

Bounty by Rand B. Lee

Rand Lee contributed "Litany" to our June issue. He returns now with a very different sort of tale, a short piece that cuts like a brand-new knife.

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They caught him up near the reservoir, where the wooded hills bunched like shoulders around the old cracked concrete of the retaining walls.

He was as strong as they had feared, so it took all four of them to hold him down; and then unctuous Binny, clumsy with self-importance, fumbled the stunner and shocked himself all to hell while the one they'd been hunting bucked and heaved like a bull gone crazy. "Enough of *this* crap," said cool Albert, nose-blood tracking down his parka, so he kicked the guy in the balls with his big boot and again when that just seemed to make him madder. Albert picked the stunner out of Binny's limp hand and applied it to their quarry where it would do the most good. There was a snap and a flash, and the smell of meat frying, and a scream like nothing any of them had ever heard, then nothing. "Presto," said Albert. "We have bagged ourself a perv. Get up, dumb wad." This last was to the perpetually scowling Drew, whom their quarry had managed to shake loose in his final convulsion. "You still have your cell or did you lose it when you crapped your pants just now?"

"Frog you, Albert." Drew's hands, gloved in the cold like all their hands, were shaking slightly. Ralph was closest. "Is he alive?" Ralph peered; looked up again and nodded. Drew retrieved his cell phone from the bush where it had landed and dialed the number. "We have him," he said to the person who answered on the other end of the line, and hung up. He clipped the phone to his belt again and looked up to see all his friends' eyes on him. "What?" he snapped.

"The money," said big Ralph, still panting from exertion. It was he who had done most of the work in immobilizing their quarry while he had fought to evade the stun. "When do we get our money?"

"On delivery, what do you think?" Binny was groaning. The left side of his face was coming up in a mass of bruises from where he had banged it during his convulsions on the hard ground. He sat up, blubbering, saying, "Oh God, oh God," over and over.

Drew went over to him. "Come on, man, get it together."

“Did we get him?”

“We got him, Bin.”

“No thanks to you, dumb wad,” said Albert. With Drew’s encouragement (though the boys were careful not to touch, always careful not to touch, not to help by touching, never ever) Binny got up and made his shaky way to where their downed prey lay unmoving, pale and a bit shrunken in a stink of relaxed bowels. Binny stood unsteadily, staring down at the man, then seemed to sway, and Ralph said, “Here it comes,” and Binny heaved, and out spewed the lovely pancakes and sausages nice Mrs. Halvorsen had treated them to that morning before they had left for the chase. “Sorry. Sorry,” Binny mumbled, and did it again. “Oh, *man*,” said Ralph. Ralph got up and stepped around their downed quarry and strode past Albert and Drew toward the trail. As he went by, Drew heard him say, “All I want is my money.” A moment after he had disappeared into the woods, he reappeared again and called, “Well, is somebody going to help me with the stretcher or not?”

“Be right there,” said Binny weakly. He made no move to follow. Drew did not feel nauseated, only very light-headed, as though his skull were a balloon that a slender tether was keeping fastened to his neck and shoulders. “I’ll go,” he said. “Stay put, Bin.” Bin nodded gratitude but would not look him in the eye. He said to Albert, “Leave him alone,” and followed Ralph down the trail.

Out of sight of Albert and the body, he began to breathe deeply, aware suddenly of the leaves of the sugar maples in flames all around him, and the sunbeams shafting the forest litter like searchlights. Bird song, stilled by their crashing through the underbrush and the *melée* that had followed, now rose and spattered about him. He realized that if he were not careful, he would begin to weep from adrenaline release, and this he refused to do, not with Albert around to hear, and see with his ferret eyes. He got to the clearing where the truck was. Ralph was leaning against the chassis, his big shoulders hunched in misery, his gray face hunched over a cupped cigarette. He looked up when he heard Drew, tried to hide the cigarette, stopped. “Don’t tell,” he said. Drew snorted, dismissing it.

They stood together, together but not touching, looking out over the clearing, Drew remembering the wild ride up the mountain, their quarry’s strong legs pumping prison pale in the sumac, all four of them screaming, excited, like birds of prey. “It was fair,” said Ralph suddenly, exhaling smoke. He squinted at Drew uncertainly. “A fair chase. Wasn’t it? I mean,

no dogs or guns. Right? He had his chance and God gave us the victory, right?”

“That’s right,” said Drew.

“I mean, it was all legal and righteous and aboveboard, right? With the national anti-perv law and everything?”

“Yeah.”

“Too bad the other one got away, huh? His friend? It would of meant double the bounty, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Boy, he really kept Albert going, this one,” said Ralph desperately, voice loud. “Didn’t he? Albert, our mighty expert tracker!” He took the cigarette out of his mouth and spat in the leaves. He sounded almost admiring as he added, “All that ducking and weaving and drawing us off so his bud could get away? Man, Old Albert was crazier than a peach orchard boar. And that perv. He was sure strong, hey! Wasn’t he?”

“Crazy’s the word.” He saw Albert’s face, purple with rage, and realized they would have to get back soon; it was too dangerous, this camaraderie, this moment of peace between the two of them. But before he could suggest it, Ralph turned to face him, his big neck corded, all triumph fled.

“I mean,” said Ralph desperately, and this time Drew wondered if he would say what he really did mean, “I never saw one before, you know? You hear about the—the pervs, how they’re the lowest of the low, even though we’re all sinners saved by grace, like?” He took another drag on his cigarette; exhaled. “I just didn’t expect—that sound.” Drew said nothing. After a while the big boy put out his cigarette on the side of his truck, then pocketed the remainder. Silently they slung the stretcher between them and walked back up the trail to the reservoir where the Devil and his henchman were waiting.