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The Debt

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Prologue

Johnny

So I'm smiling at the plump florid man who's sitting across the table. It's always a pleasure to see old friends. Time passes slowly inside, the hours dictated not by revolutions of the earth but by an unchanging routine, each week identical to the last, each year a groundhog repetition of the one before.

So I'm staring intently, drinking in every detail; I'm making the most of this most welcome of visits. How long has it been since we last met? It must be over eighteen years.

I've still not decided how exactly I should kill him.

'How's the family then? Dee's okay, I hope? And those boys of yours? They must be all grown up by now.'

'Fine, fine,' the stout man replies too quickly.

Perhaps a look of sly amusement creeps into my eyes but I'm careful to keep the voice genial. 'Glad to hear it. You're looking well too.'

This, of course, is a lie. That Jim Buckley wishes he had never stepped across the threshold is patently clear. His red face has taken on a deeper shade of mauve and under his arms two widening stains of sweat expose his guilt. Never one to waste an opportunity, I press home the advantage. 'So what do you say, mate? We're only talking a couple of months. Shouldn't put you out too much.' I leave a friendly pause before dropping the bombshell. 'And don't forget - you owe me big time.'

The implicit threat has the desired effect. As Buckley's bowels cramp into dread, his distended stomach flinches against the table. I know what he's thinking: Shit, this has

been a mistake, a terrible shitting mistake. Of course he realized the moment he opened the envelope and saw the visiting order that he should stay away. No point tempting providence. But then he couldn't live with the uncertainty either. He had to know if he was in the frame.

The word when it emerges is barely audible. 'What?'

I grant him a few more seconds of undiluted terror before starting to laugh. 'All those drinks, mate, all those free meals at the club. I reckon you owe me some hospitality.'

Jim's left leg is dancing a nervous jig, his heel beating a brisk staccato rhythm against the floor. I can read him like a book.

He can't work out if I know. Do I? Don't I? His mind's spinning round like a waltzer, getting dizzier by the second. He's starting to feel sick. But then logic kicks in and everything gradually slows. He considers that if I knew the truth he'd be dead by now, history, sleeping soundly with the little fishes. So as he's still alive that must surely mean . . . His mouth stumbles eagerly towards a smile of relief.

'Yeah,' he eventually croaks.

And who am I to disillusion him?

'Of course it goes without saying, I'll see you both right.'

I glance around the hall, gesturing for him to move closer as I lower my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'It's all still there – you know what I mean. I just need somewhere to stay when I come out, somewhere private, somewhere I can keep my head down until . . .'

I pause as Buckley's scared piggy eyes slowly brighten into greed.

The seconds tick by.

Fear battles unsuccessfully with avarice. 'How much?' he eventually murmurs.

'Five k.' I force my mouth into a curl. I'm close enough now to smell his stinking breath, close enough to wrap my fingers round his neck – but there's time enough for that. Inching back a fraction, I remove the temptation. 'In return for some privacy, right? I don't want the world and his dog to know where I am.'

Now Buckley's not the sharpest knife in the drawer but he's not completely stupid either. He shifts uneasily in his seat, a frown slowly puckering his forehead while he considers this unexpected proposition.

I sit back casually and fold my arms. I can sense his caution, can almost see it too, dripping like treacle through his treacherous mind. Silently, I wait. And believe me, if there's one skill Johnny Frank possesses it's patience. Never rush a sure bet. It

takes a while, two minutes, maybe three, and I don't say a word but finally he produces the questions I've been anticipating.

'But why me? Why us? There must be —'

I have to fight to suppress the grin. 'Look,' I interrupt quickly, shifting forward and placing a firm hand reassuringly over his, 'I know we've had our differences but that's all behind us now, isn't it? It's in the past. I need someone I can trust, someone I can rely on. Everything's changed out there. I need some time, a bit of space while I make the . . . arrangements.'

How often have I rehearsed this glib disingenuous response? On at least a thousand occasions, cursing, raving, pacing my cell with my brains in the balance. Now my right hand curls tightly into a fist. Fuck him. It takes an effort to keep my voice steady but I do – I have to.

'It's okay, I'll understand if you . . . if you can't, that's fine.

No hard feelings.' I give a swift dismissive shrug. 'Forget it.'

From the expression on his face it's clear there's nothing Buckley wants more than to forget the past – that dreadful place he's consigned to history. Nothing, perhaps, except for good hard cash. And the honeyed scent of money is wafting sweetly through the air. Things haven't been going so well lately. He could make some lousy excuse and leave but he won't. I know he won't. He's made the mental calculations and thinks he's got control.

Like a predatory snake he flicks out his tongue, moistening his lips. 'A couple of months?' he repeats tentatively.

I nod. 'Ten weeks max.' Aware my face is under scrutiny,

I keep its expression benign. I even smile again. Now there's a genuine pleasure in the gesture, in the satisfaction of a job well done. The bastard's about to take the bait. There's no going back. This is the beginning of the end.

He grunts. 'I'll think about it.'

'Sure – but don't take too long. I'm out in a fortnight.'

Jim's eyes dart around the room, unsure as to where to settle. His head is saying yes, of course it is, there's all that lovely brass up for grabs, but his instinct is still whispering caution. And now he's thinking – what? He's thinking we were never mates, never, associates at best. He's trying to justify what he did, realigning the past and twisting wrong back into right. I was always out of his league, smarter, richer – and a fuck sight more successful. Flash, that's what he thinks I was, a smug self-satisfied git. And I can't argue with that. I had everything he wanted. I was everything he wanted.

And he knows the only thing we ever had in common was . . . well, that's something he'd rather not dwell on; carnal knowledge of his wife is hardly the basis of an enduring friendship. Although he certainly got his own back. Eighteen years and counting.

Which is a reason and a half for him to just walk away.

But then there's the money.

His red face crunches into indecision. 'Give me a couple of days. I'll talk it over with Dee.'

As if outmanoeuvred by a master of negotiation, I shrug and say: 'Okay, make it ten but that's my final offer. Take it or leave it.'

He's shocked. His eyebrows hit the roof. Ten? Fuck, that's hardly a sum to be sneered at, not for a few weeks' bed and board. I must be desperate. And if I'm offering ten then how much more can he get his hands on? Oh, he remembers the job all right: Hatton Garden, late eighties – a haul of diamonds, and not just any chunks of ice but the rare and famous pink ones too. And those sweet babies are very much in fashion . . .

Buckley's eyes gleam suddenly bright. This is an offer he can't refuse. As if he's doing me a favour, he sighs and says:

'Okay. It shouldn't be a problem.'

I quickly nod before he can change his mind again.

'Thanks. I appreciate it.'

We shake hands.

The bastard's palms are clammy. Surreptitiously, I reach down and wipe my fingers along my thighs. There's no such thing as something for nothing. Buckley should have learned that by now, but some people never learn – they go on making the same stupid mistakes over and over again.

Thank fucking Christ.