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Opening Extract from...

Easy Prey

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EXTRACT FROM EASY PREY

In Giacometto’s the lunchtime crowd was still there spinning out its cappuccinos. Roberto came towards me, hands not wringing this time but clasped. In a form of prayer, I chose to think, that my return was purely social.

“Heh, Mr. Hawk! You forget something?”

I gave him a middle-aged smile, the self-deprecating one that goes with a slipping memory. He released his hands and lowered his voice, reached out and touched me on the shoulder.

“You leave something? I find it for you.”

“It’s not a thing. It’s something I forgot to do.”

The dinner-plate hands came right at me again, telling me that I should go ahead and do whatever it was. I picked up an empty glass from the bar and started to toss it gently in the air and catch it. That was the point at which his table-side manners visibly deserted him, replaced by real concern.

“I don’t understand,” he said, after three or four spins of the glass.

“I tell you, Roberto, as a young copper I trashed places like this just because somebody looked at me the wrong way. It would just hit me ... wham.”

I clicked my fingers and missed my catch. The glass fell to the floor and smashed. The place went quiet. Such is the power of oncoming violence that his customers knew something was brewing and it wasn't just the coffee. Roberto turned to appeal to the onlookers. None of them really wanted to help. None of them really wanted to be there anymore.

“Okay, Mister, what’s your problem? What you want that I should do about it?”

“Empty your top pocket onto the counter.”

He found his balls at last, somewhere in the back of his throat if the croaky voice was anything to go by.

“Fuck you!” he said.

I kicked him in the knee, he bent forward to clutch it, I took hold of the gelled head and brought it down on the counter

with a crack. A gallant regular scraped back his chair and I turned to face a boy no older than my own sons.

“Stay where you are!” I yelled at him. “This bastard isn't worth it.”

The boy was six feet two and built like a prop forward. On a level rugby field he would have left me for dead but right now he was up against thirty years of facing down everything from joy-riders to serial killers. Experience won the day and he re-took his seat but as he did so it occurred to me that one day soon experience wouldn’t be enough. I needed to steer clear of situations like this one. Like I’d told the lady in the Indian gift shop, I badly needed the Map.

I reached into the top pocket of Roberto's jacket, took out the pressed handkerchief, a clip of business cards and a cigarette lighter and laid them on the counter. I reached in again and this time came up with a fifty-pound note. I pushed him away. He staggered into the nearest clutch of stools, grabbing at them to stop himself falling.

“Does he give you one of these every week?”

“Who?”

“John Stillman. I saw him press it into your hand when you came to our table. How does it work? Does he ask you every time if there's news of his daughter? Do you say yes, a guy was here the other day, hopeful, then next week sorry, it was all a false alarm? Is that how it goes?”

“What you talking about?”

I thumped the bar and the tray of glasses trembled in sympathy with their fallen comrade.

“Is that how it *goes*?!”

There was a pause before he glared at me and said quietly, “I do him a service. He pays me. Since when is that a crime?”

“Since right now,” I said, wiping my gel-covered hands on the handkerchief. “Did Richard Crane really come in here?”

“Sure.”

“And Teresa?”

“What, you think I lie?”

“I think you turned his personal tragedy into a profitable side-line. Stop taking his money, Roberto, or I will be back in an even worse frame of mind than I'm in now and it won’t be a glass I toss in the air, it will be your head.”

I picked up the fifty pound note and left.

Out in the street I could feel the eyes watching me from the restaurant as I crossed over to Danny, still there, still asking the passing legs for spare change. I stooped down and handed him the fifty. His eyes came to rest somewhere between me and him, not on my face, not even on the money.

“It's from John Stillman,” I told him.

He winced, trying to recall the name unaided, then said, “Who?”

I straightened up, gave a discreet wave to the owner of the Indian gift shop and walked back to the Land Rover.