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Opening Extract from...

True Blue

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Published by Pan Books

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1

Jamie Meldon rubbed his eyes vigorously, but when he stared back at the computer screen it was still no good. He glanced at his watch; nearly two in the morning. He was toast. At age fifty he couldn't pull these all-nighters consistently anymore. He slipped on his jacket and pushed back his thinning hair where it had drifted down to his forehead.

As he packed his briefcase he thought about the voice from out of the past. He shouldn't have, but he'd called; they'd talked. Then they'd met. He didn't want that part of his life dredged up again. Yet he would have to do something. He'd been in private practice for nearly fifteen years, but now represented Uncle Sam. He would sleep on it. That always helped.

A decade ago he'd been a hotshot and highly paid criminal defense attorney in New York, legally hand-holding some of the sleaziest of Manhattan's underworld. It had been an exhilarating time in his career, and also represented his lowest point. He'd lost control of his life, been unfaithful to his wife, and become someone he'd grown to loathe.

When his wife had been told that she had perhaps six months to live, something had finally clicked in Meldon's brain. He'd resurrected his marriage and helped his spouse beat a death sentence. He'd moved the family south, and for the last ten years, instead of defending criminals, he was sending them to prison. Everything about that felt right, even if his financial circumstances weren't nearly as rosy.

He left the building and headed home. Even at two a.m. there was life in the nation's capital, but once he got off the highway and rode through the surface streets toward his neighborhood it grew quiet and he grew more drowsy. The blue grille lights flashing off his rearview mirror jolted him to alertness. They were in a straightaway not a half mile from his house, but one bordered on both sides by trees. He pulled off the road and waited. His hand slid to his wallet where his official credentials were contained. He was worried that he'd dozed off or been driving erratically because he was so tired.

He saw the men coming toward the car. Not uniforms, but suits, dark ones that made their starched white shirts stand out under the three-quarter moon. Each man was about six feet tall with an athletic build, clean-shaven face, and short hair, at least that he could make out under the moonlight. His right hand gripped his cell phone and he punched in 911 and kept his thumb poised over the call key. He rolled the window down and was about to hold

up his official creds when one of the other men beat him to it.

"FBI, Mr. Meldon. I'm Special Agent Hope, my partner Special Agent Reiger."

Meldon stared at the ID card and then watched as the man flicked his hand and the familiar FBI shield appeared on the next slot in the leather holder. "I don't understand, what's this about, Agent Hope?"

"E-mails and phone calls, sir."

"With whom?"

"We need you to come with us."

"What? Where?"

"WFO."

"The Washington Field Office? Why?"

"Questioning," Hope replied.

"Questioning? About what?"

"We were just told to make the pickup, Mr. Meldon. The assistant director is waiting to talk to you."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow? I'm a United States attorney."

Hope looked put off. "We are fully aware of your background. We *are* the FBI."

"Of course, but I still—"

"You can call the AD if you want, sir, but our orders were to bring you in ASAP."

Meldon sighed. "That's all right. Can I follow you in my car?"

"Yep, but my partner here has to ride with you."

"Why?"

"Having a highly trained agent riding shotgun for you is never a bad thing, Mr. Meldon."

"Fine." Meldon slipped his phone back in his pocket and unlocked the passenger door. Agent Reiger climbed in next to him while Hope walked back to his car. Meldon pulled in behind the other car and they started on their route back to D.C.

"I wish you guys could have come to my office. I just came from town."

Reiger kept his gaze on the other car. "Can I ask why you're out this late, sir?"

"As I mentioned, I was at my office, working."

"Sunday night, this late?"

"It's not a nine-to-five job. Your partner mentioned phone calls and e-mails. Was he inferring ones that I made or received?"

"Maybe neither."

"What?" Meldon snapped.

"The Bureau's intel division gets chatter and scuttlebutt all the time from the dirtbag world. It might be that someone you prosecuted wants payback. And we understand that when you were in private practice in New York you did not leave on the best of terms with some of your, uh, *clientele*. It could be coming from that sector."

"But that was a decade ago."

"The mob has a long memory."

Meldon suddenly looked fearful. "I want protec-

tion for my family if there's some nut out there gunning for me."

"We already have a Bucar with two agents stationed outside your house."

They crossed over the Potomac and into D.C. proper, and a few minutes later neared the WFO. The lead car hung a left down an alley. Meldon pulled in behind it.

"Why this way?"

"They just opened a new underground garage for us to use with a hardened tunnel right into WFO. Quicker this way and under Bureau eyes 24/7. These days who the hell knows who's watching? Al-Qaeda to the next Timothy McVeigh."

Meldon looked at him nervously. "Got it."

Those were the last words Jamie Meldon would ever speak.

The massive electric shock paralyzed him even as a large foot stomped down on the car's brake. If Meldon had been able to look over he would've seen that Reiger was wearing gloves. And those gloves were curled around a small black box with twin prongs sticking out. Reiger climbed out of the car as a twitching Meldon slumped over.

The other car had stopped up ahead and Hope ran back to the second car. Together they lifted Meldon out and leaned him face first against a large Dumpster. Reiger pulled out his pistol with a suppressor on the muzzle. He stepped forward, placed the barrel

against the back of Meldon's head, and fired one round, ending the man's life.

Together they heaved the body into the Dumpster. Reiger climbed into the dead attorney's car. He followed his partner's ride out of the alley, turned left, and then headed north while Meldon's corpse finished sinking into the garbage.

Reiger pushed a speed dial button on his phone. It was answered after one ring. Reiger said, "Done." Then he clicked off and slipped the phone back in his pocket.

The man on the other end of the phone did likewise.

Jarvis Burns, his heavy briefcase pressing against his bad leg, struggled to catch up to the rest of the party as they headed across the tarmac, up the metal steps, and into the waiting aircraft.

Another man with white hair and a heavily lined face turned back to look at him. He was Sam Donnelly, the Director of National Intelligence, which essentially made him America's top spy.

"Everything okay, Jarv?"

"Perfect, Director," said Burns.

Ten minutes later Air Force One rose into the clear night air on its way back to Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

2

"Sixty-eight . . . sixty-nine . . . seventy."

Mace Perry's chest touched the floor and then she rose up for the last rep of push-ups. Both of her taut triceps trembled with this max effort. She stretched out, greedily sucking in air as sweat looped down her forehead, then flipped over and started her stomach crunches. One hundred. Two hundred. She lost count. And next came leg lifts; her six-pack ridges were screaming at her after five minutes and still she kept going, driving through the pain.

Pull-ups were next. She could do seven when she got here. Now she lifted her chin over the bar twenty-three times, the muscles in her shoulders and arms bunching into narrow cords. With one final shout of endorphin-fueled fury, Mace stood and started running around the large room, once, twice, ten times, twenty times. With each lap, the lady increased her speed until her tank shirt and shorts were soaked through to her skin. It felt good and it also sucked because the bars were still on the windows. She couldn't outrun them, not for three more days anyway.

She picked up an old basketball, bounced it between her legs a few times, and then drove to the hoop, which was a netless basket hung on a makeshift backboard bolted to one wall. She sank the first shot, a layup, and then paced off fifteen feet to the left, turned, and sank a jumper. She moved around the floor, set up, and nailed a third shot, and then a fourth. For twenty minutes she hit jump shot after jump shot, focusing on her mechanics, trying to forget where she was right now. She even imagined the roar of the crowd as Mace Perry scored the winning basket, just as she had done in the high school state championship game her senior year.

Later, a deep voice growled, "Trying out for the Olympics, Perry?"

"Trying for something," said Mace as she dropped the ball, turned, and stared at the large uniformed woman facing her, billy club in hand. "Maybe sanity."

"Well, *try* and get your ass back to your cell. Your buff time's up."

"Okay," said Mace automatically. "I'm going right now."

"Medium security don't mean *no* security. You hear me!"

"I hear you," said Mace.

"You ain't here much longer, but your ass is still *my* turf. Got that?"

"Got it!" Mace jogged down the hall that was

enclosed by stacked cement blocks painted gunmetal gray, just in case the residents here weren't depressed enough. The corridor ended at a solid metal door with a square cutout at the top as a viewpoint. The guard on the other side pushed a button on a control panel and the steel portal clicked open. Mace passed through. Cement blocks, tubular steel, hard doors with tiny windows out of which angry faces peered. Clicks to go. Clicks to get back in. Welcome to incarceration for her and her fellow three million Americans who enjoyed the luxury of government housing and three squares for free. All you needed to do was break the law.

When she saw who the guard was she muttered one word. "Shit."

He was an older guy, fifties, with pale, sickly skin, a beer belly, no hair, creaky knees, and a smoker's caustically cracked lungs. He'd obviously switched posts with the other guard who'd been stationed here when Mace had come through for her workout, and Mace knew why. He'd developed an eye for her, and she spent much of her time ducking him. He'd caught her a few times and not one of the encounters had been pleasant.

"You got four minutes to shower before chow, Perry!" he snapped. He moved his bulk into the narrow passageway she had to navigate through.

"Done it faster," she said as she tried and failed to dart past him. He spun her around and leaned his

heft against her while she braced herself with her palms against the wall. He shoved his fat size twelve boots under the flimsy soles of her size sixes; now Mace was on her tiptoes with her back arched. She felt the brush and then grip of his meaty hand on her butt as he pulled her to him, doggie-style. He'd managed to position them both in the one blind spot of the overhead security camera.

"Little patdown time," he said. "You ladies hide shit everywhere, don't you?"

"Do we?"

"I know your tricks."

"Like you said, I only got four minutes."

"I hate your kind," he breathed into her ear.

Camels and Juicy Fruit are quite a combo. He slid a hand across her chest, squeezing hard enough to make her eyes water.

"I hate your kind," he said again.

"Yeah, I can really tell," she said.

"Shut up!"

One of his fingers probed up and down the cleft of her butt through her shorts.

"There's no weapon in there, I swear."

"I said shut up!"

"I just want to go take a shower." *Now, more than ever.*

"I bet you do," he said in his gravelly rumble. "I just bet you do." One hand riding on her right hip, the other on her butt, he shoved his boots farther

under her heels. It was like she was tottering on four-inch stilettos now. What she wouldn't have given for a stiletto, just not the shoe kind.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of anything other than what he was doing to her. His pleasures were relatively simple: cop a feel or rub his hard-on against a chick when he got the chance. In the outside world this sort of conduct would've earned him a minimum of twenty years on the other side of these bars. Yet inside here it was classic he-said, she-said, and no one would believe her without some DNA trace. That's why Beer Belly only pantomimed it through the clothes. And throwing a punch at the bastard would earn her another year.

When he was done he said, "You think you're something, don't you? You're Inmate 245, that's who you are. Cell Block B. That's who you are. Nothing more."

"That's who I am," said Mace as she straightened her clothes and prayed for an early diagnosis of lung cancer for Beer Belly. What she really wanted was to pull a gun and lay his brains—on the off chance he had any—against the gray walls.

In the showers she scrubbed hard and rinsed fast, something you just innately did in here. She'd already experienced her initiation in here after only two days. She'd busted the woman's face. The fact that she'd avoided solitary or time tacked on had not endeared Mace to her fellow inmates. They simply tagged her

as a privileged bitch, and that was about as bad as it could get in a place where your cell rep defined every right you had or didn't have. Nearly two years later she was still standing, but she wasn't exactly sure how.

She hustled on, every minute now precious, as she counted down her time to freedom, with both anticipation and dread, because on this side of the wall nothing was guaranteed except misery.

3

A few minutes later a wet-haired Mace walked through the chow line and received her basic food groups so crapped and fatted up that in any other place—except possibly high school cafeterias and airline coach class—they would be deemed inedible. She swallowed enough of the garbage to keep from passing out from hunger and rose from her seat to throw the rest away. As she passed by one table a drumstick of a calf shot out and she fell over it, her tray clattering away, the goop on it painting the floor a nice greenish brown. Up and down the perimeter line, guards tensed. The inmate who'd done the tripping, a prisoner named Juanita, glanced down as Mace slowly got to her feet.

"You a clumsy bitch," said Juanita. She looked at her crew who sat all around the queen bee Juanita had become in here. "Ain't she a clumsy bitch?"

Every member of Juanita's crew agreed Mace was the clumsiest bitch ever born.

Juanita carried two-hundred-and-fifty-plus pounds on a wide six-foot frame, with each hip the size and

shape of a long-haul truck's mud flap. Mace was five-six, about one-fifteen. On the surface Juanita was soft, mushy; Mace was as hard as the steel doors that kept all the bad girls inside this place. Yet Juanita could still crush her. She'd landed here after a sweetheart plea deal for murder in the second in which her tools had included a tire iron, a Bic lighter, and lots of accelerant.

It was said that she liked this place much better than she ever had her world on the outside. In here Juanita was queen bee. Out *there* she was just another GED-less fat chick to punch the hell out of, courier drugs and guns through, or make babies with before the man abandoned her. Outside prison Mace had known a thousand Juanitas. She was doomed from the moment she'd tumbled from the womb.

That might have explained why Juanita had done enough crazy stuff inside here, including two aggravated assaults and a weapons and drugs bust, to tack twelve more years onto her original sentence. At that rate the woman would be here until they hauled her carcass out and slipped it into a potter's field somewhere. Her fat and bones would soon fertilize the earth and no one would either care or remember her.

However, that left the living woman with nothing to lose, and that's precisely what made her so dangerous, because it carved normal societal inhibitors right out of her brain pattern. That one factor turned mush

to titanium. No matter how many reps or laps Mace did, she could never match what Juanita had. Mace still had compassion, still had remorse. Juanita no longer had either, if she ever did.

Mace held the fork ready. Her gaze drifted for a moment to Juanita's wide hand planted flat on the table, orange nail polish muted against her skin that was obscured only by a tattoo of what looked to be a spider. An obvious target, the hand.

Not tonight. I already two-stepped with Beer Belly. I'm not dancing with you too.

Mace kept walking and slid her tray and utensils into the dirty bin.

Only as she was leaving did she glance over at Juanita, to find the woman still watching her. Keeping her gaze dead on Mace, Juanita whispered something to one of her crew, a gangly lily white named Rose. Rose was in here for nearly decapitating her husband's sexy plaything in a bar restroom using the gutting knife hubby kept for his fish catches. Mace had heard that the husband hadn't come to Rose's trial, but only because he was so upset she'd ruined his best blade. It was definitely more the stuff of Jerry Springer retro than Oprah couch chatter.

Mace watched as Rose nodded and grinned, showing the nineteen teeth she had remaining in her gaping mouth. It was hard to believe she was perhaps once a little girl playing dress-up, sitting on her father's knee, forming her cursive letters, cheering at

a high school football game, dreaming about something other than one hundred and eighty months in a cage playing second fiddle to a bloated queen bee with the mental makeup of Jeffrey Dahmer.

Rose had visited Mace on the second day she'd been here and told her that Juanita was the messiah and what the messiah wanted, she got. When the cell door opened and the messiah appeared, she would like it. Those were the rules. That was just the way it was in Juanita Land. Mace had declined Juanita's offer several times. And before things had truly gotten out of hand, Juanita had suddenly backed off. Mace thought she knew why but wasn't sure. Yet it had led to two years of fighting for her life every day, using her wits, her street smarts, and her newly found muscle.

Mace trudged to Cell Block B and the doors slammed into place behind all of them at precisely seven p.m. So much for another exciting Sunday night. She sat on the steel bed with a mattress so thin laid over it that Mace could almost see right through the damn thing. Over the two years she'd slept on it her body had absorbed every buckle and bend in the old metal. She had three more days to go. Well, now really only two, if she made it through the night.

Juanita knew when Mace was getting out. That's why she'd tripped her, tried to bait her. She didn't want Mace to leave. So Mace sat in her cell, crouched into a hard, tight wedge in the corner. Her

fists were clenched and there was something shiny and sharp in each one of them that she kept hidden in a place not even the guards could find. The darkness came and then strengthened into the time of night when you figured nothing much good was going to happen because the evil that was coming scared all the good away. And then she waited some more. Because she knew, at some point, her cell door would open as the guards on the night shift looked the other way in consideration for drugs or sex, or both.

And the messiah would appear with one goal in mind: to never again let Mace experience the light of a free day. For two years she'd been building herself up for this moment. Her buffed body waited with anticipation as adrenaline pumped with each exhalation of breath.

Three minutes later the cell door slid open, and there she was.

Only it wasn't Juanita.

This visitor was tall too, over six feet with the one-inch polished boots she wore. And the uniform was not like that of the guards. She wore it well, not a baggy part or dirt stain to be seen. The hair was blond and smelled good in a way that no hair in here ever could.

The visitor took a step forward, and though it was dark, there was enough light coming from somewhere out there that Mace could see the four stars

on each shoulder. There were eleven ranks in the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department, and those four stars represented the highest one of them all.

Mace looked up, her hands still clenched, as the woman looked down.

"Hey, sis," said the D.C. chief of police. "What say we get you the hell out of here?"