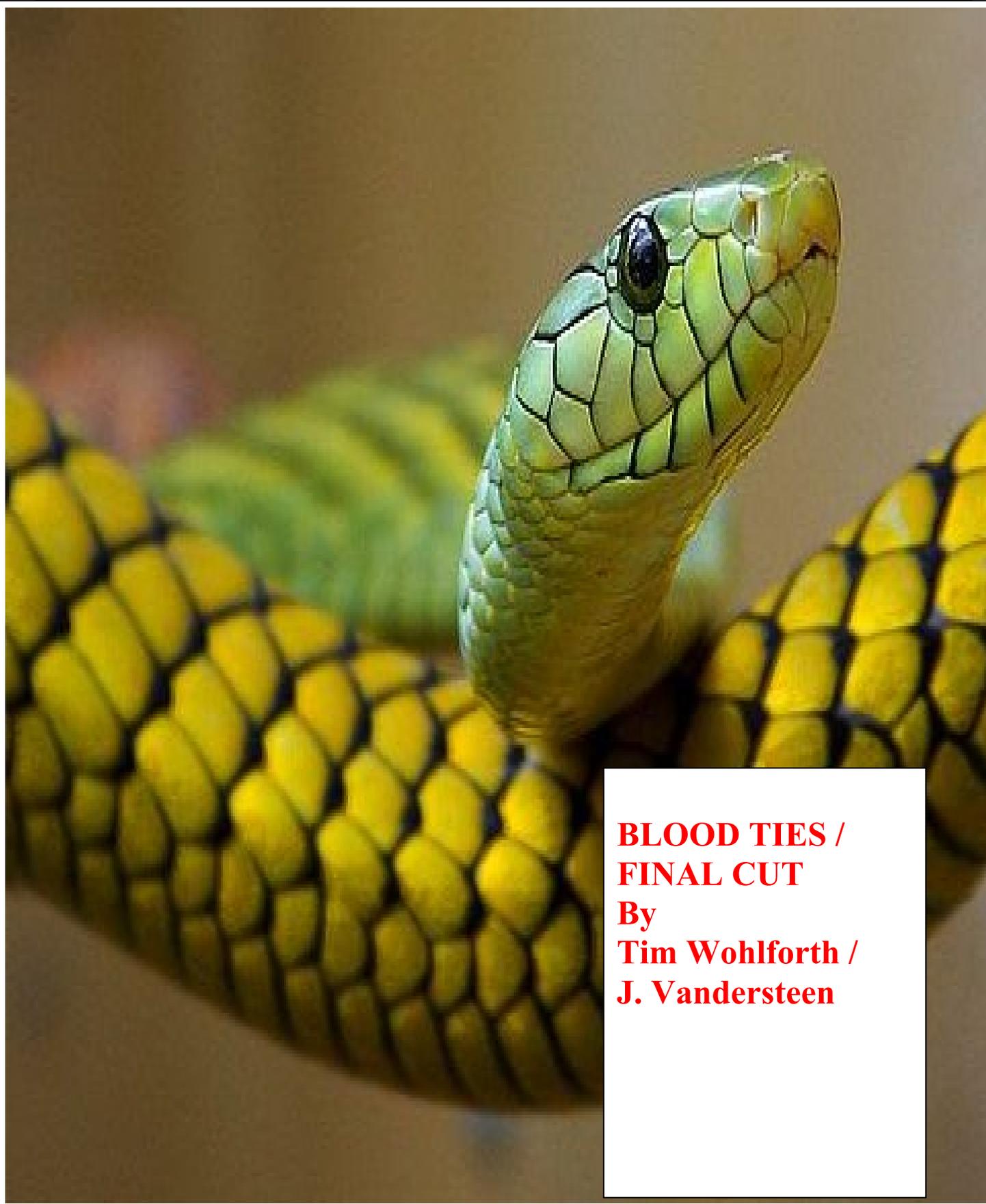


www.sonsofspade.tk presents a split novella by Tim Wohlforth and J. Vandersteen



**BLOOD TIES /
FINAL CUT**
By
**Tim Wohlforth /
J. Vandersteen**

BLOOD TIES / FINAL CUT

A SPLIT NOVELLA BY TIM WOHLFORTH
AND JOCHEM VANDERSTEEN

PUBLISHED BY WWW.SONSOFSPADE.TK

Blood Ties Copyright © 2010 by Tim Wohlforth
Final Cut Copyright © 2010 by Jochem Vandersteen

Blood Ties

A Jim Wolf Short Mystery

By Tim Wohlforth

tim@timwohlforth.com

Foreword to Blood Ties

As a writer I'm always interested in new ways to get my stories out there. As a fan of the PI genre I'm always looking for ways to promote the genre and it's writers. As a rock reporter I'm well aware of the split EP's that artists use to promote their stuff. A split album (or split) is a music album which includes tracks by two or more separate artists.

A split allows more than one artist to split the production costs for one release. The same can also apply to the promotional costs of a single release. Splits also allow bands to expose their music directly to another band's fanbase. Usually, the bands on a split are of a similar musical genre.

The idea of a split seemed like a great way to reach my goals. So, I started to look for authors interested in participating. The first guy I thought of was Tim Wohlforth, since I'd been enjoying his short stories online and I figured he wasn't popular enough yet. I was in luck, he was willing to provide me with a Jim Wolf short story.

In that story, which you're about to read, Jim has to face his past and deal with the relationship with his mother. It has everything a good Jim Wolf story needs, Wolf's boat that pays homage to Travis McGee, a snake, witty dialogue and the compelling start and surprise ending that are trademark Wohlforth.

I'm sure you will enjoy the story as much as I did.

Jochem Vandersteen

1 .

Lori Mazzetti beamed at me as I entered Big Emma's, the Victorian bar she runs on Jack London Square. The last time she looked at me that way was when she introduced me to a belly dancer named Sheila. That lady stuck me with Monty, a seven-foot-long Burmese female python. Lori figured if she supplied my women, I wouldn't get into a serious relationship. That way I'd have plenty of time for her. And she sure demanded attention. Lori was definitely up to something. Had I any sense I would have turned around right then and there and headed back to my cozy berth on *Misty*, my sailboat, and home. That way I would have been saved from taking on my most difficult case, a case that forced me to confront what I have spent a lifetime avoiding. And I am one hell of an avoider. Just ask Lori. For years now I have succeeded in avoiding a relationship with her, yet remained her best friend. Smart? One look at Lori and anyone would conclude it was just plain stupid.

"There's a woman in here asking for you," Lori said.

Her deep blue eyes expressed more than their usual mischief. An excitement tempered by a touch of craftiness. Her lips curled up slightly into a smile, yet there was a frown on her brow. Damn it, she was up to something. The frown. That didn't fit. No, I didn't think the waiting woman was another one of her dates. Something far more serious. But who?

I push my way into the crowded bar. The after work crowd packed the place. I strained my eyes to adjust to the dim orange light, given off by small candle-shaped bulbs attached to chandeliers. I heard shouts from the rear, the bang of liar's dice cups, the drone of ESPN coming from a pair of TVs, the murmur of a hundred voices. The pungent odor of garlic and mozzarella cheese wafted through the air.

I swung onto a stool and stared at a large oil painting of a gargantuan naked lady, boobs like two Goodyear blimps, thighs to rival sequoias. Big Emma. I said, "I don't have any time for seeing ladies today."

"I can see how busy you are," Lori said. "You've been hanging out here all week."

She placed before me a double-shot of Oban single malt neat. She wore a tan cashmere turtleneck sweater, a gold cross bouncing off her bosom, and tight black ski pants. She swung her naturally blond ponytail from side to side, dismissing my resistance. The corners of her mouth turned into a pout. And she had one hell of a persuasive pout. "You're going to see this woman, like it or not."

"No, I'm not." The lady wasn't going to boss me around. One reason why I stayed single, damn it.

"She says she's your mother."

"You're crazy. My mother's in Connecticut and she doesn't fly."

"Not that mother."

“Oh.”

All these years as a PI, I could have found her. But I didn't want to. I didn't want to see her. And now she had found me. Why? If she had cared a damn about me when I was three she wouldn't have given me away. So why did she search me out now? She wanted something. What she wanted would cost me. Cost me a lot.

I had no memories from my life before I was adopted. All I knew about this woman is what my adopted mother told me. And that wasn't good. How could I be sure this woman was my mother?

“You going to just sit there and drink?” Lori's voice broke into my musings. I had no choice. I would have to meet with her.

“Fuck.”

“That's all you got to say? Your birthmother searches you out and all you can say is fuck?”

I looked up at her. She must have seen the hurt in my eyes for she reached over the bar and squeezed my hand.

Lori said, “She must have hurt you something terrible when you were young. But you've got to see her now. Find out what she wants.”

She was right as usual.

“Where is she?”

She gestured toward a woman sitting by herself in a booth in the rear. She was nursing a martini. Sixty something. Bottle blond hair, thin, frail. She hadn't spotted me. How could she after all these years? She looked furtively around the bar as she sipped. Frightened. Yes, she was definitely scared of something. But of what? Maybe just of meeting me. Maybe.

I dropped down into the seat opposite this woman who claimed to be my mother. She looked up from her drink but avoided my eyes. I searched her face. Yes, there was a resemblance there. Narrow head, a strong chin, thin body, light blue eyes. Something else not so easy to describe. An ambience, the way she sat, the way her hands played with her martini glass, a sense of reserve, a wariness. But I wasn't sure. How could I be?

“You're Jim Wolf now,” she said without emotion. “My son.”

“So you told Lori.”

“Pretty woman. Your girlfriend?”

“Just a friend. And who do you claim to be?”

She smiled. “Claim? I guess I deserve that. No way you would remember me. It was so long ago. Just as well.”

“Just as well?”

“Let's just say I wasn't the greatest of mothers. I was very young, sixteen, when I had you.”

“My mother told me your name is Janice Sutcliff.”

“Your *adopted* mother wasn't supposed to know. Yes, that's my maiden name.”

“How can I be sure that you're really my birthmother?”

She reached in her purse, removed two documents. The first was her birth certificate. The second a hospital admittance form reporting that Janice Sutcliff had entered Norwalk Hospital on May 15th, 1945 and was admitted into the maternity ward. I was born at Norwalk hospital the day she was admitted. Certainly not ironclad proof yet suggestive. Interesting that she had come prepared with documents. I handed them back to her.

“How did you find me?”

“Remember the Tanzis? Eugene and Mary. Your foster parents. They were present when you were adopted. Mary passed away some years back, but Eugene is still alive. I begged him for your new name. He couldn't refuse a mother. Then I typed your name into Google. I came up with your address in minutes. Just a box number down at the marina. I asked around. Told you hung out here.”

Damn Google! Put us PIs out of work one of these days. I didn't remember the Tanzis. I had no images in my mind from that distant period. Only feelings. But my adopted mother had mentioned them. They were good to me. Yes, what she said did fit. Still.

I continued to stare at her and she continued to avoid my gaze. Her face was a maze of wrinkles. Not just age. The kind of sun-damaged skin you find on women who live for years in sun-soaked Florida or Southern California. She had spent decades outside of snow-belt Connecticut. She wore a skin-tight white blouse and a pleated gray short skirt. A garish bright yellow scarf covered with pink flamingos was wrapped around her rather long neck. She gave the impression of a cheerleader from the fifties who had refused to adjust to growing old. She had kept her figure. She must have been a knockout when she was younger.

"Why did you bother?" I asked.

"Because, I need your help."

Simple as that. This lady must have ice flowing in her veins. Hadn't seen me in over forty years but she now wanted a favor. I was no better. I had displayed no warmth toward her because I felt no warmth. Rather anger swelled up inside me, anger flowing from some emotional scar so deep and so far in the past that I no longer remembered its cause. I grew rigid and pulled away from her. She saw my reaction.

"I know I wasn't much of a mother back then. But I was only sixteen, alone in the world. I'm not saying I've been that great of a person ever since. Still, I *am* your mother. Blood matters. And I really need your help."

Blood? A lot blood mattered to her when I was three and she gave me away. Why in hell should it matter now? That argument wasn't going to work with me. But I was curious. Who was this woman? What had she done all those long years? And what kind of trouble was she in now? I knew she wasn't lying about needing help. I had to know more.

"I gather you're in some kind of trouble. Tell me your story."

She sighed, finished off her martini in one gulp, and plunged into her narrative.

* * *

"It's kind of complicated," she began.

I waved for Lori to bring another round of drinks. I sensed we would both need them. The place was packed with a raucous crowd. Two parties were going full swing in the back. A group of UPS drivers occupied bar stools up front and were discussing their upcoming Teamsters contract negotiations.

I leaned forward in my seat. She had a soft voice with a cadence I hadn't heard in years, the accent of Western Connecticut. New York tinged with just a touch of Boston. The sounds of my childhood.

"You're a PI so maybe you will understand," she continued. "I've been living in Miami for some time. It's a special place, not like Connecticut. Dangerous unless you're connected."

"Connected to whom?"

"To everybody, to those who run the place and that means, one way or another, to the Cubans. I met one of them. Raphael Hernandez. Well connected. Maybe too well connected. He ran a travel agency with his brother Jaime in the heart of the Cuban community. I was having trouble getting a job, because I had a record...."

"A record?"

She shrugged her shoulders and looked over my head. Never, never into my eyes.

"A little misunderstanding. I'm a bookkeeper. But once something like that gets on your record, it's hard as hell to find a job."

"No doubt."

"Raphael didn't seem to care. Maybe that should've been a warning. Like he was looking for someone with a record. But I'm getting ahead of myself."

"Take your time."

Lori came, bringing our drinks. She had this ridiculous grin on her face. Like she was watching some damn soap with dutiful son listening to long missing mamma. Lori had no idea what this woman was telling me. A lot more than white picket fences, bridge evenings, book clubs.

We both took deep sips of our drinks.

“He paid me well. Let me take off as much time as I liked. Got me box seats for Marlins games. A handsome man. Easy to like. Still it was all just a little too good. I mean, hardly any customers, yet very large sums of money flowed through the agency’s accounts. I began asking around about him. I speak perfect Spanish. Nobody wanted to talk. And you know what that means in Miami.”

No, I don’t.”

“He’s still in play.”

“In play?”

“Most Cubans have given up on the Castro thing. They don’t like the guy, but figure he’s not about to go soon. So they get on with their careers, their kids become real Americans. Every now and then they attend a rally and curse Castro. Like when Janet Reno took that little boy back. But some of the exiles conspire, wear camouflage, practice combat in isolated fields in the Everglades, prepare for another Bay of Pigs.”

“So Raphael was a terrorist.”

“They consider themselves patriots.”

“So does Bin Laden.”

She shrugged her shoulders again.

“I keep out of politics. But you need to know that Raphael was connected, very, very well connected. And in play. Therefore the money.”

“I’m not sure I follow you completely.”

“This little travel agency had over ten million dollars stashed away in bank accounts on the Cayman Islands.”

“So the money was to finance an invasion.”

“That’s what Raphael said when I confronted him. It takes a lot of book cooking to hide ten million dollars.”

“Where did they get the money? Are exiles that charitable?”

“You don’t understand Miami. Cocaine, the Colombians, money laundering, politicians, cops, even the Federal Government. They are all connected. I figured Raphael’s operation was laundering drug money. I made a lot of transfers to another travel agency in Bogota. I was instructed to keep ten per cent and send it to the Caymans. Remember the Contra business? Drug money, the mob, the CIA?”

“You telling me this little travel agency you worked for had CIA connections?”

“Not directly. That’s not how it works. The DEA, the CIA, now the Homeland folks, they all do their jobs as best they can. Occasionally they discover something that leads to connected people. They back off, look the other way. In return, at election time, they reap the rewards.”

“You know this for a fact?”

“I will tell you exactly what I do know from my own sad experience. Recently Raphael spent less and less time in the office. I would see him down the street at a Cuban restaurant talking with Jaime, his brother. Jaime never came to the agency. Raphael said he was a silent partner. Investor only. Then, after the long Labor Day holiday I turned up at work to find a lock on the door, and a For Rent sign in the window. I peered inside. Nothing. Not even a desk had been left. And I was owed two week’s salary.

“I asked around the neighborhood. All I learned was that a moving van had shown up on Sunday and emptied the place. Then I checked the phones. All disconnected. Office phone, Raphael’s home phone, Jaime’s home phone, both of their cells. I went around to the banks I

normally dealt with. Accounts closed. Then I called the Caymans. I possessed the account code and could access whatever amount I chose. I figured I'd get my back wages and maybe a bonus as well. No luck. Closed out as well. So I was fucked. No job. Just some savings."

Bonus? I'd bet she planned to wipe them out.

"So you want me to find these guys? Miami is not my beat."

"No, I don't want you to go to Miami. Miami is coming to Oakland."

"What do you mean?"

"There's more to the story. Two days later there's a knock on my door. Two big guys walked in. I recognized them from the meetings Raphael and his brother used to have down the street. An Anglo named Oscar. The other was Carlos Perez, a Cuban big shot. Charity events, political rallies. Definitely connected and, the rumor is, in play. I got the impression Oscar worked for him."

"What did they want from you?" I asked, though I had a pretty good idea they weren't paying a social call. This mother of mine was into some very deep shit.

"Ten million dollars."

"Come on."

"They had discovered the Cayman Island money had disappeared. Only three people had access to that account. Raphael, Jaime and me. So they figured we were all in on it. I said I didn't know where the brothers were and had no money myself. They didn't believe me. Gave me two days to come up with ten million or else."

"Or else what?"

"I stop breathing."

"Why didn't you go to the cops?"

"Are you kidding? Oscar is a cop. He showed me his badge."

"What do you expect me to do about this whole mess?"

"You don't get it. They're here or they will be soon. Then I'm dead. You've got to protect me."

"I'm not a bodyguard. Just a simple PI who works mostly insurance cases."

For the first time since I sat down in front of her she made eye contact. A withering, commanding stare. More angry than frightened. She raised her voice to a shout.

"So you're going to let them kill me? Is that it?"

I said, "I have just one question for you. Why did you give me away?"

"What do you want from me? A confession? Genuflection? Blood?"

She reached into her purse and pulled out a pair of manicure scissors. She placed one hand palm up flat on the table and jabbed the point of the scissors deep into its flesh. She didn't cry. Blood oozed out over the table. I was so shocked I couldn't move.

"There!" She stood, leaving a pool of blood and the scissors on the table, and began to run toward the door. The UPS drivers turned around and stared at us. Lori shrieked and came running. Blood dripped down over Janice's dress. The crowd, cowed by the violent scene, parted to let her through. I pushed past Lori and ran after her.

A burly African-American UPS driver with a shaved head ran after me. He flung himself at me, tackling me around my feet. I fell crashing to the floor. He must have thought I had stabbed her.

"No," I said, "she stabbed herself. Got to stop her."

"That's right," Lori said. "I saw what happened."

He let me go and I rushed to the now closed door. I flung it open, but there was no one outside. Where had she gone? I stood for a moment trying to control my emotions, think of what next to do. I shivered. It was a cold moonless night. Wind swept candy wrappers and leaves around my feet. A storm was coming up. I prepared to re-enter Big Emma's. Then, halfway down the block, I spotted her. Janice ducked out from an alleyway and stepped into a

yellow convertible. She had wrapped her scarf around the injured hand. I dashed toward the car. The engine started up and swung out into the street. Florida plates. A brand new BMW. She'd hit sixty by the time the car got to the corner. Then she was gone.

I staggered back into Big Emma's.

* * *

I climbed on a stool at the end of the bar by the door. The place had returned to its normal chaotic self. No one seemed to remember the bloody scene that had taken place moments earlier. Or maybe they just didn't want to get involved.

"What was that all about?" Lori asked as she pushed a glass of Oban single malt in my direction.

"I have one hell of a mother."

"So now you admit she's your birthmother?"

"She had proof. But there's more to it. That outburst. The blood. The way I felt when she stabbed herself. Yes, it's her."

"So now you remember her?"

"Yes. No images or details. It was her fury. I will never forget the rage of my birthmother."

"She attacked you physically when you were a child?"

"I was placed in a foster home for some reason. Janice wasn't supposed to have me alone. My adopted mother said she... she was unstable."

I took a deep sip of my whiskey. I knew I was drinking too much. Getting a bit woozy. But I preferred a whiskey fog to the clarity of my mother's wrath.

"Why did she look you up after all these years?"

I told Lori her story.

"You believe her?"

"I believe some of it must be true. I believe she is in deep shit."

"So what are you going to do?"

"What can I do? She's gone. No address for her. Nothing but a yellow BMW with Florida plates."

"You're a detective. You can find her."

"Then what?"

"You'll think of something. You have no choice. She may not be perfect but she's your mother."

"Blood ties."

"Something like that."

"I don't believe in blood ties."

"It's not a matter of belief. It's the way it is."

I shrugged my shoulders, finished off my whiskey, and walked unsteadily out of Big Emma's and into a downpour.

* * *

I can handle a bit of drizzle. Cleans the air and is a welcome relief from months of good weather. But this rain, driven by wind, battered into me horizontally as if seeking to perforate my body and transform me into a sieve. I bent my head and plowed forward toward the marina, *Misty*, and dry clothes. I could see only a few feet ahead of me. No one else out. I passed the little hut with grass on its roof, a replica of the one Jack London inhabited in the Yukon. At least it wasn't snowing.

The rain washed the whiskey haze from my brain. I began to think somewhat more clearly about this birthmother of mine. I needed to find her, because I needed to understand her. That was the only way I would ever be able to understand myself. An emotional, bitter woman. What caused her rage? My adopted mother had told me how Janice had been born into

poverty, abandoned by her own family, and deserted again by the father of her child. There were reasons.

Somehow this line of thought wasn't helping me. I still felt my rage against her rage. So I started to think about her story. Was she telling the truth? I didn't trust her. I was stuck with two emotions from my distant past: rage and distrust.

What about blood ties? Damn it. Lori was right. Blood mattered. Part of being human. I had a responsibility for this demented woman. Shit.

* * *

I stood by the railing of the promenade and looked out over the marina. The rain had subsided, becoming a persistent drizzle that was transforming me into a wet sponge. Yet, I stood there and looked out over the Alameda Estuary. A lone tug, with red and green running lights, made its slow way through the water. I could see inside the lit-up cockpit. A dark bent figure grasped the wheel. My only human contact since leaving Big Emma's. That's the way I liked my human beings – in the distance with me doing the watching. My terms. My space preserved.

* * *

Hands from two separate individuals grabbed my arms. Where the hell had they come from? The man on my left was thin, small mustache, dark complexion. A hulk held my other arm. Two Hispanics. Miami had arrived.

"Where is she?" the thin one asked.

"Who?"

"You know who. Janice."

"And you are?"

"Her former employers. She stole our ten million dollars."

"Ah, Raphael and Jaime."

"We want the ten mil back," Jaime said. "It's not our money. It's for Cuba, for freedom."

Or did they want money for themselves? I was having trouble picturing these two thugs as patriots.

"I haven't got it."

Jaime started to push me over the railing. This damn mother of mine hadn't told me the whole truth. Just enough to get me into trouble.

"So where is she?"

"I don't know."

He grabbed my legs and lowered me over the water. I tried to wiggle out of his grip. But Jaime was one huge powerful bastard.

"That's not a good answer," Raphael said, calmly.

"I really don't."

Jaime let go of my legs and I plunged down and smashed head first into a piling and then into freezing water. My head spun from the concussion. The cold numbed me. I opened my mouth and took in a gallon of seawater. I felt myself fading away into darkness. I had to live. I wasn't going to allow these Cuban thugs to end my life without one hell of a fight. My mind cleared and with it came biting paralyzing cold, a splitting headache, and enormous painful pressure on that space inside my chest where my lungs were supposed to be. I kicked my feet but felt like some large octopus had wrapped itself around them and was pulling me down, down. I continued to struggle to reach the surface.

Then, as if by some miracle, my head broke through the water. I spit out salt water and gasped. Finally a painful breath, but a breath. I saw the marina floating dock bobbing in front of me. I swam toward it and grasped onto the side of the deck. Then I looked up. The two Miami bastards stared down at me.

"Where is she?" Jaime asked.

“Where’s the money?” Raphael added.

“I don’t know.”

“Wrong answer,” Jaime said.

He stepped on one of my hands. I had to let go. I held on with my other hand. I knew if I let go I’d sink and not come up. Too weak. Hyperthermia setting in. Dizziness.

That’s when I saw her. Janice stood behind them. She had no coat on. Her hair was matted with rain and rivulets of water, darkened by mascara, flowed down her face. She held a revolver. Her hardened eyes met mine for a second then returned to the backs of the Hernandez brothers. She fired. And fired. And fired. The two men jerked as each bullet hit them. They clawed at the air and then collapsed. Janice bent down, dragged each body to the edge of the float, and dumped them into the water. Like it was all in a day’s work for her.

Then she turned to me.

“Now get on up here.”

“I...I can’t.”

“Well, I’m sure as shit not hauling you out. I just saved your life. The least you can do is crawl out of there.”

This was one mother who didn’t take no for an answer. I painfully pulled my aching body up on the deck as directed. Water poured out of my mouth. I vomited.

“Now take me to your boat. We have some talking to do.”

* * *

We sat opposite each other, a folding table between us in the cabin of my boat. I had wrapped a blanket around my soaked body in a vain attempt to get warm. My teeth chattered. Mother Dear, however, didn’t seem to notice my plight. She was fixated on keeping me covered with her revolver. I must say she looked as miserable as me, but more vital than she had in Big Emma’s. Excited. She liked to be in command.

“You lied to me,” I said.

“I told you the truth about most of it.”

“Just left out the bit about who was the thief.”

“I stole from thieves.”

I said, “What do you want from me now?”

“I want you to understand.”

“That you are a cold-blooded murderer who shot two men in the back as well as a thief?”

She jumped up from her seat and swung her gun toward me. Damned if she didn’t plan to smack me in the face with it. She stopped herself at the last minute and sat back down.

“You haven’t changed. You used to defy me when you were a little baby. Refused to walk when I knew damned well you could. Cry for no reason.”

Then she began to shake and cry. Her grip loosened on her gun. I reached over and withdrew it from her hand. She didn’t even notice.

“What the fuck does it matter anymore?” she asked. “I try and try. Take the whole ten million. Take me. Throw me in jail. I just don’t give a shit.”

“Tell me why you came back after stabbing yourself in the bar.”

“I told you. I need you. They would have found me.”

“You could have let them drown me and then shot them.”

“Maybe, I should have. But you see, you’re my ...blood.”

“Should have thought about that back when you gave me away.”

“I never gave you away. I was sixteen and a ward of the state. They took you away from me. Put you into foster care. Then the adoption.”

“So why look me up now?”

"I've been in trouble my whole life. Juv Hall. Prison three times. Four failed marriages. Did a lot of bad things. Then along came the Hernandez brothers and their ten million. The score of a lifetime. Cover my retirement then some. I could be respectable. Maybe I'm getting old, but I felt I couldn't handle it all on my own. And, well, I had to see you."

"And now that you saw, what?"

"Okay, okay. I still need help. I'll pay you."

"I don't want your money."

"You got to help me. It's not over. The Hernandezes aren't the only ones out there looking for the money, looking for me, now for you."

"Keep your hands on the table." The voice came from the hatchway, followed by a body with a gun. Anglo. Fat, ruddy-faced, balding, gray hair. I figured Oscar. "I'm a police officer."

"This is not Dade County, Oscar."

He smiled. "Don't move, wise guy."

He approached the table, took a handkerchief out of his pocket and used it to pick up Janice's gun, then placed it in his pocket.

"Now the ten mil."

"Where is Carlos?" I asked.

"Back in Miami. He leaves operations to others. You seem to know a lot Wolf. Janice no doubt told you everything. You are stuck with a dumb one there. Easy to trace. The Hernandez brothers found her and I followed them. Then she goes and shoots them. A real stupid move. This gun is all the evidence the local police will need to link her to the murders."

"Why do you care, Oscar?" I said. "You're not here to catch crooks, but to recover ten mil."

When you do, are you going to turn the money over to the authorities? Account for the money transfers the Hernandez brothers carried out on the instructions of Carlos? Help DEA find the source of the hundreds of millions that flowed through that two-bit travel agency?"

"None of your damned business how I proceed."

"I've made it my business. You're just a rent-a-cop on this operation and you know it. So let me ask you one question? Do you or do you not want to retrieve the ten mil?"

"What's your proposition?"

"Simple enough. The three of us take a stroll to the parking lot by the Marina. After wiping off Janice's gun, you will drop it into the estuary. The three of us proceed to a yellow BMW convertible with Florida plates. The money is in the trunk. That is, all the money minus a hundred grand or so needed by Janice for wheels."

My mother, who had appeared too shocked by Oscar's arrival to speak, suddenly came alive. It must have been the mention of the car and the money.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Where else would it be?" I said. "You don't know anyone in this town."

"Thanks for telling me where the money is, Wolf," Oscar said, "but I really see no further need for the two of you. You know too much."

He raised the gun and pointed it straight at my head. I was going to be the first to die. Great. Hadn't thought this damned thing through all the way. Too late now.

That's when I spotted two beady eyes staring out at me from the rope locker in the bow of the boat. Monty. She usually spent her time in a tank in the stern. But sometimes I let her free to get some extra slithering when I wasn't on the boat. This was one such time. Snakes aren't dogs. They don't attack on command. But did Oscar know that?

"Monty!" I shouted. "Now!"

"What the hell? Who's Monty?"

"That seven foot Burmese python preparing right now to strike you if you shoot."

"Bullshit," he said.

Then he did something incredibly stupid. And I wasn't about to stop him. He pushed past me and lunged at the snake. Rule Number One of Burmese Python Handling: never, never lunge toward the animal. Instinct takes over and you lose.

Monty coiled and sprung. She flew through the air and wrapped herself around Oscar's body. In seconds Oscar was forced to drop his gun. I picked it up. Monty began to squeeze. Oscar battled to continue to breathe. In minutes he would be dead from asphyxiation. Only then would Monty test out if she could open her mouth wide enough to swallow his fat head.

"I... I can't breathe. Help me."

"We need to settle a couple of things. A few minutes ago I proposed a deal. You vetoed it. I would like to give you some time to rethink your position."

"Pl...ease."

He had a point. I had to have Monty loosen up just enough so the fellow could talk. I started to unwrap her. Rule Number Two of Burmese Python Handling: always start to unwrap from the tail. Leave head and fangs to last. I freed around two feet of Monty and said, "Go ahead, talk."

"You win, but I take the car, too. It was bought with my money."

"You are in no position to negotiate. We shall consider the car a finder's fee."

"But she stole from us. You can't reward her."

"I'm the finder. You give me the car for retrieving the money. Then I'll give the car to my dear mother as a present."

She looked up at me, speechless. Monty had gotten to her as well. Florida folks just don't like snakes. I let about a foot of Monty rewrap around Oscar.

"Okay, okay."

I uncoiled a foot of Monty again.

"There's just one problem," I said. "I don't trust you. Once you get your money what is to stop you from returning and killing me, implicating my innocent mother in murder?"

"My word."

"Ha!"

"What do you want from me?"

"Simple," I said. "After I unwrap Monty just a little more, I want you to take Janice's gun out of your pocket. Use that snot rag to wipe the handle clean, then you grip it firmly so that you leave your fingerprints. You will hand the gun to me. Carefully. I'll keep Janice's revolver as my guarantee."

"That means I'll have to trust you."

"There's a difference between me and you. I'm trustworthy and you're not. More important, Oscar, you have no choice."

He nodded his head. I unwound Monty and returned her to the tank. He handed me Janice's gun as instructed.

Janice rose from her seat without saying a word, turned her back on me, and made her way toward the companionway. She was gutsy, that mother of mine. She began to climb the ladder. She turned.

"Gonna shoot?" she asked me.

"Haven't made up my mind."

She faced away from me, continued up the stairs, soon absorbed by darkness. I waited until I heard in the distance her car start up. I said to Oscar, "get the hell out of here."

After he left, I picked up Monty, holding her with one hand just behind her head and the other near her tail. I placed her back in her tank. Then I went to the fridge and pulled out a frozen mouse for her dinner. I keep them next to my emergency burritos. After her exertions she would need a snack. Then off to Lori to confess to her why I allowed a cold-blooded murderer to leave with ten million stolen dollars.

She would understand. Blood ties.

End

Blood Ties

A Noah Milano Short Mystery

By J. Vandersteen

jvdsteen@hotmail.com

Foreword to Final Cut

I am very pleased to collaborate with Jochem Vandersteen in this project. What could be better than two PIs for the price of one? And they couldn't be more different. Jochem's Noah Milano is a tough guy's tough guy. Son of a mobster, he's doing his best to break from the mob and run a legitimate private security firm. He does not always succeed in sticking to the straight and narrow, but he always gets his man or woman – one way or another.

His former mob connections give him access to heavies for the lifting when needed. In this story he calls on Tony Hawaii, a buddy from the days when he worked for his Dad. Then there's Kane, whose specialty is whacking people. Never fear, only the bad guys get whacked. And his client, Arthur Bridges? He is not telling Noah the full story. His clients rarely do. My guy, Jim Wolf, is a loner's loner. He has no friends to call upon when he gets into trouble, unless you count Monty, his eight-foot-long female python. And in this story family connections are less than helpful.

Jochem Vandersteen has been writing about Noah Milano for a couple of years now. His stories have gotten positive comments by writers like Ace Atkins, Jeremiah Healey, Tony Black and Sean Chercover. The first full-length novel *White Knight Syndrome* is still on sale. He's also the webmaster of the site that spotlights the fictional P.I.: www.sonsofspade.tk and can be reached at jvdsteen@hotmail.com.

Read on... if you know how to duck!

Tim Wohlforth

The Final Cut, a Noah Milano short story

Arthur Bridges was a middle-aged man in a dark suit, wearing a Rolex around his wrist and Italian loafers on his feet. The kind of guy who could afford the big leagues. I was a bit surprised I was meeting up with him in a Brentwood restaurant.

“My home was invaded by four men, wearing Halloween masks and carrying shotguns. They took my money and those bastards raped my wife and fourteen year old daughter,” he told me while cutting his steak.

“That must’ve been awful,” I stated the obvious and took a sip of my beer. His story made my blood boil. I guess I can understand why they stole his money, but what was the point in hurting this man’s family?

“They’ll probably be in therapy for the rest of their lives,” he said.

“What did the police say? Any leads?”

“In fact, I haven’t told the police about this. That’s why I contacted you. You see, the money that was stolen was not exactly known to the IRS. I run a business that sells household appliances. Sometimes however, some items get sold at a, err, different price than the IRS thinks.”

“I see.”

“I heard you can be trusted to be discreet.”

“You heard right.” In fact, he probably contacted me because my dad is a renowned mob figure. That immediately makes people think I won’t step away from jobs that might be a bit illegal.

“I want to hire you to find those bastards and get my money back. You get 5% of the returned money as a fee. How does that sound?”

“How much money are we talking about?”

“They ripped me off for 200 thou.”

I whistled between my teeth. “Not bad. You’ve got a deal. I will charge you my expenses separately though.”

“That’s not a problem as long as you keep things discreet.”

“I will. And again, I’m very sorry about what happened to your family.”

While finishing our meals I grilled him about the details of the home invasion. Reliving it was pretty painful for Bridges, but it was necessary for my investigation. It was clear that these criminals were extraordinarily vicious and had done that kind of thing before. After our meeting I got into my Dodge Charger and phoned my pal Tony Hawaii with my cell. Tony, who got his nickname from wearing the loudest Hawaii shirts you’ve ever seen, is a small time criminal and seems to know everyone in the underworld. He’s also a good guy to hang out and drink a beer with and the only real friend I ever made working for my dad. Even when I severed all ties with my father, trying to run a more or less legitimate business as a security specialist, he stayed my best friend.

I gave him the details about the home invasion crew and asked him to try and find out more about them. He would, and I promised him a part of my cut if his investigations brought up something useful.

My next call went to a cop named Harper. He’d been on the take for years, working for my dad since I was a teenager. For a relatively low price he didn’t mind offering up some details about ongoing investigations or looking the other way when faced with an illegal act. A good guy to do business with. He promised me to find out more about any open cases that could involve the same home invasion crew.

“Halloween masks? Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, Bill Clinton and Frankenstein? Christ, that’s not a home invasion, that’s a masked ball,” Harper chuckled.

“I don’t think Bridges’ daughter found it very amusing,” I said. Harper told me to relax and keep my pants on. A bit of cop humor made you cope with those sick fucks. I wasn’t sure I

wanted to learn how to cope with them. My dad was a cold criminal, but assholes like that even he despised.

The following days I spent doing some routine work, installing a security system at the home of a paranoid rockstar, bodyguarding a visiting CEO and doing some background checks on new employees. I was just typing up an invoice when my phone rang. It was Tony.

“Hey, Noah. I think I’ve got something for you. There’s not much info out on the streets about who did that home invasion but I did get a call from an old pal who overheard some asshole bragging about raping a middle-aged woman and her fourteen year old daughter.”

I sat up straight. “Tell me more.”

“There’s this buddy of mine, Arnie, who’s kind of addicted to strip clubs. He was visiting the Golden Amazons Club, hanging out at the bar when he got into a conversation with one of the other regulars, some muscle-bound creep with a lot of tattoos. They were talking about pussy, when the creep offered there was no tighter pussy than teenage pussy. He bragged about doing a mother and daughter a few days ago. He didn’t offer much details about how he got into contact with them, but Arnie figured this just might be one of the guys we’re looking for.”

“Just might,” I agreed. “And if not, I’d still like to kick the shit out of him.”

“Thought so. We could go over to the club tonight, if the creep is in Arnie can point him out to us.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I assume you’re picking up the tab, you being the one with the expense account and all.”

I said I’d take care of it, hoping Tony hadn’t just conned me into taking him to a titty bar.

*

If you’ve seen one of these places, you’ve seen them all. Several booths filled with sad man leering at the gyrating bodies of unclad, surgically enhanced women and less sad men who

just wanted to show off how much money they had to spend. The Golden Amazons Club was a bit lower on the ladder than most, partly due to its location, near Los Angeles Street. That meant lower prices and because of that it meant guys like Arnie could stop over very often. Tony pointed his pal out to me. Arnie was a fat guy in a bowling shirt with curly hair and the thickest glasses I'd ever seen. I thought I noticed a bit of drool coming from his mouth. He clearly appreciated the ebony beauty doing her act on the stage.

Tony introduced me to Arnie. Arnie held out a hand for me to shake, but never looked me in the eye. He didn't want to miss out on a minute of the strippers act, obviously. His hand was soft and clammy. I had to wipe my hand on my jeans when I got it back.

"Arnie, could you tell my buddy here if the guy you told me about is in here?"

"He usually comes in at eleven. I'll point him out to you then," Arnie said.

That meant we had an hour to go before we could expect him. I guess there were worse ways to spend your time than watching hot women undress. Tony had the class to even put a few bucks between the occasional thong. He seemed to be particularly fetched with an Asian chick sporting breast implants and a lot of dark makeup. Arnie was like a dog in heat over every woman that stepped onstage. I tried to stay cool, even when the Asian chick's nipples were close enough to poke out my eyes.

At a few minutes past eleven Arnie managed to take away his eyes from the strippers long enough to notice that our person of interest had come in. He elbowed me and nodded in the direction of the door. A muscular man wearing a sleeveless black shirt that showed off his black Tribal tattoos entered the club. He took a seat not very far from ours and ordered a drink with the brunette in Daisy Dukes that waited the tables. When she walked off he slapped her ass. It was a nice ass, but that didn't mean you had to slap it. If you were allowed to slap any nice ass that you saw my own would be battered and bruised. His attitude annoyed me. Good. I walked over to him, Tony followed me.

“Hi, pal,” I said.

The creep gave me a look that would’ve made you think he was looking at a piece of shit floating in the toilet. I didn’t appreciate that much. “Who the fuck are you?”

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “Someone who wants a word with you. Would you care to step outside?”

He slapped my hand away and got up. He was bigger than me and quite a bit more muscular.

He was probably thinking he could kick my ass. “Why the hell would I want to do that?”

“Because I’m asking you nicely?” I tried. It didn’t work. He shoved me against the chest, telling me to fuck off.

I grabbed his right wrist with my right hand and gave it a nice little twist. His entire arm ended up on his back and his knees on the floor. When it comes to unarmed combat I’m a pretty tough mofo, thanks to my old mentor, Kane.

Two bouncers walked over to us. Tony stepped between them and me and took out some dollar bills from his pockets. The bouncers were pretty cheap labour, they took the money and backed off. Good, I figured Tony was wearing his .38 in an ankle holster and I didn’t look forward to see him shoot someone.

“We’re just taking my friend for a walk. These ladies are just too dangerous for him. He’s got a heart condition, see?” I told the bouncers when we walked past them.

When we’d arrived at the parking lot the creep made a move. He tried to kick me in the shins, and while he didn’t manage to do that my grip loosened a bit when I tried to avoid that. It was enough for him to break free. He tried to hit me in the face. I managed to move my head just in time to prevent his knuckles from damaging it. I’m just as proud of my boyishly good looks as my buns of steel.

Tony decided that was enough senseless violence and drew his .38. He put the barrel between the creep's ribs. "Enough. We'll draw some concerned citizen's attention and he'll call the cops. None of us want that to happen."

The creep's hands went up. I told him to act casual and walk with me. Pushing him forward I directed him to Tony's Cadillac. I put him in the backseat and joined him there. Tony handed me his .38 and I took over guarding the asshole with it. Tony got behind the wheel and we drove off.

While driving I asked the creep's name. When he told me to go to hell I poked him in the ribs with the gun. He told me his name was Mike.

"Okay Mike, nice to meet you. I'm Noah. I want to talk to you about some story I heard about you. You see, I heard you like raping young women, is that right?"

He tried not to look worried, but a nervous twitch with his eyes gave him away. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Do you really want us to torture you?"

"You wouldn't dare," he said. I proved him wrong and hit him with the butt of the .38. His nose broke like a teenage runaway's dreams the moment she stepped from the bus in L.A.

"Next thing from this gun that ends up in your face is a bullet. You're going to tell us where the money is you stole from the guy whose family you raped. And no funny shit."

He started to laugh. "And what if I tell you where the money is? How will you get it away from the three armed men guarding it?"

"First of all, you're going to introduce us," I said. "Second of all, we're not exactly unarmed ourselves."

"The creep's got a point. Three against two aren't the best of odds," Tony said. "I say we ask Kane to join in."

“I don’t like working with Kane,” I said. I should know. I’d been working with coldblooded killer for years when I was still doing jobs for my dad. In fact, he’s the one that taught me how to shoot and fight. The way he did things didn’t fit in with how I tried to live my life these days. I tried to avoid him like the plague. Every now and then our paths crossed, though. “He’s the best backup I can think of,” Tony said. “I say we split the money with him.”

The creep thought that was funny. “You’re just two cheap thugs, aren’t you? You’re no better than my crew.”

That pissed me off. I hit him in the face. “We never raped any underage girls, asshole.”

His face was now covered with blood. He spit some of it out of his mouth. “Yeah, you’re behaving like a real gentleman.”

He had a point. Was this really the only way to handle this case? Hadn’t I resorted to violence just a little too fast? Sometimes it seemed like it was an instinct I couldn’t get rid of. My best friend Minnie sometimes told me she thought I became a security specialist to set right some of the wrongs of my past. That I was looking for some sort of redemption. I wondered more and more these days if I didn’t choose that profession after breaking the ties to my father just so I could keep kicking heads in.

“Just tell us where the money is and I don’t have to act like a thug,” I told Mike.

He finally caved in and told me his crew owned a club a few blocks away from Los Angeles Street in fact. The club was only open during the weekends. The money was in their safe over there. Getting the money out of the safe and possibly encountering all three criminals seemed like a dangerous job. Maybe Tony’s idea wasn’t that bad. When we were outnumbered the chances were pretty good we would have to resort to shooting. If we matched their number and came with enough firepower they might surrender and no shots would have to be fired. In that case, involving Kane might be proof of how I’d changed instead of confirming I was still a thug. I decided to call Kane.

He said he was glad to hear from me. He'd told me before he sometimes felt like an uncle, and sometimes even a father to me. I had to admit, Kane didn't seem to possess many feelings, but if he had them, he would have them for me. He could be pretty protective of me. He would be happy to go along for backup, he said and we agreed to meet up around the corner of the home invasion team's club.

*

We'd been parked around the corner of the club for ten minutes when Kane arrived in his Hummer. If you got paid the amount of money he did, you could afford fancy cars like that. He got out of the car, looking just like he did when I'd been a kid. Long, dark hair streaked with gray, a goatee and skin that seemed to have seen way to much sun, like a cowboy's. He wore combat boots and a long black duster. I knew the duster was covering up a sawed-off shotgun.

"Kid," he greeted me. He merely nodded at Tony.

"Hi, Kane. Let's talk about how we're going to approach this," I said.

"That's easy," Mike said. "You guys are going to get your asses killed."

Suddenly Kane lashed out. He hit Mike right in the throat, eyes bulging, trying to find back his breath.

"I wasn't talking to you, asshole," Kane told him.

"Jesus Christ, Kane! We need this guy," I said.

"We do?"

"I want to use him to get inside the building," I explained.

"I can get in there and take out everyone in the building without them even noticing me,"

Kane promised.

"I know you can, but I don't want anyone killed."

Kane shrugged. "Okay. It's your party. But don't worry, your boy will be fine. I didn't strike to kill. He just needs a minute to catch his breath."

*

His breath caught, Mike was ordered out of the car and to the front door of the club by me. I was right behind him, my .38 in his back, covered by my own.

Mike knocked on the door and yelled, "It's me, Mike. Open up."

The door opened. A big man with long red hair and a beard was in the door opening. He reminded me of a Viking. He was carrying a .45 pistol in his right hand. "Who's that with you?"

I showed him my .38. "I'm a special guest. Drop the gun."

The Viking started to raise it, instead of dropping it. Before I could fire the .38 a neat little hole appeared in his forehead. He dropped down on his knees, then fell down on his face.

Kane appeared, carrying a still smoking 9mm with a silencer.

"Don't complain," he said. "I saved your ass. Let's get inside." He led the way inside. I followed, using Mike as a shield. Tony was the last one in, carrying an Ithaca shotgun.

The club didn't exactly look like the hipper ones on the Strip. The tables were worn, the floor was dirty and the stereo equipment from the last decade. It was probably just a front for these guys' illegal doings, anyway.

Behind the bar was an Italian looking guy with black, slicked back hair. He was pouring himself a drink. "Mike? Who are the guys with you?" Then he noticed our guns and produced a shotgun from behind the bar. I wasn't sure whose bullets killed him first, Tony's or Kane's. The Italian fired off a shot before he died however. If it wasn't for Mike I would've been hit. Now it was Mike's body that was torn apart. My jacket got spattered with blood.

"Fuck, fuck! This isn't going the way I planned at fucking all!" I felt things had gotten totally out of control. What the hell had I been thinking anyway, barging in there with triggerhappy

fellas like Tony and Kane. Had I really expected this to end without a body-count, or was my thirst for avenging Bridges' teenage daughter's innocence that big I'd unconsciously planned for this to happen?

Bottles broke, gunshots sounded. From a door at the back someone was taking shots at us. I upended a table for cover and started to fire at the door. Kane dove behind the bar and opened fire with two silenced 9mm's while Tony's shotgun blazed. Seconds later the shooting stopped and blood was coming from the door.

Kane jumped over the bar, his duster billowing behind him like it was Batman's cape or something. He went to the door. Kneeling down he checked out the fallen shooter's pulse.

"Dead," he confirmed. He stood and walked over to us. "Let's find the safe."

That was just a little bit too cold for me. "We just killed three men and I'm not sure we're not guilty of getting the fourth one killed. We can't just raid the safe like nothing happened."

"It was them or us, simple as that. And they were grade-A douchebags. We just did the world one hell of a favour. And don't worry about the bodies. I'll take care of them." Kane was really good at getting rid of bodies I knew from experience. In fact, Tony wasn't too bad at it either.

After a while we found the safe, it was behind a painting in an office attached to the club.

Kane smiled like the Cheshire cat. We found a lot more than 200 thousand.

"I'll just take this with me. You guys get your 20% of 200," Kane said.

"You can't do that. What about Bridges' money?" I said.

"I never agreed to anything with him. Besides, we avenged his wife and daughter for him.

Isn't that worth more? He should be happy he doesn't need to pay my usual gage for four hits like that."

"Come on, this could ruin the guy's business."

Kane sighed. "I will get an extra 50 thousand to you. Use it to get his family the best kind of therapeutic help possible. How does that sound?"

I shook my head. "I promised this guy something."

"This guy is a douchebag. He told you the money was just some dough he didn't tell the IRS about, right? Well, he lied to you. I know the business he's in. This asshole runs several sweatshops, putting illegal immigrants to work for just a few dollars. He threatens to report them to Immigration if they don't work hard enough. I heard some stories in fact about how he personally sexually abused some of his employees. He's not getting the money back. I'm going to take my cut. You get yours. His family gets some. He gets squat."

I couldn't believe what Kane was saying. Was he just making up excuses for taking the money? That wasn't the way Kane operated, though. He didn't need any excuses, he carried guns.

"All right," I said. "It's a deal."

*

I met up with Bridges in Brentwood again, two days later. I'd done some research and found out Kane was right. I had to resist the urge to kick his teeth in the moment I saw him.

"You got my money?" he asked me after a sip of his Martini.

"I got you revenge," I told him.

"What do you mean?"

"Can't say much more about it, I'm afraid. I also paid a top shrink enough cash to get your family the therapy they need."

"Okay. And the rest of the cash?"

"I paid out some associates for their help."

"Good. And what's left?"

I stood. “Mister Bridges, I’d like to stuff the chair you’re sitting in down your ass. You’re lucky I won’t.”

Bridges slammed a fist on the table. Waiters and guests alike looked alarmed.

“I want my goddamned money and I want it now,” he whispered.

“I’ve got the address of the guy who’s got your money right here. If you want to, you can try taking it from him,” I said and slid a note his way.

He took the note and stormed off. I knew how this would end. I decided my cut would go to his widow and child.

END