach-bum kind of way, he juggled girlfriends and ex-wives with great dexterity. A legend in the Department for having shot the balls off a knife-wielding assailant, a status he relished, he’d once admitted to Griffin during a drunken “choir practice” that he’d been aiming for the man’s head.

A hardworking agent assigned from the County, Wade “Little Wade” Shelby was a quiet investigator who produced solid cases without fanfare. Medium *everything*, he could blend into any crowd, had a sense of humor drier than the Sahara, and nerves of steel.

Vying with Downey for the title of Supreme Suckmeister, County investigator John “Hoover” Hadley’s nickname related to the vacuum—massive suction—not the FBI Director. Unlike Downey, who could at least conduct an investigation, Hadley just occupied an investigator’s slot. He was worthless. Dead weight. An oxygen thief. *Spineless, backstabbing, and dim* came to mind when Griffin thought about Hadley, which was seldom as possible.

Short, stocky, and bull-strong, Stuart County Sergeant Scott Peterson took no crap. Despite twenty years on the job, he still hit the street with aggressiveness matched by few; one good cop.

“Task Force” seemed a grandiose title for such a skeleton crew, but they got by.

“Mornin’, gents,” Griffin said over the noisy chatter. “You should all have a briefing folder, so I’ll skip the bullshit and get right to—”

The Task Force Director may have intended to enter unobtrusively, but his unexpected appearance at an operational

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brief created a pregnant hush.

“Please continue, Mister Griffin,” said Byron M. Styles, face blank, eyes cool.

A hard man to read, Griffin seldom knew what to make of Styles, with his suits and formalities and stone-carved expressions. The Worm and Hoover, however, appeared less doubtful. The spineless duo set to preening like birds in the sun, basking in the warm glow of *The Director*.

Big Wade winked. Magic blew a kiss. Nothing else to do, Griffin continued. But for a few blanks, the warrant was done. All he needed was a little cooperation from some not-so-good Samaritans.



One ear tuned to FM 105—*Stevie Nicks*—the other to the encrypted narcotics channel, Griffin watched the Pig Pad. He had an unobstructed view, and The Pig was busy.

With plenty of potential candidates for the planned “stop-n-talk,” Griffin finally settled on a couple that entered The Sty together. Even from a distance, they had that wired, strung-out meth-head look that said they were heavy users. Nearly phobic of drugs, Griffin despised Meth more than most.

Crystal Methamphetamine, usually known as crank, crystal, or meth, gave a spiky, long-lasting high greatly favored by hard-core partiers. Too many exotic dancers used the can't-hold-it-in energy boost to dance their asses off, only to find themselves washed up, worn out, and old before their time. Though Meth supplied a long-lasting high, the post-Meth crash was a high dive into a shallow pool of shit, and Meth-heads' hyper-paranoid, quick-to-freak reactions made them

especially dangerous.

Griffin's choice of *Good Samaritans* looked to be in their thirties, but were probably younger. Meth ages its slaves. Their closeness as they moved toward the house and their "sharing of space" as they waited at the front door suggested intimacy. *Bingo*. Couples were best: two people doubled the odds of success, and almost invariably one of the pair would cop to the dope in order to protect the other.

Love is a wonderful thing.

Faulty brake lights, a pretext to stop, yes, but a perfectly legal pretext, prompted Patrol Officer Martinelli's stop of Kevin Lamper's rusty Yugo.

Lamper and his "almost-common-law-wife" Heather were fine specimens. Surprisingly astute, young Kevin almost immediately recognized the true nature of their predicament and gave himself completely to a scenario constructed well before his badly timed introduction. Without hesitation, he allowed Officer Martinelli to search the vehicle, and just as quickly claimed the Meth found beneath the front seat as his, and his alone.

*Perfect.*



"So, ya wanna play ball?" Griffin asked.

"Play ball?" parroted Lamper. Despite the heat, he wore a long sleeve "Just Say Yes To Jesus" T-shirt. Fidgety and stick-thin, with sharp, scrunched features, he looked distinctly rodent-like hunched on the curb in front of the patrol car.

"Yup, play ball." Griffin spun the wheel on his Zippo, lit up, leaned against the fender. "You're a smart guy. You know what I want. Help me out, and I'll help you out."

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"I'll walk?" Hope made an appearance on the pinched face.

That hope disappeared with Griffin's, "Nope."

"Can I have a smoke?"

Griffin stuck a Marlboro between the handcuffed Lamper's lips and lit it. "Can't let you walk, but I'll talk to the Assistant District Attorney. We should be able to do *Possession With Intent* instead of *Trafficking*. Probably end up pleading down to *Felony Possession*."

"Mannnn, I dunno..." Lamper whined.

"But I *do* let your woman walk. Otherwise..." Griffin left the unspoken threat hanging in the air.

"Ahhh man, I'm so fucked..."

"Yup."



*Nut cut'n time.*

The thick smell of sweat-drenched men filled Griffin's nostrils as they crowded together on the dirty floor of the gutted old van. Big Wade cradled the ram in his lap. He looked serene, as he usually did when his adrenals started kicking in. Head back, eyes closed, Magic hummed a bluesy tune, a half-smile on his youthful face. Little Wade ate a tootsie-roll, expression blank as a wall.

Griffin did his best to ignore the breathtaking heat, but even the air he took into his lungs left a hot trail down his throat. He wanted a cigarette, pushed the craving away, tried to concentrate on what they were about to do. It was hard. He'd been distracted since his future ex-wife left.

"N-Four, N-Three," Peterson said into the radio.

"Three, Four," Boone's voiced crackled in reply.

“Ready?”

“Ten-Four. No activity. We’re set up and ready to roll.”

Peterson looked back over his shoulder, met Griffin’s eyes. “Boone and Downey are set up to cover the rear. You ready?”

Griffin gave him a nod.

“Four, Three,” Peterson called after dropping the van into gear, “We’re rolling. Two minutes out.”

Boone and The Worm would cover the rear door when the entry team took the front, but barring an emergency, wouldn’t enter until the house was secure. Hadley had a position across the tracks from the target. He’d be out of the way there.

As they approached the target, Griffin forced himself to focus. Four men to hit a house, even a small house with only one occupant, was insufficient, but not uncommon for the underpowered team. He checked his men: each sported a black raid jacket with “Police” displayed in big white letters, front and back. Each wore a badge suspended from a chain around the neck. Every sweaty head was topped by a black hat, again marked “Police” in big white letters. These precautions helped team members identify one another in the controlled chaos of a raid, and prevented suspects sliding off the hook with “I didn’t know they were cops when I started shooting” excuses.

Griffin tapped the pocket of his jacket, felt the firm resistance of the warrant. *All set.*

“Five seconds!” Peterson yelled, and the wheels of the old van jumped the curb with a teeth-rattling *thump-thump* that bounced the passengers off the floor.

The van was still sliding when Griffin yanked the side door open and leapt into a cloud of dust. Three quick steps put him on the porch, where he assumed a cover position be-

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side the front door. Close on his heels despite the heavy ram, Big Wade quickly covered the distance between the van and the door. In seconds, Little Wade and Magic stacked behind Griffin in a tight, rapid entry stick. Big Wade swung the ram and The Pig's front door exploded from its hinges.

"Police!" Griffin bellowed as he shot through the opening. "Police! Search Warrant!"

Doorways. Fatal Funnels of Fire. The most dangerous spot. Clear the doorway fast and hard...

Completely focused, all plaguing thoughts and distractions banished, Griffin followed the front sight of his pistol into the trash-strewn living room. It smelled of stale beer, rancid food, and marijuana. Surrounded by cans and pizza boxes, a filthy old monstrosity of a couch sagged against one wall. Other than that, the room was empty. Griffin rushed into the short hallway on the far side. He never considered what the others were doing; after many such raids, he knew.

With deceptive speed despite his size, Big Wade would follow him through the door and cover their push down the right side of the house to the master bedroom. Magic and Little Wade would take the left. Sergeant Peterson would secure the front, preventing unexpected visitors. Despite the squeaks and dents, their small force remained, if not well-oiled, at least a *functional* law enforcement machine.

*So where the hell was The Pig?*



Arnold-The-Pig Feldman sat shirtless and barefoot in the oppressive heat of the bathroom, rancid jeans pooled around his ankles, shiny rivers of sweat streaming down his bloated body. Proving himself multi-talented, The Pig perched his

large ass on a relatively small toilet seat, ravenously eyeing the age distorted *Hustler* centerfold in his left hand, while simultaneously mulching a day-old Hoagie clutched in his right. The stench he produced, and rather enjoyed, lay so thickly in the air that even the roaches had gone into hiding. Though a long mile from genius, Arnold was a seasoned criminal, and immediately grasped the significance of the situation when his door caved in.

“Police! Police! Search Warrant!”

Wisely, the aging con chose not to move when the big narc came wheeling into the bedroom. Busted on a crusty throne in his doorless bathroom, limp-dicked and eating a sandwich.

*Ain't life a bitch?*



Front sight of his .45 trained on The Pig's sloped forehead, Griffin approached the bathroom quickly, only to be assaulted by the eye-watering, stomach-turning stench.

“Don't fucking move! Don't even blink,” was all he got out before he felt, more than saw, the blur hurtling toward him from the far side of the room.

Two ear-shattering blasts punctuated Big Wade's timely entrance, and seventy-five pounds of mortally wounded pit-bull slid to a halt at Griffin's feet. It yowled and spun itself in a pain-crazed circle with one spasmodically working leg until a third shot from Big Wade's Ruger splattered the wall with blood and brains.

Very carefully, Griffin relaxed his trigger finger. Another tenth of a pound and The Pig would have been a red smear behind the world's filthiest toilet, and that scared Griffin.

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He'd almost blown a man's brains to Georgia because he, the allegedly professional cop, fucked up: He hadn't asked Lamper about dogs, a standard concern when preparing warrants.

*I need to get my head out of my ass.*



A footlocker yielded nearly a pound of orange-colored Meth, a rainbow of pills, ten pounds of low-grade weed, three pistols, and nineteen thousand dollars. The Pig was looking at serious time, and the aging outlaw had reached the point where time wasn't so easy. Younger, tougher, more feral cons made the state pen even riskier than dealing *crank* on the street. Screwed as he was, maybe The Pig would play *let's make a deal*.

"So Arnold, you're kind of fucked here, bro." Griffin sat on the arm of the couch—the cushions were just too scary.

The Pig sat deep in the couch, on a spot that saw enough of his ass to become a crater. "I don't see it that way," he said. "I stopped by to see a friend, and next thing I know, you guys is killin' dogs and throwin' me around like I done sumpin' wrong. Don't seem right."

Griffin smiled, lit one, and blew his smoke at the ceiling. "Now Pig, let's not get mired in bullshit, huh? *Trafficking Meth*. Enough pills and *mota* for *Possession With Intent*. And let's not forget *Felon In Possession of a Firearm*, a five year minimum-mandatory."

He saw fear in The Pig's eyes.

"So you're screwed, and that's for sure. How *badly* screwed is something we could work on, you and I."

Head back, eyes closed, sweat dripping, Arnold was the picture of life gone wrong. He spoke without lifting his head

or opening his eyes. "I ain't no snitch."

"Of course not," Griffin agreed.

"But I ain't doin' nobody else's time, neither. What's the deal?"

"Play it straight, give me what I want with no bullshit, and I imagine we can make the *Felon In Possession* disappear, and probably knock the *Trafficking* down to *Possession With Intent*."

"Motherfucker, that still puts me inside. You must have me confused with some punk-ass fish."

A hard grin snuck onto Griffin's face. He leaned down to put himself eye-to-eye with The Pig. "Take it or leave it. You weren't sellin' girl scout cookies, so you gotta dance to the music, but it saves you a bunch of years." He leaned closer still, grabbed The Pig's ear, and drug him forward until their foreheads cracked together. *Smack Sunshine around, will you?* "And if you call me motherfucker again, *motherfucker*, you'll be spittin' teeth. Understand?" He gave the ear a twist for emphasis.

The Pig's face scrunched with pain. "Yeah, *goddammit*. It's just how I talk, man. Ease off, hey?"

Griffin released the ear. He wanted to wash his hand. "What do you say? Wanna play my game, or get out of the joint an old man with some young stud's name tattooed across your ass?"

"What if I wanna talk to a lawyer first?"

Griffin sighed disinterest. "Then the deal's off. It's a limited time offer."

"How do I know I can trust you? You could fuck me over."

"Arnold, where's your faith, man?" Griffin laid a hand on the old biker's shoulder. "Ask around. I keep my word, even

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to lowlife pukes like you. But ask around *later*, because right now it's decision time."

It didn't take long. "I had a bro, Fungus, got runned over by a train. He's the one hooked me up with this dude—Billy."

"Billy. Billy what?"

"Billy," said Feldman, "Just Billy." His chin disappeared into rolls of neck-fat as he shook his head. "Never knowed his last name. Don't know where he's from, neither, but he's a real country fuck, y'know? Wears overalls. Looks like a damn farmer."

"Know where Billy gets his shit?"

"He grows the weed. Makes the crank. Don't know where he gets the pills, but he's always got plenty."

"What kind of weight can he deliver?"

"Billy don't never move less than half a pound of his high-grade zonk."

"Can you set it up so I can buy directly from him?"

"Nah, he'd never go for that. It ain't like we's bros, or nothin'. I just give 'im a call, tell 'im what I need, and meet him at that rest area on ninety-five."

Griffin considered that for a minute. "What about you call in an order, but tell Billy you're sendin' someone else to pick it up? That way I get what I want, and you spend less time in the joint."

"I could probably do that," The Pig said. "Billy's kind of strange, though..."

"Give it your best shot, huh Arnold? Your future depends on it."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Does this guy carry a piece?" Griffin said.

The Pig smiled, exposing his pearly browns. "I ain't never

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seen that Ol' Hillbilly with a piece." His smile grew. "No sir, I never have."

*Billy. Hillbilly. Billybilly? Hillybilly.*

"So let's give this Hillybilly a call..."

## CHAPTER THREE

### THURSDAY—JULY 19—10:13 A.M.

“*God.*”

Griffin’s hope for divine intervention dwindled, then disappeared as the phone continued its obnoxious shrilling. Reluctantly, his hand slid out, grabbed the handset, and dragged it to his head, which felt like a kindergarten kickball at recess.

“What?” he croaked.

“How ya’ feelin’, beau?” Wade sounded disgustingly cheerful.

“I *was* fine. What do you want?”

“Is that any way to talk to the man, nay, the incredibly talented *pistolero*, who saved your ass yesterday?”

“I knew I would hear about that. You have no modesty.”

“None at all,” agreed Wade. “Modesty seems so insincere when you’re as talented as I.”

“Why are you bothering me? My battered head earned me the day off.”

“Yeah, I heard that old redneck boy gave you one severe asswhoopin’.”

“You heard wrong. I wore him down, then pounced. Simple, really.”

Wade laughed. “Lisa called. She didn’t say what she wanted. Thought I’d give you a heads up.”

“Oh.” He didn’t want to talk about Lisa, didn’t want to hear about Lisa, didn’t want to *think* about Lisa. “Thanks.”

She was all he wanted to talk about, hear about, think about. *Maybe she’ll call. I hope not. But still, maybe...*

Perhaps sensing his partner’s distress, or perhaps oblivious, it was hard to know with Wade, he rambled happily onward. “And your favorite sidekick is stuck in the office for the day.”

“The dog?” Animal or human, a line of duty shooting was a line of duty shooting, and generated mountains of paper.

“Yup. I should write a novel, it wouldn’t take as long.”

“What about the paper on Hillybilly’s place?”

“Styles and our crew are down in Pine County with the State boys. Last I heard, they’d grabbed a few hundred plants in a high-tech grow house, fifteen pounds of Meth in a lab with all the fixins, and sixty-five thousand cash. The newsies are on it, so Styles is shittin’ in tall cotton.”

“I’m happy that he’s happy.”

“And by the way,” Wade added, “I met your Hillbilly pal when they brought him in from the hospital. They had to wire the pieces of his jaw together, but he managed to communicate. He said he’d look you up someday. Wanted to be

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sure you got the message. I guess he's not the forgivin' type."

"Guess not," agreed Griffin. How many threats or promises had he received over the years? He should keep track, maybe set a Guinness record.

"I told him he'd have to get at the tail end of a mighty long line for a shot at your ass," Wade continued happily.

Griffin considered those electric moments trapped in the Jeep, the insane strength of the man, and decided that, unlike most, a threat from Hillybilly might be worth remembering. "Guess I rub some people the wrong way."

Wade was still laughing when Griffin hung up.



A hot shower, cold pizza, and day-old coffee started the day. Though Griffin's head still ached, and the purpling, pounded face in the mirror looked like something from a bad dream, he felt almost human. Restless, he wandered the house, did small, make-work chores, and tried to ignore the cold shadow of encroaching loneliness.

Purchased pre-Lisa, the log A-frame seemed inordinately empty now that she'd moved on to greener pastures. An ironic twist, as she'd never liked Griffin's treasured homestead.

Bequeathed to the State by the last of the prominent Beaumont Family in 1904, the Catawba State Forest surrounded Griffin's ten acres, land set aside for Jeremy English, the Beaumont's foreman. Jeremy's great-grandson built the winged A-frame over the remains of his family's original cabin, but unfortunately, he had a fondness for horses, *racing* horses, and no particular talent for picking winners. Gambling debts cost him the house and his marriage; scotch and a slick road cost him his life.

The trail that led Griffin to own his small chunk of heaven was a roundabout string of coincidence, the kind of seemingly inconsequential events that build upon one another to create life's milestones.



Lights off, Patrolman Michael Griffin idled his cruiser into the dark mouth of the alley. The brief wink of a taillight had drawn his attention, and it came from a Cadillac that had no business being there in the crumbling brick maze of the old warehouse district. Slipping the shifter to neutral, he used the emergency brake to stop without telltale brake lights, but his attempt at stealth failed. As he padded toward the tint-windowed testament to free enterprise, the driver's door opened and spat a wobbly figure into the garbage-littered blackness.

Hampered by five inch spikes, the prostitute known as Delilah LaRue proved less than elusive, and the tottering escape attempt ended against grimy bricks with the sound of ratcheting handcuffs.

Sweating in the fetid dampness of the alley, Griffin kept the hustler pinned to the wall and ran his hand up under the mini-skirt, front and back, then inside the black push-up bra visible through the gauzy white top. One wishful cup surrendered a wallet, the other two rings and a Rolex.

"What are you up to, Dennis?" Griffin said.

Delilah LaRue to friends and customers, but Dennis Larkin to the cops on the beat, who knew him well.

"I didn't do anything, Officer Griffin," said the winded harlot. His breath smelled like peach brandy and cigarettes. "My boyfriend and I were parking, he's so *romantic*, and he fell

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asleep. I wanted to stretch my legs, but you scared me! You shouldn't scare a girl like that!"

"Dennis, Dennis, Dennis." Griffin propped his prisoner against the Cadi's front fender, aimed his flashlight through the windshield, and saw the crumpled form on the front seat. "You're in serious trouble. This looks like Ag-robbery."

"No!" Dennis wailed, collapsing across the hood. "He's drunk, that's all. Drunk! I'd never hurt anybody, you know that!"

The man was alive, strong pulse, no visible wounds. He looked like Joe Middle-Aged-Businessman, smelled like a Bourbon Street slop trough.

"Okay, Dennis," Griffin pulled the mascara-streaked drama queen off the hood, "Spill it."

Lopsided on a broken heel, Dennis sniffled. "Must you call me that?" A plum-sized adam's apple bounced in his neck. "A girl can't control how she was born."

"I'll call you Delilah when you tell the truth," Griffin said. "Right now I'm trying to decide whether to take you in, or whether some discretion might be in order. Your level of truthfulness will help me decide."

He tapped Dennis on the sternum. "But lie to me," tap, "and I'll know if you do," tap, "and it *will* piss me off," tap, "and I *will* lock you up," tap, "in a bad place where you'll get no money for the miles of dick rammed up your ass," tap. "Got it?"

Ladylike, Dennis dipped his head and dragged his runny nose across the shoulder of his blouse. "Promise?" A pimple the size of an anthill decorated the bulbous tip of his decidedly masculine nose.

"What?"

"Promise you'll call me Delilah?" He tossed the platinum

curls of his wig Monroe-ishly.

*God.* Griffin didn't want to waste his night at the station building a mountain of paper when he could be doing something productive, like patrolling his zone. Joe Businessman would never come forward to testify against a known male prostitute, never acknowledge such an embarrassing situation, so the paperwork and minor inconvenience to Dennis were pointless.

"Yes, I'll call you Delilah if you tell the truth. Do that, and I might cut you loose—with some strings, of course."

"Well, it happened like this..."

Dennis' "friend" enjoyed a few too many at a downtown gentlemen's club. Moving in as the man staggered into the parking lot, Dennis helped the nearly comatose mark to his car, where he promptly passed out. The end—except for the robbery part, of course.

With the clear understanding that she owed Griffin big, Delilah got a free pass and swished into the night.

The picture on the driver's license in the wallet matched the man in the car: Marion Webley. The name rang a bell in the back of Griffin's head, and then it clicked: Webley, a well known community activist who'd pulled himself up from humble roots. He owned a real estate and development company, sponsored youth leagues, built parks, and contributed to charity organizations.

After dropping Webley at the all night diner of Sally Small, a straight-shooting ex-prostitute who agreed to safeguard the besotted mogul, Griffin went back to patrolling his zone. Life on the street, where a cop's most effective weapon was often well-aimed discretion.

Delilah delivered on her I-O-U. She identified a pair of slugs brutalizing downtown prostitutes. The predatory duo

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went down for a long stretch. Justice served? More or less, Griffin supposed. It was hard to know, sometimes.

Months later, again working the midnight shift downtown, he stopped at Sally's for coffee and a chance to catch up on his reports. The diminutive, still-attractive woman wiped down the already spotless table.

"Hey, Sally. I'll have coffee, black."

"Coffee only?" she said, words still thick with the accent of her German homeland. "You *verke* hard. You need food. Coffee, eggs, ham, hashbrowns, *ja?*"

"No, Sally, just the—" but she was gone.

Engrossed in his paperwork, he didn't look up when the coffee arrived, not until the waiter set the pot down and slid into the booth across from him.

"Officer Griffin, I hope you will excuse my intrusion."

Griffin's eyes locked onto the face. In less than a second, his brain matched it to the nearly forgotten incident. "Mister Webley."

Webley smiled, went a little pink, but his eyes were clear, his hands weren't shaking, and he didn't smell like a distillery. "So you remember. I guess I'd hoped you wouldn't. I've wanted to call you, to thank you for what you did, but I...I..." He looked down at the table, his discomfort as obvious as the Rolex on his wrist.

"We all have a bad day now and again," Griffin said. He sipped his coffee. "Forget it."

But Webley wouldn't forget it, he wasn't the kind of man to forget such a thing, and over time, despite differences in age and financial status, Griffin, Webley, and Webley's new bride, Sally, developed a unique friendship. When the English property came up for bankruptcy auction, Webley picked it up well below market value, then sold it to Griffin for not

much more. Friendship, coincidence and happenstance; building blocks of the future.



The cornflake crunch of tires on gravel warned of company, and a glance out the window confirmed it: Lisa, in her new Mustang convertible—a reward from her father for leaving Griffin. She was business-chic in blazer, skirt, and heels, sexier somehow for the blending of professional attitude with feminine curves. Perfect legs and a sexy French braid completed the look and made for one hot package.

Griffin met her on the porch. He tried to keep his face blank, hide the hope from showing in his eyes. Only three weeks apart, she made him feel like a tongue-tied clod.

“Hello, Lisa.”

“Hello, Michael.” She was just about the only person on the planet who called Griffin by his given name. “May I come in?”

“It’s still your house,” Griffin answered as she brushed past. She smelled like...*desire*.

Lisa laughed. “No Michael,” she gestured vaguely around her, “It’s yours. Always yours. Never mine.”

Her casual dismissal hammered the finality home like nothing else. She was gone for good. They were done.



Naive for a cop, her Michael, but he looked so damn good standing there in his old shorts, all battered and stitched. It made her weak in the knees. She had always loved the way he looked: handsome, in that hard-jawed, narrow-eyed way pecu-

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liar to Southern men of Celtic blood. A little bit dangerous. She wondered if she could make him her lover after she married Arthur. Probably not. Michael was so damned conservative about some things, and fidelity was one of them.

She was sure he'd never strayed, equally sure he knew nothing about her year long affair with Arthur Beale. Though no match for Michael in the bedroom, Arthur had money, *old* money, and an overpowering abundance of screw-you-out-of-my-way ambition. He was surely going places, and Lisa Atwater-losing-the-hyphen-Griffin planned to go with him. She had the rest of her life to find satisfying lovers.

*But not today. Today I'm going to fuck Michael's brains out. I need that, and there's no reason I shouldn't have it.* "I heard about yesterday, that you'd been hurt." Her full lips shaped a pout. "I needed to make sure you were okay."



He should have known. Always intense, their sex burned hotter still when Griffin bore evidence of violent encounter, as if Lisa came alive with vicarious proximity to life's raw edges.

"I'm fine. Wasn't a big thing."

Lisa eyed his face. "Still, I thought I should check on you." She threw her blazer across the back of the couch. The white silk blouse beneath did little to conceal the lacy camisole that wrapped her body.

"I'm fine," came out less forcibly than intended: the sight of her stole the strength from his words and made his mouth go dry.

*I will not be her dildo.*



Lisa saw the impact she created as she walked to where he sat in his favorite chair, an ancient leather monstrosity of a recliner that had belonged to his father. She enjoyed the power she wielded over Michael and nearly every other man she'd encountered. He was stronger than most, more in control, but she could still push his buttons, her victory only sweeter for his strength. She put a little extra roll in her hips as she closed the gap.

"Is there some reason we can't be friends, Michael?"

"You're my *wife*. I prefer matrimony to friendship, if it comes to that," he said, but she could see it in his eyes—*desire*.

She touched his shaggy head, outlined the bruising around his eye with a soft, manicured finger, hips within inches of his face. "Michael, Michael, Michael, we've been through all that. Our lives went different directions. We have different goals, different ambitions, but I still care about you as a person, as a friend...and friends *do* have *needs*, Michael."



Griffin didn't recall having "been through all that," but it didn't seem the time to dig into it. Three weeks sexless, Lisa stood too close for him to think clearly. He smelled her perfume and the musky, *much* sexier aroused-woman scent beneath that perfume. He needed to make his break while he still could.

"I appreciate you stopping by," he said, pushing to his feet, "but I'm pretty tired." He would maintain his discipline. *C-O-N-T-R-O-L*, he spelled out in his mind.

Lisa reached back and opened the zipper at the small of her back. It was an innocent, feminine gesture, yet she somehow made it an event...a show...*torture*. The taut material of

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her skirt parted almost magically, as if it wanted nothing more than to be stripped from the heated skin beneath. Griffin felt sure he heard each little ratchet as it fed through the zipper mechanism.

“*Really, Michael?*” She stepped out of her skirt. *Glorious.*

“You’re so tired you can’t help an old friend?”

The blouse fell on top of the skirt.

“You feel *that* bad, Michael?”

The camisole dropped to the floor.

As if discovering previously unexplored territory, Lisa’s hands shaped themselves to the defiant jut of her breasts, held them appreciatively for a moment, then tracked silkily down her torso, Griffin’s eyes in tow.

“*So* tired you don’t *want* me anymore, Michael?” Quite casually, she tossed the words over her shoulder as she moved into the bedroom, naked but for a white sliver of silk, heels that bunched the muscles of her calves to perfection, and the world’s most confident smile.

He watched her walk...stroll...strut...*sashay* into the bedroom and damn near forgot to breathe. *Hot* didn’t describe Lisa. *Hot squared*, maybe. She wanted a quick romp, Griffin knew, a few orgasms for the road. But he didn’t have to play her game. Did she think he didn’t know she was sleeping with Arthur Beale? Practically living with him?

*Well, fuck her. I’m no joyride.*

Full of purpose, he stalked into the bedroom. She could get into her clothes as quick as she shed them, and strut her ass out the door.

“Lisa, you need to...” The words died in his throat.

Bait, he knew, nothing but an incredibly hot pose with no purpose but to draw him in: On her back, naked, scarlet-tipped fingers sliding through the silken blonde curls at the

juncture of perfect thighs. One leg cocked at the knee. Tan. Breasts. Hips. Lips...

He tried to regain his poise, recover the resolve with which he'd entered the room, force the harsh words of refusal past his teeth, but nothing happened. Instead, it was Lisa who took the offensive: her crumpled thong struck Griffin squarely in the chest. It fell at his feet and laid there for only a moment before it was joined by his shorts and the last of his self respect.



Lisa couldn't suppress a shiver of satisfaction. Michael might not be the most ambitious man she'd ever known, but he was certainly the best lay. Probably why she'd stayed with him so long, even after she realized he was going nowhere. Her daddy wanted her to come by his office and sign the papers, and she supposed it was time. She didn't want to hurt Michael, but he'd proven too blue collar to ever succeed in her world. She would marry Arthur, full of goals and raw ambition, a man who saw the future for what it was: opportunity.

Unless she found someone better, of course.



"Griffin, I hear you took a few lumps," said Styles.

Jimmy Hoffa could have called and Griffin would have been less surprised. "I'm fine." Was this a test? A trap of some sort?

"You did a good job. Wanted you to know."

A good job? That didn't fit with what Griffin thought he knew of Byron Styles. "Well...thanks."

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“Be sure to fill out the Use of Force forms if you come in tomorrow.” He made a sharp, coughing sound into the phone that might have been a laugh. “You broke the asshole’s jaw.” Another cough. “If you need another day or two, I’ll send somebody out with that paperwork. We don’t want IA getting a burr up their ass.”

Styles hung up without further conversation, leaving Griffin to wonder if there might be a real cop lurking deep within the suit.



Despite his soggy head, Griffin hit the well worn path connecting his property to the State Park, which had miles of running trails. He enjoyed the solitude, the effort-induced clarity of thought that running delivered, and returned an hour later pleasantly exhausted. Big Wade’s task force ride, a white Nissan 300ZX, squatted in front like speed on a leash, and Griffin found his partner parked on the couch. He wore yesterday’s Levis, ragged tennis shoes, and a red *Come Ride The Wild Pony* T-shirt.

Griffin ignored Wade in favor of a shower, but two minutes later a frosted bottle of Warsteiner appeared over the top of the shower door. Icy German brew slid down his throat, hit his belly, and exploded in a cold ball of pleasure. He called out, “Fancy beer for a hick.”

Wade answered from the bedroom, where Griffin felt sure he was sprawled on the bed. “Yeah, well, I may be a hick, but I am an *educated* hick, and don’t you forget it.”

Griffin took another swallow of cold perfection. Damn Germans. Weapons and beer they could do like nobody else.

“By the way,” Wade said, “your bed smells like *Eau de*

*Rut.*”

He took another pull from the neck of the bottle, set it on the tiled floor, and resumed washing. “Lisa stopped by.”

“I thought she might,” Wade drawled. “Patchin’ things up?”

Griffin considered the question, and it’s source. He didn’t want to talk about Lisa, but Wade was his partner, more than a friend, and probably deserved an answer. “Don’t think so. I think we’re done.”

His admission made it real. “Maybe I’m better off.” He stepped from the bathroom in a towel. “You knew she was sleepin’ with Beale?”

Wade’s eyes slid away. “Ah...well...you know how Stuart is...rumors and such. I don’t put much stock in that truck.”

Lisa had an apartment, Griffin knew. He’d heard the happy little *whispers* that she seldom slept there. They’d just settled in with a new pair of Warsteiners when Magic and the new kid, Justin Baker, arrived laden with beer and pizza.

“Okay if we crash?” asked Magic. “Wade said he was coming out, so we thought maybe we’d make it a party.”

“Guests bearing beer or pizza are always welcome,” replied Griffin. “Those with both are considered family.”

Pre-Lisa, Magic had been a regular visitor. He shook his head in dismay and said, “That old redneck put some serious ugly on you.”

“We both know it would take more than stitches and a bruise or two to detract from my Errol Flynn-ish good looks.”

Magic laughed, opened a Diet Coke, and nodded at Baker. “I brought new meat.”

“You realize you’re keeping evil company?” Griffin said.

Baker smiled, said nothing.

Assigned from the County, he was the newest member of

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the task force. He'd done a three year hitch in the Army, served his year in the County jail, as all new deputies must, but had only a year in patrol prior to his task force assignment. Too fast, it smelled of nepotism, but the kid seemed solid, and Griffin instinctively liked him.

They played poker, ate pizza and, except for Magic, who didn't touch alcohol, guzzled beer. Baker played perfect poker. Griffin started calling him "Cool Hand," like Paul Newman in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*. Wade played with reckless abandon, winning big hands, then losing just as big—his norm. Magic played with calculated caution, efficient as always, neither winning nor losing. Somewhere along the way, Griffin realized that for the first time in many moons he was having fun. It felt good.

He was grabbing a smoke on the back porch, listening to the breeze rustle through the pines, cool air from the stream below wrapping him in a chilly embrace, when Magic came out.

"You know," said Magic, "when it's like this, I can see why a person might want to live beyond the fringes of civilization."

"You know you love it," Griffin said. "It's that whole *Roots* thing, man. It's in your blood—the call of the wild."

Magic laughed, smacked Griffin on the shoulder. "I'll give you *Roots*, white boy." He leaned over and rested his elbows on the porch rail. "But I don't think I could live without city noise."

"I suppose this is like the moon after growing up in New York."

"Yeah," Magic said. "You okay?"

"Sure," said Griffin. "Just some stitches and my damn nose. I've got to stop blocking punches with that. I'm starting

to look like a hockey player.”

“You know what I mean.” He turned to look squarely at Griffin. “Lisa. Divorce. All that?”

Griffin felt embarrassed heat climb onto his face. Not many people could confront him so bluntly on a personal issue. Magic could. Friends and partners, they’d shared too many risks, too many tough days on the street, to be anything but direct with one another.

“I’m okay. Everything just seems out of whack without her around. You get used to sharing your space, I guess.”

“It’s like you told me when Marlene and I split up: It will pass. Everything does. Give it time.”

“I hear you,” Griffin said. “And you? Anyone new?” Eight months before, Magic’s fiancée had dumped him without warning. He’d been devastated.

“Yeah.” He grinned. “I met someone. Cynthia. I want you to meet her.”

“Cool, man. Bring her out. I’ll throw some meat on the grill. We’ll do it up right.”

“I haven’t even told my mom. I want to surprise her,” Magic said. “There’s just one thing...” He turned, leaned his butt against the rail. “She has a little boy. Andre. He’s three. It doesn’t matter to me, hell, I love the little guy, but...I don’t know. What do you think?”

“My friend, if she makes you happy, and you’re fine with Andre, then I say enjoy what you’ve got. Hell, we need a rugrat or two running around.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think, too,” Magic said, “but it’s good to hear it from you.” Magic hadn’t known his father, and it left a mark on his soul.

Griffin offered a sincere smile. “No probs, m’man. I’m always here for you. And when you’re Stuart’s first black Chief

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of Police, I want *you* to always be there for *me*.”

Magic laughed, faked a swing. “I didn’t know we’d be celebrating your survival of the redneck beating or I’d have brought you a bottle. I wanted to have you over to meet Cynthia, so I bought a bottle of that nasty stuff you drink, but then Lisa split, so...”

“It is a sin to refer to good bourbon as *nasty stuff*.” Griffin threw his arm across his friend’s shoulder. “But I forgive you. When you bring Cynthia and Andre to feast upon my perfect barbecue, you can bring my bottle, too. I will provide the sugar water upon which you thrive. Now let’s go play some poker. I’m down at least a buck to that damn Cool Hand.”

*Friends.*

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