

PIT ON THE ROAD TO HELL by JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT

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By Linda Weatherly

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When the telephone rang, I rolled over and squinted blearily in its general direction, my head swimming from too much whiskey the night before. What was this, Grand Central Station? I'd gotten more phone calls in the last week than I had in the entire previous year.

Cursing would-be friends and telemarketers under my breath, I fumbled for the handset. Though booze helped blunt the pain from my ruined legs, the side effects left a lot to be desired. My coordination was off, and I couldn't stop my hands from shaking.

Somehow, I got the receiver up to my ear.

"Who is this?" I rasped.

"Hello, Pit," said a too smooth voice.

I felt the blood drain from my face. Gulping hard, I sat up, nearly dropping the phone.

That voice belonged to Cal Tortelli—or Mr. Smith, as he now called himself. He ran an illegal gambling club outside Philadelphia. When an old college friend of mine fell victim to a blackmail scheme, I had manipulated Smith into handling the problem for us. I didn't know all the details, but I knew the resolution had been neither legal nor pretty for the blackmailers.

Unfortunately, Smith seemed to have taken a particular interest in me. He had researched my life, even going so far as to have my phone bugged. I seemed to intrigue him ... probably due to my trick memory. I could recall every name, date, face, and fact that I had ever encountered.

"Hello, Mr. Smith," I said warily. "What do you want?"

"Don't you ever leave your apartment?" he asked with a low chuckle.

"I try not to. Walking hurts."

"Come outside. I need to see you."

"You're ... here?"

“Yes.” He paused. “And bring your toothbrush, ‘Pit-bull’ Peter Geller. You’re going on a trip.” He hung up.

With an uneasy feeling, I fumbled my phone back into its cradle. I really needed to get an answering machine and start screening calls. Mr. Smith was the last person I wanted to meet again ... in my book, he ranked somewhere south of doctors and lawyers.

Bring a toothbrush? Why a toothbrush, but not a change of clothes?

No sense guessing. Throwing off my blanket, I hauled the hideously scarred pieces of flesh that now passed for my legs over the edge of the bed and, with a groan and several grunts, levered myself to a standing position. From the arches of my feet to the joints of my hips, I ached with a dull constant pain. Getting up was the worst part of any day.

I eyed the nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s on the pillow next to mine. Maybe one quick drink, just to steady my nerves? No, I had better not ... Tortelli/Smith was a sharp man, and I’d need my head clear to deal with him.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced around my spartan bedroom: bed, dresser, nightstand, closet with shut doors. No pictures, no calendars, no clock—time doesn’t mean much when you’re waiting to die. Nothing had been moved; nobody had been inside while I slept.

I felt my attention starting to sharpen, all the little details leaping out at me. It had been an asset in college, a useful talent at work, but my always-racing, always-analyzing mind had pushed me to a nervous breakdown five years before. Thin blades of sunlight shining through the not-quite-closed blinds on the east-facing window meant late morning, somewhere around eleven o’clock. Not that the hour mattered; I only worked one day a month, when I made my regular pilgrimage to Atlantic City to win my monthly expenses at the gambling tables. Sometimes it helps to remember everything ... like the number of aces and face cards played from an eight-deck blackjack shoe.

I had left my silver-handled walking stick leaning up against my night table. Using it, I limped into the kitchen. Four aspirin and a glass of orange juice made breakfast. Then I returned to my bedroom, where I dressed methodically in my last pair of clean pants, a blue-and-gold sweater, and worn leather loafers—all remnants from better days, when I had been a wunderkind at a Wall Street investment bank. But that had been before my nervous breakdown. And before my run-in with the taxi.

At the front door, I paused just long enough to pull on a Yankees cap and shrug on a windbreaker against the cool October weather. In an act of defiance, I

deliberately forgot my toothbrush. Then, taking a firm grip on my walking stick, I slowly limped into the hallway, then out to my building's tiny front porch.

A cold wind gusted, stirring leaves in the gutter. Lowering gray clouds threatened rain. A long black limousine with dark-tinted windows sat double-parked in front of my door, its powerful engine purring. The chauffeur—short but stocky, sporting a military-style haircut and dark sunglasses—opened the rear door and stood stiffly next to it, waiting for me to get in.

Three careful steps down, leaning heavily on the rail, and I reached the sidewalk. When I limped over to the limo, I noticed the bulge of a gun at the chauffeur's right armpit—which meant he was not only armed, but also left-handed. Just another useless detail I couldn't help but observe. My mind turned like a well-oiled machine now, noting everything around me and analyzing it.

Surreptitiously, I gave a quick glance up and down the block, but found no sign of life—everybody in my lower working—class neighborhood had already gone off to work or school or whatever else they did during the day—no witnesses to see my abduction.

Carefully, grimacing a bit, I lowered myself into the extra-roomy backseat and stretched out my legs. They hurt less that way.

Mr. Smith sat inside, dressed, as he had been the last time we met, in an impeccable Italian silk suit. He wore his short salt-and-pepper hair swept back, and the faint scent of lavender surrounded him. Against my better judgment, I eyed the two glasses in his hands with interest, amber liquid with faintly clinking cubes of ice. As the chauffeur closed the door firmly behind me, Smith passed me a drink. I gulped without hesitation, then made a face. Ginger ale.

“You spoiled perfectly good ice,” I muttered.

“Alcohol kills brain cells, Pit. I want you at your best.”

“Why?” I asked bluntly. My hands started to tremble again. As subtly as I could, I placed the glass into a holder in the door, spilling just a little.

“Because,” he said, “I have a problem, and you can help me solve it.” It wasn't a request; it was a statement.

Leaning forward, he tapped on the plastic partition separating us from the chauffeur, who had returned to the driver's seat. Slowly we accelerated. At the end of the block, we turned left, heading toward Roosevelt Boulevard.

I half grumbled, “Why does everyone think I'm some sort of freelance problem-solver?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No!”

Smith chuckled again. “My aunt has a farm west of here. You’re going to pay her a visit and keep an eye on things for a week or so. She...” His voice trailed off. I couldn’t read anything from his expression. “Someone—or something—may be stalking her.”

“Some thing?” I asked.

“Well...” He shifted a tad uncomfortably. “She’s claimed to see ghosts and angels as long as I can remember.”

“Then she needs a psychiatrist, not a seedy drunken cripple!”

“Come on, Pit! You aren’t seedy. Merely depressed.”

“That makes me feel so much better,” I grumbled sarcastically. Boy, had my stock fallen. From stopping blackmailers to babysitting crazy aunts.

“Actually,” he went on, “I sent a couple of my boys out to visit her a month ago. They scared off a prowler one night, though I suppose it might have been a dog or even a coyote. It was dark; they couldn’t tell. Anyway, after that, things got quiet. As soon as they left, though, Aunt Peck started reporting disturbances again.”

I frowned. “What sort of disturbances?”

“Oh ... noises at night, her possessions disappearing or moving around inside the house. That sort of thing. She thinks the spirit world is trying to communicate with her.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Do you believe in these spirits?”

His eyes narrowed. “Let’s say ... I have an open mind. I’ve seen a lot of odd things over the years. And believe it or not, I used to be a choirboy. Growing up in the Catholic Church, you get a good strong dose of saints and miracles and superstition.”

I snorted.

“You don’t believe?” he asked.

“There are no ghosts, ghouls, zombies, vampires, werewolves, or angels prancing around farms in rural Pennsylvania!” I said it with absolute certainty.

“Then prove it!”

I looked out the window at the passing row houses. Laundry hung outside on tattered lines. Trash and graffiti spoke of a neighborhood heading downhill fast, just like my life. Suddenly I felt old and tired.

Angels...

Once upon a time, before my accident, so long ago it felt like someone else’s life—once upon a time, when I was a good little boy, I had believed. But now...

Frowning, I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Did I really want to do this? Did I really want to babysit a delusional old lady?

It wasn’t like Smith had given me a choice in the matter; we were already on the road, so I might as well make the best of it. Besides, maybe a change of scenery would be good. At least it would keep me from drinking myself to death for a little while longer.

Leaning back, I closed my eyes. “Tell me,” I said, “everything you know about your aunt. Start with her name and family background.”

“Don’t you want to know about the disturbances?”

“No. You’re a secondhand source of information. If I need to, I’ll question her about them.”

“Then you’re going?”

My mind was racing ahead. Ghosts ... farms ... noises in the night...

I sighed. I shook my head.

But I said, “Yes.”

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Her name, said Smith, was Elizabeth Peck. She was his mother’s sister-in-law: not a blood relative, but marriage meant a lot in his family. As long as he could remember, she had espoused the beneficial effects of fresh air and sunshine on children, and the Pecks’ farm—a hundred or so acres just outside Hellersville—played host to a steady stream of young relatives throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Her husband Joshua had been a lay minister, so the country visits came with

generous helpings of sermons ... especially to the Tortelli boys, the black sheep of the family.

After Uncle Peck's death two years ago, Aunt Peck began renting her land to neighbors, who planted soybeans, corn, and other crops. She made enough to pay her rather modest bills.

Aunt Peck had always been an avid correspondent, and she still kept in touch with all branches of her extended family through frequent letters. Her speculations about the nightly disturbances being caused by "angels" had alarmed Smith enough to send a couple of his men out to visit her.

Their first night on the farm, moaning sounds awakened them just after midnight. They ran outside, fired a couple of warning shots into the air, and heard someone—or something—run off through a cornfield. They gave chase, but whoever or whatever it was got away.

Then things got quiet. After another week, they left.

A few days later, Aunt Peck proudly wrote that the "angels" had returned. Hence Pit's summons.

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"She may just be a crazy old lady," Smith said thoughtfully, "but she's my aunt, and I have to look out for her. Family duty, you understand."

Actually, I didn't. My parents were long dead, and I had never been close to any of my other relatives. Uncle Mark's response to my taxi accident had been to send a "get well soon" card. And he forgot to sign it.

"I'm not sure," I said, "whether to be flattered or insulted."

"Flattered. You're my big gun, Pit."

I snorted. "Now you're being silly. But I can't go—I didn't pack my toothbrush, let alone a change of clothes. You'll have to take me home first."

"Nonsense. I know you don't take instructions well, so I took the liberty of having bags packed for you. Here."

Reaching into his pocket, he produced a set of miniature steel keys, the kind that fit suitcase locks. The tag dangling from the ring said, "My Other Car is a BMW."

"I didn't notice anything missing from my apartment," I said.

Mentally, I ran through the contents of my closet and sock drawer as I had seen them this morning. Everything had been exactly where it belonged.

“I purchased a new wardrobe for you, one better suited for farm life.”

My eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

“Seven flannel shirts of assorted colors; one white and seven black undershirts; seven pairs of bluejeans, waist 28, inseam 30; one Sunday go-to-church suit, from your usual tailor—”

“I don’t have a tailor, usual or otherwise,” I said.

He tsk-tsked. “Perhaps you’ve forgotten your account at Paolo Versacci’s on Vine Street.” That was where I had bought an Armani suit before visiting his illegal gambling club. “You made quite an impression on Paolo. He still has your measurements on file.”

It seemed Smith’s research on me had been even more complete than I’d thought.

“One purchase does not make him my tailor,” I grumbled. “Besides, I don’t wear flannel. Or jeans. I find them too heavy and binding. And I don’t believe in churches, so I won’t need a Sunday suit.”

“Show some flexibility.”

“I don’t have to. I’m a cripple, remember.”

“That doesn’t cut it. We run an equal-opportunity underworld these days, Pit. View your clothes as part of the job—a disguise, if you will. You’ll need to blend in on the farm.” Smith took a deep breath, then continued his inventory: “Heavy wool socks, underwear, light boots, windbreaker, baseball cap, pajamas, and of course, a shaving kit, complete with—you guessed it—a toothbrush.”

“You seem to have thought of everything.”

“Of course.”

“Then how are you going to explain me to your aunt?”

I glimpsed a predator’s teeth when he smiled. “We have a charity program at work, helping needy handicapped individuals rehabilitate themselves through clean air and sunshine. She’s looking forward to your visit. And, of course, to the twenty-five dollar per diem my company is paying for your room and board.”

“You’re too generous,” I said sarcastically. “But I suppose anything more than that would have roused her suspicions.”

“Precisely. If she thought I sent you merely to give her some extra money, she never would have agreed.”

Our car took the King of Prussia exit. I leaned forward, eyeing the landmarks. Lots of new buildings had appeared since the last time I had been here, some ten years before, back when I was a healthy college student.

Smith said, “You haven’t asked what the job pays.”

“It pays something?” Money had been the last thing on my mind.

“A hundred dollars a day, plus reimbursement for any expenses. That’s yours just for showing up and keeping my aunt company for a week or two, no matter what happens.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“But you’ll take it.”

“Do I have a choice?”

He smiled thinly and did not reply.

A few minutes later, we took an exit ramp, then turned into a gas station. Leaning forward slightly, I studied the limo’s dashboard. The gas gauge showed nearly full. We weren’t here to fuel up.

“This is my stop.” Smith swung open his door. “I have businesses to run. And you have another two-and-a-half hours’ drive ahead. Enjoy Hellersville ... or, as my brothers and I used to call it, Hell!”

He slid out, and without preamble my chauffeur pulled into traffic and accelerated again. When I glanced over my shoulder, Smith raised two fingers to his forehead in salute. Then a new Burger King hid him from view.

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Ten minutes later, we were on the Pennsylvania Turnpike heading west, surrounded by pleasantly monotonous trees and the occasional sprawling farm, complete with picture-perfect horses and cows. Traffic remained light. Little here could stimulate my overactive mind. I found it soothing.

With nothing better to do, I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Flannel shirts ... bluejeans ... fresh air and sunshine ... Hell indeed for a city boy like me.

What had I gotten myself into?

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When the rhythm of the car abruptly changed, I jolted awake. We had taken an exit ramp.

According to the clock in the dashboard up front, almost three hours had passed since we left King of Prussia. The afternoon sunlight seemed too crisp, the rumble of wheels on pavement too sharp. My stomach growled faintly. Rubbing crusty-feeling eyes, I longed for a stiff drink. I had to press my hands against my thighs to keep them from shaking uncontrollably. God, I wanted to go home.

At the toll booth, the driver paid cash. Then we sped down a rural highway. Two turns later, we were on a narrow country road. Fields to either side had just been harvested, leaving a rough stubble of cut-down cornstalks. A pair of huge red harvesting machines sat idle.

As we drove, farm complexes broke the fields every half mile or so: old houses, ancient barns, silos, sheds, dogs and horses, and the occasional cow or sheep. At least they had garbage pickup; at the end of each driveway sat identical green plastic bins stenciled "Waste Management." A few driveways had bonus items out: a threadbare sectional sofa, a rusted old bicycle, piles of broken-down cardboard boxes neatly tied into bundles.

Then we turned onto a gravel driveway. In crooked letters, the battered metal mailbox said PECK—2040.

We had arrived. I sat up straighter, studying a large old barn with peeling red paint, three ancient silver silos, and a sprawling Victorian-style farmhouse that had seen better days. A clothesline running between ancient oaks held faded yellow sheets. To the left of the house, in a chicken wire pen, fifteen chickens scratched and strutted.

My chauffeur pulled up beside a pink Cadillac twenty years out of style, honked twice, then cut the engine. Immediately a plump, cheery-faced woman in a red-and-white checked dress burst from the house. She wore her gray hair up in a tight bun, and a smudge of white—flour?—dotted the tip of her nose. She had that pleasant, beaming expression I had always associated with grandmothers, and half against my will I found myself smiling back.

The chauffeur opened the door for me. I fumbled with my walking stick for a moment, then climbed out awkwardly.

“Hello!” I said through clenched teeth. I tried for a happy note, but it came out as a desperate croak. I had been sitting in one position too long; fierce stabbing pains shot through the length of my legs.

“Hello yourself!” she replied. I tried not to wince; she spoke at full volume. “Call me Aunt Peck—everyone does. You must be Mr. Geller? Pete? Petey?”

“My friends call me Pit, Aunt Peck.” Not that I had any left, but Pit was several steps better than Petey.

“Lord above, what an interesting name! You must have quite a story to tell about it!”

“Not really—” I began.

She swept past me, all but bouncing with energy and enthusiasm. The chauffeur had opened the trunk. Without hesitation, Aunt Peck seized a blue leather suitcase and a matching garment bag, then started for the house.

“Come on, Pit!” she called over her shoulder. “I’ve got pies in the oven! Can’t let ‘em burn!”

I looked at the chauffeur. “I suppose it’s too late to back out?”

“Sorry, pal,” he said. “Orders.”

I nodded. You didn’t contradict a man like Mr. Smith. Leaning heavily on my walking stick, I limped after Aunt Peck.

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She was a talker—I’ll say that much for her. As I sat at the kitchen table and worked on a slab of hot-from-the-oven apple pie topped with freshly whipped cream, she kept up a nonstop monologue about everything under the sun, except angelic visitors: the farm, her late husband Joshua, the city kids who had just moved in next door.

“City kids?” I prompted. New neighbors explained all the cardboard boxes out for trash pickup.

“Nick and Debby,” she said. “You’ll meet them tomorrow. I always invite neighbors over for Saturday dinner. It makes things a little less lonely. Of course, now that you’re here...”

I nodded encouragingly. “Have they been here long, Nick and Debby?”

“Oh, a bit over a month, I guess. Maybe two.”

“Ah.” I ate my last bite of pie. My hands kept shaking, but Aunt Peck either didn’t notice or marked it down to my accident.

How closely did the new neighbors’ arrival coincide with the disturbances? Could they be trying to scare her off her land? Pennsylvania had its share of natural resources ... what could make her land valuable enough to steal? Oil, perhaps?

“I was wondering,” I said, wiping my mouth carefully on a napkin, “if you have well water?”

“Of course. Why?”

“In the late 1800s, my many-times-great-grandfather had a farm in Pennsylvania. He gave up on it and moved to Ohio because every time he tried to dig a well, it filled up with black oily stuff.”

She laughed; everyone who heard it always did. According to family legend, it had really happened. And Marilyn Monroe used to babysit my father and uncle too, before she got famous.

Aunt Peck said, “I bet your family has been kicking themselves ever since automobiles came along!”

“Yes.” I shook my head ruefully. “I guess you don’t have that problem here, though.”

“Oil companies poked around in ‘75 or ‘76, doing all sorts of surveys, but apparently there’s nothing under Hellersville but water.”

Strike one theory.

“Surely the town has something going for it...” I said. “Mines? Silver? Gold?”

“Well, there used to be a quarry. They made gravel, I think, but then it filled with water. It’s been a lake for nearly fifty years now. All Hellersville produces is produce.” She gave a wink. “But wait till you taste my tomatoes; they’re as big as softballs and sweet as anything! And my watermelons!” She laughed heartily.

Strike a second theory. If the land had no intrinsic value, why would anyone want to scare her off her farm?

After I finished my pie, Aunt Peck offered to show me my room. She retrieved my bags from the hallway, where she had left them while we checked her

pies, then skirted the narrow stairs (which I had been dreading) and headed down a wide hallway. The floorboards creaked loudly as we walked. No one would be able to sneak up on us during the night.

We reached a cluttered family room. The sofa, wingbacked chairs, and ottoman all had plastic over the upholstery. Books, curios, and photos crammed the built-in shelves and the standalone bookcases. A small TV sat next to the fireplace.

We passed through into another small hallway, then came to a small bedroom at the back of the house. It had one window, which looked out across fields stubbled from recently harvested corn. To the left, I saw the edge of her garden—tomato and pepper plants.

I nodded approvingly at the single bed with a white quilt and two fluffy pillows. It looked a lot like my bed back in Philadelphia. A threadbare oval rug, made of tiny triangles of randomly chosen fabric set in a spiral pattern, covered much of the floor. An oak dresser and a battered old armoire completed the furnishings.

As she set the bags on the bed, I straightened the pictures on the walls: three faded black-and-white photographs showing children standing in armylike formations before this same farmhouse. Smiling girls wore knee-length dresses with bows in their hair; boys wore short pants and shirts with buttons, their hair buzzed so close they almost looked bald. The men behind them all wore white shirts with dark ties, and the women wore plain dresses. Dates written in the lower corners said July 13, 1961, July 8, 1962, and July 14, 1963. They had to commemorate the family gatherings Mr. Smith had disliked so much.

That would make Smith one of the boys. I studied their faces, but couldn't pick him out; nearly identical clothes, haircuts, and suntans made him blend in among the others. Smith's father, though, stood out among the men—shorter and darker than the others, leaner, with a somewhat sinister look in his eyes. A younger, rougher version of Mr. Smith.

"You used to have a lot of guests," I said to Aunt Peck. "Where did you put them all?"

"Oh, we put the boys in the barn—plenty of room in the hayloft—and the girls slept in the family room. We had six bedrooms upstairs for the adults."

"I was an only child. It must have been great to have so many family members together."

"Oh, it was wonderful." She sighed, eyes distant. "Those were the days." Then she brightened. "Do you want me to unpack your things?"

“No, thank you. I can manage. I try to be self-reliant.”

“My Joshua was the same way, God rest his soul.” She started back for the kitchen. “I’ll start supper. Give a holler if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

* * * *

I spent the next half hour unpacking. Everything Mr. Smith had purchased looked like it would fit me. With careful precision, I opened packages of socks and then refolded the contents, placing each garment neatly and precisely in the dresser drawers. Next, I meticulously removed all the tags from my new shirts and hung them in the armoire. Jeans didn’t need hangers, so I stacked them in the bottom.

Mindless activities let my racing mind slow down. For a few minutes, I could forget Aunt Peck’s problems and concentrate solely on the here and now.

The last things in the suitcase turned out to be a tiny cell phone and a small but powerful flashlight, batteries already installed. I turned on the phone and checked the list of numbers. Speed-dial had been preprogrammed with two numbers:

Smith ... 001

Fast help ... 002

Smith really had thought of everything. I switched it off and put both phone and flashlight in the front of my sock drawer.

Next, I opened the garment bag. My new suit turned out to be a Joseph Abboud original, gray with pinstripes, one hundred percent wool—practical and conservative enough not to stand out in a rural farming community. Mr. Smith had good taste, if nothing else. I hung it up, then put my bags on top of the armoire. I made one last pass over the room, straightening the dresser slightly, lowering the shade so it covered the window latch, and picking a few bits of lint from the bed’s white quilt.

Finally, I opened the window and peered out. Now I could see the whole of Aunt Peck’s garden, and I had to admit it was impressive: a rectangle perhaps thirty feet long and sixty wide, enclosed with chicken wire and planted with peppers, tomatoes, pumpkins, and quite a few other vegetables I couldn’t identify at this distance. Other than the garden and a couple of shade trees, the land around the farmhouse had been cleared for more than two hundred yards in every direction. Nobody could sneak up on the house—or, having gotten here, escape unseen the way the last prowler had.

I made my way back toward the kitchen, straightening pictures along the way, examining rooms with greater attention. The books in the family room seemed to be a mix of espionage novels and religious nonfiction. Family photos showed Aunt Peck and a man I took to be Joshua with five children and in a variety of settings, from Disneyworld to Hershey Park. I committed the position of every item in every room to memory. If these alleged angels moved or made off with anything, I would notice.

The plastic covers on the sofa and chairs had tiny pinprick indentations—probably cat claws, since cat hair in several different colors speckled the throw pillows.

Then, as I made my way toward the kitchen, I heard voices. Visitors? I strained to hear but couldn't make out the words.

As quietly as I could, I crept up the hallway and peeked around the corner. Aunt Peck had her back to me as she stirred something on the stove—soup or stew, from the smell. An old man in coveralls sat at the kitchen table nursing a mug of coffee. He looked at least seventy, maybe older: thinning white hair, weather-beaten skin, rough callused hands.

“—ought to be ripped out and replaced,” he was saying. “Wouldn't take more'n a day or two, and you wouldn't have to worry about the termite damage. Can't have you fallin' through the floor.”

“I don't have the money right now,” said Aunt Peck. “It will have to wait.”

As his fingers curled tightly around his white coffee mug, I noticed that the little finger and ring finger of his right hand were both missing their last joints.

“Wouldn't cost more'n a couple hundred for lumber, Bessie. A wise investment, if you ask me. Happy to throw in the labor for free, just to keep you safe.”

“Maybe next year.”

“Suit yourself. But the damage ain't goin' to go away.”

“I know, Joe.” She sighed. “But my heart just isn't into keeping things up anymore. Joshua used to handle all that.”

Joe frowned. “You do what you can, Bessie. You do what you can.”

He drained his mug and shoved back his chair. “I better get goin'. My boy and I can fix the barn tomorrow afternoon. Just needs a few new shingles, and I have plenty at home.”

“Thanks, Joe.”

Then, to my shock, she gave him a kiss—not a casual peck, but a downright passionate smooch—and he returned it heartily, along with a squeeze that made her squeal. Clearly the old folks had some friskiness left inside.

Joe left through the side door, which led into the yard facing the barn. After it slammed shut, I counted to ten, then limped into the kitchen.

“I heard voices,” I said. Through the door’s window, I watched Joe climb into a battered blue Ford truck and slowly drive away.

“Joe Carver stopped by.” Aunt Peck nodded as she stirred her pot. “He’s worked on the farm since the day we moved in here. The hardest thing I ever had to do was let him go when Joshua passed. He and his boy still do all the little jobs I can’t handle.”

“Ah,” I said. I picked up both coffee mugs and carried them carefully to the sink. Aunt Peck hadn’t stirred hers well enough; a thick white residue of sugar remained on the bottom when I poured out the dregs. “Does he live around here too?”

“He has a little house in Hellersville. His wife kept it cute as a button till she got sick last spring. This was the first year they didn’t plant new flowers.” She shook her head. “Poor dear. She passed just after Joshua.”

Two old friends who had lost their spouses. No wonder they felt drawn to each other.

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At dinner, my hands shook so badly I could barely eat. I spilled all the water from my glass twice, soaking myself and the table. I apologized profusely as I wiped at everything with my napkin.

“Land sakes, it’s just water, Pit!” said Aunt Peck with a laugh. She fetched a towel from the kitchen and mopped up. “After five babies and Joshua’s passing, a little spilled water isn’t going to bother me!”

“You’re very kind,” I said miserably. Stop shaking, stop shaking! I pressed both hands together in my lap, but it didn’t help. My body wouldn’t cooperate. What I needed was a drink. Did Joshua keep a supply of booze in the house? Probably not; he had been a minister, after all.

Aunt Peck returned to her seat and began to eat her stew again—a thick one

full of beef, carrots, and potatoes, just the way I liked it.

“You must be wondering what happened to me,” I said, as I struggled with my fork. With effort, I managed to spear a carrot and get it into my mouth without impaling myself.

“Do you feel like talking about it...?”

“I don’t mind.” I half shrugged and put my fork down. Eating wasn’t worth the effort tonight. “I used to work on Wall Street. I got a plum job right out of college, but I had a nervous breakdown from working twenty-hour days seven days a week. After six months of treatment, when I finally began to pull myself together again, a taxi ran a red light and hit me. I spent an hour pinned under its front wheels, and I almost lost my legs. I spent another six months in rehab ... and I just haven’t been the same since.”

“I’m so sorry, Pit.” She touched my hand gently. “I’ll pray for you.”

I didn’t particularly want her sympathy—what’s done is done. No use crying over it or hoping for miracles that would never come—but she said it in such a heartfelt way that I couldn’t help but feel touched.

“Thank you,” I said.

* * * *

After dinner, she invited me to watch game shows with her, and to my surprise, I accepted. I used to find game shows annoying and contrived. But now, tonight, it was almost ... comforting ... to have someone with whom I could sit in silence, someone who made no demands on my intellect or time or will to live.

Jeopardy! had three really bad contestants; even the returning champion flubbed answer after answer. The host, struggling to put a positive spin on things, quipped that tonight’s questions must be harder than usual.

“That’s not the problem, Alex,” I couldn’t help but blurt out. “You picked idiots to play.”

“Can you do better?” Aunt Peck asked with a yawn. I think she had been watching me more than the television.

“It’s always easier when you’re at home.” I forced a laugh. But then I proceeded to come up with questions for every single answer on Jeopardy!—and for the final answer, I came up with not just two, but all seven members of the United Arab Emirates. None of the players got it right. The least unskillful of the three—or perhaps the most cunning—had only risked a dollar and won the day,

complete with a laughably small \$1,200 jackpot.

“That was amazing, Pit!” Aunt Peck said, staring at me in awe. “You should go on TV. You’d win a fortune!”

“I don’t think I can stand long enough to play. And besides, I don’t like to travel. It took a lot of arm-twisting to get me out here!”

“I imagine Cal can be quite persuasive.” She smiled wistfully, eyes distant, remembering. “The Tortellis were always that way.”

“Cal is quite something.” How much did she know about him? Somehow, I suspected she had no idea he ran an illegal casino.

“Oh, Cal’s a kitten. Best of the lot. Be glad you never met his father. There was a man who, well, I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.” She paused. “But when Bruno wanted something, he got it, no matter what.”

“Was he in organized crime?”

“What makes you ask that?” she said sharply.

“Something Cal once said.”

“I don’t know for sure. He kept his business to himself, at least around me. But Joshua always said he was some sort of gangster. When the police found him dead in the trunk of a car, that clinched it for us.”

“How long ago did that happen?”

“Well, let’s see ... it must have been 1963, early August, I think. He had been shot with a single bullet to the head.”

“It must have been hard on his family,” I said. To my surprise, I found I had a lump in my throat. I remembered my own father’s death from pancreatic cancer. It had been devastating to Mom and me; she had never recovered from it.

“Yes. Yes, it was. But the Lord gives and the Lord takes—maybe it was for the best. At least Cal and the other boys didn’t follow their father into a life of crime, so something good came of it.”

She yawned, covering her mouth with a plump-fingered hand. “Oh, excuse me!”

“Quite all right. I’m tired, too.” Farm people went to bed early, I reminded myself. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll turn in.”

“Me too.” She yawned again, then stood unsteadily. I reached up and steadied her arm. “I can barely keep my eyes open!”

* * * *

Once Aunt Peck disappeared up the stairs, I prowled through the house, doing a quick security check. She had left all three outside doors unlocked, so I locked them. None had deadbolts or chains, unfortunately; they all should have been replaced with steel-core security doors years ago. The basement door had a simple hook and eye; nothing I could do about it now, so I left it alone.

Next, I examined all the windows. Not one single lock had been turned, so I did it myself. Perhaps they didn’t believe in burglars out here. Or perhaps they didn’t have much worth stealing.

Returning to my bedroom, I opened my window about three inches. A cool wind began to billow the curtains. If angels or ghosts wanted in tonight, they would have to get past me.

I did not undress. Instead, I lay on top of the quilt, listening to the unfamiliar noises around me. Houses have their own rhythms: the creaks, the squeaks, the little settling sounds. When the furnace suddenly kicked on with a whump, I jumped so much, I almost fell out of bed.

A little later, raccoons or possums or some other beasts I had never heard before began to yowl and hiss in the yard. Mating? Fighting? Slaughtering the chickens? I had no way of knowing. Since Aunt Peck didn’t come running down from her bedroom in a panic, I assumed the racket fell into the “typical farm sound” category.

Then I heard a low but steady crunch-crunch-crunch. Tires on gravel. The vehicle was moving very, very slowly toward the house.

Rising as fast as I could, I grabbed my phone and flashlight and went down the creaking hallway, through the family room, and into the parlor, just to the right of the front door. Peering around the drapes, I gazed into the front yard. A large, dark vehicle rolled up to the house and glided to a stop. No headlights showed, and when the driver opened the door, no cab light came on. Could this be Aunt Peck’s angel?

The driver went around back and got something out of the bed of his truck, then carried it toward the house. The breath caught in my throat as heavy footsteps sounded on the steps, then the porch.

I hobbled around to the front door and flipped all the switches on the wall. The porch and the hallway flooded with light. Through the little window set in the

front door, I saw Joe Carver's startled face, then heard a metallic crash as he dropped something heavy.

"Bessie?" he called. He tried the door handle, but it was locked. He jiggled it.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Who are you?" he called. Rather than run away, as I'd half expected, he began to pound on the door. "Bessie? Are you okay in there? Open up!"

"Stop that!" I said.

"Open up!" he shouted. "Bessie? Bessie?"

Those weren't the actions of a prowler. I fumbled with the lock and opened the door.

"Who the hell are you?" Joe demanded, staring at me. The loud crashing noise had been his tool kit. He had dropped it when I turned on the lights.

"I'm Peter Geller," I said, leaning heavily on my walking stick. "I'm visiting Aunt Peck for the week. Now who the hell are you?"

Joe looked me up and down. I guess I didn't strike him as dangerous or threatening—me, thin as a rail, eyes limned with dark circles, looking closer to sixty than my true age of thirty—because he didn't try to tear me to pieces. Which he probably could have done with very little effort.

"You one of her nephews?" he demanded. He took a step forward, face cycling through anger and puzzlement. "She didn't say nothing about you comin'."

"It must have slipped her mind," I said. "She didn't say anything about expecting burglars, either!"

"I'm not a burglar!"

"You could have fooled me, sneaking around like that!"

His fists balled up; he seemed about to take my head off. I shifted uneasily. Maybe I had chosen the wrong approach. He wasn't responding well to confrontation.

"Say," I said, pretending to study his features. Time to change tactics—and fast. "Don't I know you? You're Joe Carver, right?"

"Huh." He squinted hard at my face, but seemed to draw a blank. "How do

you know me?"

"We met years ago," I lied. "I was just a kid, and I didn't have this." I raised my walking stick.

"Huh," he said again.

I peered around him at his truck. "I heard you come up the drive, but your headlights were off. That's why I thought you were a burglar."

"I was trying not to wake Bessie," he said. He frowned. "Termites been eatin' into the dinin' room floor. I need to replace it or she's gonna fall through and break a leg. Maybe worse. She wouldn't let me do it, so I thought I'd come by tonight and get started. Once the floor's up, she'll have to let me finish."

He had the lines down so well, he must have practiced them. Smiling, I swung the front door fully open.

"Come in, Mr. Carver. I'm sorry if I was rude, but you scared the bejesus out of me. I wasn't expecting anyone. And you have to admit a cripple like me can't exactly defend the house. You understand."

"Uh-huh."

I glanced over my shoulder at the stairs, brow furrowing. "And I'm surprised Aunt Peck's not up, considering all the racket we've made."

"Bessie sleeps like a log." He said it a little too fast. "Don't fret yourself about her. Early to bed, early to rise."

Mental alarms went off. Hard work and country air might make someone tired. But nobody could have slept through the crash of his dropped toolbox or the shouting we'd done at each other. No, Aunt Peck should have been down here in a flash to investigate.

Then I remembered the white sludge in the bottom of her coffee mug. I had taken it for sugar. But it could have been something else—some drug to make her sleep, so Joe could get in here and do ... what? Haunt the place?

"Well, at least someone's tired," I said with a chuckle. I had to put him at ease and get away long enough to check on Aunt Peck. "I'm going to have to take my pain pills to get to sleep tonight."

"Yeah," he said. "You should do that."

I nodded and smiled. "If you don't mind, I'm going to turn in. Good night,

Mr. Carver.”

“Good night.” He picked up his toolbox, then pushed past me into the dining room.

I limped with deliberate noisiness down the hallway—a shuffling step, then a tap of my walking stick, then another shuffling step, the another tap, floorboards creaking underfoot all the time. Halfway to my room, I heard a slight noise behind me, and I could feel his eyes following my every move. I hoped he found my performance convincing.

Without a backward glance, I entered my room and shut the door. Then, so slowly it hurt, I counted to a hundred. When I peeked out, he had gone back to doing whatever mischief he had come to do.

I pulled out my cell phone and flipped it open. Number 002 on the speed dial list still said “Fast help,” but what did that mean—police? FBI? Mob hitmen? I needed muscle, and I needed it fast. Despite his affection for Aunt Peck, I didn’t exactly feel safe with Joe in the house.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed button 2. On the first ring, a man picked up and said in a gravelly voice, “Smith’s office.”

“This is Peter Geller. I need someone here. Fast.”

“Five minutes,” he said and hung up.

Five minutes. I could last that long.

Slowly, I eased myself out into the hallway, closed the door silently behind me, and crept up the hallway toward the narrow stairs. I placed my feet as close to the wall as I could, hoping the floorboards wouldn’t squeak. Tiptoeing along that way, without using my walking stick really hurt; I put too much weight on the balls of my feet, and the shooting pains it caused brought tears to my eyes.

But it worked. The floorboards remained silent.

When I passed the door to the dining room, Joe had his back to me. He had rolled up half the rug and was examining the floorboards. Looking for termite damage? Somehow, I doubted it.

I reached the staircase. Cautiously, I placed my foot on the first step. The stairs had barely squeaked when Aunt Peck went up them at bedtime. I estimated my own weight at seventy to eighty pounds less than hers, so I anticipated little trouble. Grasping the railing, I hauled myself up an inch at a time. Three steps and not a sound. Six steps, halfway there. Eight steps and I knew I’d make it.

I paused at the top landing. The door to Aunt Peck's room stood open. Dim light spilled in from the hallway, and I could just make out her queen-sized bed and several bulky pieces of furniture. I flipped on the overhead lights and went in.

She lay on top of her quilt, still wearing that red-and-white checked dress. She hadn't had a chance to put on her nightgown. She had just collapsed, unconscious or dead.

"Aunt Peck?" I called softly.

From below, ancient nails groaned as they pulled free from a board. By the sounds, Joe hadn't been lying: he really was pulling up the floor.

"Aunt Peck?" I called again, louder.

When she still didn't respond, I limped over and shook her shoulder. Nothing. Her forehead glistened faintly with perspiration. When I touched her carotid artery, she had a fast, fluttery heartbeat.

No more than two or three minutes had passed since I'd called Smith's office for help. How fast would Hellerville's EMS respond to a 911 call? Who would get here first?

Taking a deep breath, I dialed 911. I couldn't risk an old woman's life.

"Emergency services," said a tinny voice.

"I need an ambulance," I said.

"What is the nature of your emergency?"

"I have an old woman here who's unconscious. Possible drug overdose. I don't know what she took."

"What is your location?"

I gave the address. "How long will it take to get someone here?"

"I have already alerted the police, sir. They should arrive shortly. Can you remain on the line?"

Behind me, I heard a voice say, "What are you doing?"

A chill swept through me. I whirled and found Joe Carver silhouetted in the doorway. With two quick strides, he reached me and ripped the cell phone from my

hand.

“Aunt Peck—” I began.

“You leave her be!” He raised his fist to strike me, face drawing back in rage.

Then the doorbell rang. A second later someone began to pound on the door. The cavalry had arrived. Far off, I heard the wail of an ambulance’s siren.

Joe hesitated, then lowered his fist. He looked over his shoulder, clearly uneasy.

“The police are here,” I said in a soothing voice. “You better run down and let them in. I think Aunt Peck had a stroke.”

“A—a stroke?” He gaped at me.

“Please let them in!” I let a note of urgency creep into my voice. “We have to get her to a hospital!”

The cell phone in his hand began to ring. I reached out and plucked it from his fingers.

“Go!” I said, pointing at the stairs. “Let them in!”

He turned and thundered down the steps. I heard him babbling to the police about how poor old Bessie must have had a stroke, how they needed to get her to a hospital.

Then I answered the cell phone: “Peter Geller.”

“You’ve got cops there,” said the man with the gravelly voice. “We drove past. What do you want me to do?”

“Circle around. Come in quietly as soon as they’re gone.”

“Anything else?”

“Call Smith and tell him to get out here fast. It’s important.”

“Got it.” He hung up.

I stuck the phone in my pocket as two uniformed police officers came bounding up the stairs carrying medical cases. Both cops looked young, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four, with close-shaved heads and plenty of muscles bulging beneath their uniforms. One started taking Aunt Peck’s blood pressure while the

other did a circuit of the room, scooping vials of pills from her dresser into a plastic bag.

“You phoned it in?” the cop asked me. Pulling out a stethoscope and a blood pressure cuff, he started to take Aunt Peck’s blood pressure. “Do you know what’s wrong with her?”

Over his shoulder, I read Aunt Peck’s blood pressure: 160 over 90. Much too high.

“Yes, I know what’s wrong.” My gaze flickered over to Joe Carver, standing in the doorway wringing his hands. “It’s a drug overdose.”

“Why do you think so?”

“I noticed a white residue in her coffee mug. I think there were pills in it.”

“A—a stroke!” Joe said. His face had gone bone white. “You said it was a stroke!”

“No, it wasn’t a stroke.”

“Where is the coffee mug?” the first cop asked.

“She washed it.”

The second cop said, “Besides the ones here, do you know of any other pills she might have taken?”

“No.” Again I looked at Joe, but he volunteered nothing.

The ambulance’s siren cut off as it pulled into the farm’s driveway; I could see its flashing lights through the drawn shades. The police officer who had collected the pills pushed past Joe and jogged down the stairs to show them in.

Two minutes later, they had Aunt Peck in a stretcher and carried her down. All the fuss and attention seemed to have finally penetrated her stupor. She half opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Angels...” she whispered.

Maybe that’s where all her visitations had come from—drug-induced dreams. Which meant Joe had dosed her before. All the pieces of the puzzle were falling neatly into place. Everything except why.

When I patted her arm gently, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

“Where will they take her?” I asked the police.

“County hospital,” the first officer said. “It’s the closest. Don’t worry, they’ll take good care of her.”

“I should go too,” muttered Joe. “Bessie...”

“No,” I said firmly. “You aren’t family. The hospital won’t let you in.” Pointedly, I added, “Besides, you’ve done quite enough for Aunt Peck already.”

Joe stared at me, eyes glittering with hatred. “Then you should go.”

“I’d love to, but I’m not family, either.”

“But you said—”

I smiled sweetly. “I lied.”

Just then the first police officer returned and asked for my name. I told him the truth, and he wrote it down. Then he did the same to Joe. A little sullenly, Joe told him.

Joe and I stood side by side on the front porch, watching in silence as first the ambulance and then the police car peeled away—the ambulance with its lights flashing, the police dark but close behind.

“I ought to kill you,” Joe Carver announced.

“That would not be wise.” I shifted uncomfortably, leaning heavily on my walking stick. “We’re about to have company. Very powerful and very mean company who won’t like what you did to Aunt Peck. And then we’re going to find the money.”

It was a stab in the dark, but his response told me I’d guessed right.

“How do you know about the money?” he gasped out.

“I work for Bruno Tortelli’s son.”

Joe sagged, all the fight gone out of him. He sat on the porch steps and began to sob quietly.

Just as he managed to compose himself, a black car pulled into the driveway, tires crunching on the gravel. It parked beside the pink Cadillac, and two stocky men in dark suits climbed out. Both carried handguns in shoulder holsters.

“Mr. Geller?” asked the driver.

“That’s me,” I said. “Is Mr. Smith coming?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.” I turned and limped toward the front door. “Let’s wait inside. My feet are killing me. Oh, and don’t let Mr. Carver leave.”

* * * *

The mantel clock showed 3:10 when I heard another car pull up in the yard. One of the guards got up to check. He returned a moment later with Mr. Smith.

“This had better be good,” Smith said, even before I’d managed to pull myself to my feet. He looked tired and ruffled and unhappy at being dragged out here.

“I think you’ll be pleased,” I said.

He folded his arms. “Proceed.”

“Surely you remember Joe Carver from your childhood days here.” I indicated Joe with a nod of my head.

Smith frowned. “The handyman?”

“Correct. But this story starts in 1963. Your father stole some money and brought it out here. Somehow, he talked Reverend Peck into holding onto it for him. Together they hid it inside the house. I believe Joe can corroborate that part of the story. Joe?”

“Yeah,” Joe said sullenly. “That’s what happened.”

“Unfortunately,” I went on, “your father was killed before he could return for it. And Reverend Peck refused to touch the money because it was stolen.”

“Go on,” said Smith, looking interested.

I said, “Decades passed. Somehow Joe heard about the money—”

“Joshua was dyin’,” said Joe Carver. “Out of his head, just babblin’. He thought I was Bruno Tortelli, and he began arguin’ with me. Said he couldn’t keep the money here. Said he wanted it gone before Bessie found out.”

I continued, “So that’s when Joe decided to take the money for himself. His wife died sick—it probably left him deep in debt. He wanted to clear himself so he could remarry. I’m sure he had the best motives.”

“Where does my aunt fit into this?” Mr. Smith asked.

“She doesn’t believe in locking doors or windows,” I said. “Joe has been coming at night and searching for the money, but he hasn’t found it. She attributed the noises and disturbances to ghosts and angels. Now Joe thinks it may be hidden under the floorboards. This afternoon, he drugged your aunt—probably with one of the medicines his wife used to take—and he came out tonight planning to rip up the floorboards.”

Smith looked around. “Where is Aunt Peck?”

“In the hospital. I found her drugged, so I called an ambulance. She’s a strong old girl; she’ll be fine.”

“She better be.” Smith gave Joe a dark look. “If anything happens to her...”

“Right now,” I said, “I think we should look for the money. I’m willing to bet Joe got it right. It’s under the floor. But not in the dining room.”

“Where, then?” said Joe.

“Did you notice,” I said to Joe, “that the steps to the second floor don’t squeak?”

“No. But what of it?”

“In a house this old, the steps should squeak. All the other floorboards do. I think someone took the staircase apart and put it back together more firmly. And someone has been giving the steps extra attention over the years to keep them in tip-top shape.”

“All this time...” Joe muttered. “All this time, and I never even suspected!”

“Of course, I could be wrong.” I pulled myself to my feet. “Mr. Smith, shall we have a look?”

“Certainly!”

Joe Carver fetched a crowbar from his toolbox and brought it to the staircase. He hunted around the first step, looking for the right spot, then deftly inserted the thin end of the crowbar and pried.

With a groan, the nails pulled free. Then the step popped up ... and in a dusty little hole under the first step, I spotted three dusty canvas bags. Each had been stenciled with “Manhattan Federal Trust” in dark blue letters.

Smith pushed Joe aside, took out the bags, and dumped neat stacks of twenty-dollar bills wrapped in paper bands onto the floor. Fifty-five bundles of bills—not so much these days, but in 1963 it would have been a fortune.

Smith tossed me one of the stacks. I flipped through the bills slowly: fifty of them, exactly one thousand dollars.

“The serial numbers are non-sequential,” I observed. “This money has been circulated. And there are a few gold certificates in here. They may be worth more to collectors than the face value of the bills.” I tossed the bundle back onto the pile. “Probably safe to spend.”

“Dad knew his stuff,” Mr. Smith said.

“What are we going to do with it?” Joe asked him. “Divide it up?”

“Return it to its rightful owner,” said Smith.

Of course, he meant himself. But Joe didn’t know that.

“Is there a reward?” Joe asked, sounding desperate. He licked his lips. “Maybe ... a finder’s fee?”

Smith frowned. “Trying to steal from my aunt was a stupid thing to do. Drugging her was worse. This—” He sneered at the money. “This is nothing. It’s hardly worth my time. But to protect my family—my flesh and blood—I would happily give ten times as much.”

He nodded to his men. They grabbed Joe’s arms in vice-like grips. Joe yelled in sudden panic as he realized how things had suddenly turned against him.

Smith smiled at me. “Once again, Pit, I’m impressed. You gave me more than I expected. Now, please wait in my car. This won’t take long.”

I swallowed hard. I had a very bad feeling inside.

Carefully, Smith took off his coat, folded it neatly, and set it onto the hall table. Then he removed his cufflinks and slipped them into his pants pocket. Slowly he began to roll up his sleeves.

“You won’t kill him,” I said.

“Not as long as my aunt recovers.”

I nodded. I understood, even if Joe didn't. Family came first with Mr. Smith.

“One more thing you should know,” I said.

“What's that?”

“As long as you're keeping it in the family ... Joe is going to be your uncle. Your aunt is in love with him.”

Then I turned and walked out. Mr. Smith's chauffeur had been waiting for me; he held the door open, and I slid into the back seat to wait.

About five minutes later, the two goons came out, looking unhappy. They got into their car and drove away. A few minutes later, Mr. Smith came out. He had put his coat back on. And he didn't look happy.

He got in next to me, then motioned for the driver to proceed. We pulled out of the driveway and headed back for the turnpike. He opened the little compartment with the martini glass on it and poured himself a glass of ginger ale.

“Want some, Pit?”

“No.”

He took a long drink. “You must be wondering,” he finally said, “what happened inside.”

“I assume you gave him a wedding present,” I said, “and welcomed him to the family.”

Smith hadn't carried the money out. I would have noticed something that bulky.

“We also set a wedding date,” Mr. Smith said, frowning. “He has a month to get his affairs in order. And he knows what will happen if he ever steps out of line again.”

I leaned back with a half smile. “There's still the matter of my fee. For twelve hours' work, you owe me fifty bucks. I'll take it in chips next time I visit your casino.”

“I think,” said Mr. Smith slowly, studying me, “that you might be the most dangerous man I've ever met, Pit.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said. Then I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep.

My legs hurt less that way.

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