

Switch

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Extract

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Prologue

Rick Ironwood staggered back from the blow, his trick knee giving out with a pop as his feet twisted sideways in a puddle of grimy engine oil.

Twin jolts of pain took his breath away, the shock turning his scream into a pathetic squeak. His feet failed to find traction and slid out beneath him. For a moment he was airborne, his body twisting unnaturally until all 260 pounds came crashing down. He landed hard, sending a dozen flimsy oilcans clattering across the floor. The back of his skull struck the garage's concrete pad with a loud crack.

Rick groaned as every pain sensor in his body flashed red. His face was a mask of blood, his left cheek and upper lip gashed open, his twice-broken nose snapped once more from the unexpected assault.

He held up his hands.

'Take anything you want! Fuck! The car! Anything! Jesus! There's nothing here!'

The tall black man with the gun stared at him, his eyes so wide and pupils so small the whites were like soft-boiled eggs. He held his mouth half open as though struck dumb at how easily the larger man had gone down.

Lying on his back with torn skin and pulled muscles, Rick knew the years hadn't been kind: hard muscle of youth turned to blubber from years of sitting on his ass and guzzling too many beers; skin a sickly white from a lazy diet of high-fat convenience foods and a liver disease only recently diagnosed. Even his shaved head, spotted with two days of growth, was a poor attempt to hide a hairline that had begun to recede before he was even out of his twenties.

Despite those flaws, he hadn't been prepared to be knocked flat by a skinny-assed spook in a business suit who looked too weak to part his own hair. Sure, the attack was a complete fucking surprise, but still, it wasn't so long ago that he'd had a reputation for kicking serious ass.

Gagging on blood, the broken nose making it difficult to breathe, Rick couldn't fathom why *anyone* would break into his garage. The only thing of value was his black-and-Bondo '79 Trans Am Firebird with the silver screaming eagle logo on the hood. But since it was sitting on cement blocks, it wasn't worth more than a couple hundred. He had been meaning to restore it, like that *Pimp My Ride* show on MTV, but money didn't grow on trees, at least not in his neighbourhood.

His attacker, a lanky, smoke-steel silhouette, pointed a tiny, blood-flecked pistol at Rick's face. The Detonics Pocket Nine still looked comical, its three-inch barrel no larger than the man's coal-black fingers. Rick had almost laughed when the well-dressed stranger pulled it out of his pocket, but that was before the barrel had gashed open his face and sent him sprawling.

The man finally spoke, his voice low.

'I had almost forgotten you.'

'For . . . gotten?' Rick's broken mouth was having trouble forming words as bubbles of crimson foam popped on his lips. 'I don't know . . . who the fuck . . . you are!'

'Yes,' the man said quietly. 'Yes, you do,' he paused before adding, 'Ironman.'

Rick's eyes narrowed in puzzlement, the nickname sparking cherished – *hell, sacred* – memories.

'And for what it's worth,' the man continued, 'I am sorry.'

'Wha—'

Rick's face imploded as the ball-bearing-sized bullet punched through his nose to become an explosive pinball. Ricocheting off bone, the bullet ripped tissue and muscle with abandon before finding the soft palate for a destructive exit.

Remarkably, even with the lower half of his face unhinged and his brain on fire from the shock, Rick stayed alive. He tried to speak, to reason with the man, but his tongue was no longer

whole. He felt cold concrete against his cheek and found he could no longer lift his head.

Rick struggled to find a reason for his attack. His gaze came to rest on a wooden bench containing an unfinished birdhouse and an old metal tool-case that had once belonged to his father.

The tool-case, rusted and worn like everything else in his life, had been his favourite hiding spot at a time when he still had a wife to hide things from. The case held a half-dozen dog-eared *Hustler* magazines, a small metal pipe a buddy who joined the army had made from brass bullet casings, and a glass vial containing two tiny rocks of yellowed crystal meth. The grand worth of his secret stash was about ten bucks and change.

The gunman stepped closer. His polished black shoes acted as twin mirrors to reflect the horror of Rick's face. Rick whimpered then, his mind finally unravelling as he felt the hot gun barrel touch his temple with a brief sizzle.

Rick's eyes flicked skyward and suddenly, with the man's dark, unsmiling face filling his vision, he remembered him.

It was the last thought he ever had.

1

The thin man felt as fragile as glass.

With shaking hands, he dropped the warm gun into the pocket of his suit jacket and removed a folded triangle of white cotton. After wiping the sweat from his face, he noticed the handkerchief had become spotted with blood – Ironwood’s blood.

Christ, he thought. *What have I become?*

His cellphone chirped and the unexpected sound was almost enough to make him drop to his knees and stick the damn gun in his own mouth. But he hadn’t come this far to fall apart now.

He answered the phone.

‘It’s done.’

‘I know,’ said a voice scrambled by cheap electronics to flatten its pitch and cadence.

‘You’re watching?’

‘You made quite the mess, Dr Parker.’

Zack Parker scanned the rafters of the garage for the camera. It didn’t surprise him that he

couldn't see one. When today's engineers made cameras so small they could swim in your bloodstream and identify plaque in the vessels of a beating heart, any object in any room could hide a thousand of them.

The scrambled voice laughed.

'Would you like me to send you a copy of the footage?'

Zack closed his eyes, struggling to hold back the madness that would send him so far into the abyss, return would never be an option.

'I've done everything you asked.'

'Perhaps,' said the voice.

Zack waited, not noticing he was holding his breath until his lungs began to burn.

'They're waiting,' said the voice. 'Here's what I need you to do.'

2

Inside the house, mother and child began their nightly ritual.

It was like watching a soap opera on a rabbit-eared TV set. When they crossed a window, he could see their features as clearly as if he were in the same room, but then they would fade out of sight behind a wall and he would need to use his imagination to fill in the gaps. But that was OK, he had developed a good imagination, and he could hear their voices.

The familial sounds emanating from the speakers floated around him, surprisingly static-free considering the cheap wireless microphones he had planted inside the house. He had considered planting cameras, too, but the idea of spying so intimately on the child had bothered him.

Better simply to listen.

‘Are you wearing your retainer, MaryAnn?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘If I come up there—’

‘OK, Mom. Geez. I’ll get it.’

‘MaryAnn! Do you know how much money your father and I have spent on your teeth?’

‘OK, you don’t have to yell. I was gonna do it.’

‘And floss, too.’

‘Yes, Mom.’

In the darkness of his lair, the watcher played with a disposable lighter. Its dyed plastic skin gradated from red to orange to yellow, the colours any amateur artist would use to depict flame. It took a true *auteur* to see the full spectrum of a fire: the blood reds and puss yellows, crisp blacks and molten ginger, and the deep, deep violet that told you it was a living thing.

Fire lulled you into the belief that it could be tamed, controlled, like a performing white tiger in a Vegas magic act. But all it took was a flick of thumb to release its true nature, and if you listened closely enough, to release its true voice: not unlike a human scream.

‘No more Facebook, MaryAnn. It’s time to sleep.’

‘But, Mom—’

‘No buts, it’s late. Switch off your computer and get to bed.’

‘Yes, Mom.’

Once the child had retreated under the bedcovers, the house grew silent.

The watcher leaned forward, closing his eyes and listening intently to the gentle padding of feet as the woman poured herself a glass of chilled Chardonnay (she preferred the vineyards of Southern Australia) and settled in her favourite armchair.

The bookshelves in the cozy den that overlooked a well-tended garden were lined with paperback thrillers. There was also a short shelf of plays and bound TV scripts with small speaking roles highlighted in yellow. But all those books belonged to her husband.

In these quiet hours, the watcher knew that Hannah would dig deep into the side pocket of her recliner and pull out one of the Victorian romances that she bought by the sackful from a used bookstore in Burnside. She liked her bodice-rippers full of old-fashioned romance and British accents, plus teary middles, tender-hearted rogues and, most of all, happy endings.

The faint crinkle of thin foil signalled that she had also dug out her other favourite indulgence, a Terry's Chocolate Orange in dark rather than milk chocolate. The watcher admired her discipline. She ate only two or three segments a night, which made the treat last a whole week.

Satisfied that both woman and child were settled for the evening, the watcher lifted a tiny remote control with two buttons: one blue and one red. The remote was unremarkable in design

or function and, like the lighter, it was inexpensive and easily disposable.

He pressed the blue button.

From his vantage point inside an olive-green van parked a short distance away, nothing seemed to happen. But inside the house, in a dark corner of the neglected basement, a perfect hole was punched in the natural gas line that led into the furnace.

Within forty minutes, enough deadly gas would escape to pack the furnace cavities and begin creeping upstairs to the main floors. By the time the rotten-egg odour became noticeable, both woman and child would be in a deep slumber.

Within seventy minutes, the slightest spark would be enough to turn the quaint two-storey, lemon yellow and white trim home into a blazing pyre. For each additional minute, the gas would build until the entire block was in danger of being reduced to an impressive crater.

The watcher looked once again at the plastic lighter in his hand. The continual motion of his thumb had worn away a patch of orange paint. Like all the others he had handled in his time, the colour underneath was a pale, almost translucent white.

With a sad smile, the watcher eased back into his chair, rolled the metal thumbwheel against the flint and watched as a tiny flame leapt from its plastic womb. In the silent darkness, he could hear the creature begin to scream.