

I go up there, but I'm not taking any chances. I park a few blocks from Boss' office. I light one more Lucky. I walk the back way, I'll need to scan the parking lot. When I get there it's empty, well-lit, but empty. *Good to be suspicious...now where's that Mercedes?* Boss has always driven a black Mercedes or two. If it isn't around, he isn't around. But I don't have a reason to believe anything just yet. I go to the corner, to scan the front of the building. No black Mercedes. I go back around, I check the other side. No black Mercedes. *You can't be serious Boss...* Then, across the street from the back parking lot, I see a familiar Pontiac. *Sent a boy to kill a man, huh? Well, there's no going through the front.*

I jimmy open the back door and head quietly up the steps. I get the nine out immediately. I step soft, too, noise is even a tell to an idiot. Boss barely has any lights on in the place. Since I'm coming from the back, I can check his office first. I can see that the only thing illuminating it is a desk light. But that's enough to cast a shadow. My back is to the wall, now. I know he's waiting behind the desk. *Goddamn, who's amateur enough to let the streetlight slip in through the blinds?* I have a pretty good idea. My nine does too. Quickly, quietly, I step to the door. I draw. *There he is.* Without even a thought, I pull, twice. I think the second Bullet catches his forehead. He falls, right beside Boss' desk.

"Sorry Adam." Idiot never had a chance, and it wasn't my damn job to give him one. I'm a little hurt, not that Boss'd try to have me killed, but that he'd think this pile of shit could do it. Or maybe Boss knows what he's doing, maybe the son of a bitch hasn't gotten my message yet. I scrawl a little note on his notepad.

"Sorry I missed you. ~ Shamrock."

I leave Adam, Boss can figure him out, it aint my problem. He's still got his gun in his hand. Besides, Boss doesn't like to invite the cops to his office. He's got boys that can take care of these things. I need a Lucky, and I enjoy one. I leave out the back, quick. I've dropped 'em like that before, it's never good to stick around. When I get to my car I just have to sit. *Dammit, Boss. I just wanted out... you're the one making it complicated. I'm ready to cut the strings...* Then I smirk...*But I still like the rush.*

It isn't until I get back to the room that all of this hits me.

*Is this the way to hold on to her?* I go for my bottle. *You're not getting yourself out of Hell this way. SHE ISN'T IN YOUR ARMS NOW, IS SHE? hell calls hell, boy...* I need to get these thoughts quiet. I take a few swigs and just lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Then the cell rings. I'll damn sure check the number. *Sean?*

"Hello."

"Hey man." He sounds a little flustered. "You know Nash?"

"Stuck up Boss' ass, princess of Mobile, Nash?" Nash was an older guy who had been in the life since before Boss. But he didn't have the sense Boss had. He could put out a hit when he wanted to.

"He's after Sapphire."

I feel like everything below my rib cage just drops out of my body, nothing but air. "Sapphire?"

"He thinks that'll draw you out." Sean tells me. "He aint afraid to kill her."

"What? Boss wouldn't sign off on that shit."

"Boss didn't have to." Sean narrows his voice.

“She safe?” I ask, scared shitless.

“I think so, for now.”

I can't hold in the anger. “Don't these dirty sons of bitches know she's a mother? Just cuz she dances on a pole they think they're carryin' the deed to her goddamned life... Just cuz she was nice enough to give me some attention these bastards are gonna kill her? Fuck them!” I'm starting to take it personally. *Thank god Nash doesn't know where Marie is...or Gracie, god forbid.*

“Look, I wanna be there with her.”

“I'll take you to her.”

“Take a cab to the Krystal, right by the Econo-Suites, understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I'll drive.” I take a deep breath. “Thanks man, I owe you one. And if you're screwin' me...well I still owe you one.”

I get my bag together. Checking out is easy, I paid in cash and can leave whenever the hell I feel like it. I get into my car and drive the short distance to the Krystal. I light myself a Lucky, goddamn I need to calm my nerves. I take Gracie's picture out from my wallet and just stare. For the first time, I start to feel anger staring at the picture. *What the hell kind of man tries to take a mother from a little girl? What the hell kind of dirty son of a bitch wants to take that from a little baby?* I don't have any illusions. I know that if I fall, anybody can say I had it coming. But Sapphire? Sapphire? Whatever mean streak she has aint worth this. The cab pulls into the parking lot. I get out and signal Sean over. He's got on blue jeans and a leather jacket and is quick, but subtle, about pointing out what he has under the jacket.

“Man, I'm glad you called me.”

“No problem, I figured you'd want to know.”

“Kay know about it?” I had to ask, it didn't seem like she'd be too happy.

“Yeah, man. She's pissed too. She's tryin' to get ahold of Boss. Everybody knows she's got as much swing as Nash's dumb ass.”

“Nothin' brings in money like the Magnolia.” I'm through with small talk.

“How's Amy?”

“She's fine...for now.” Sean stops for a minute. “You know her real name?”

Sean shows me to the place she's hiding out. The goon from the Magnolia Club is watching the place. I find my way to Sapphire as soon as I get in. She's been crying, I can tell. She runs into my arms, I hold her tight and close.

*“You'll be safe babydoll, I'll fix this. I promise you.”* I try to whisper as soft as I can, without letting her sense any of my fear. She buries her face in my shoulders. “Is Jasmine safe?”

“She's with Casey.” Her voice is almost a whisper.

“He know why?”

“I just told him...” she takes a breath in, “it was an emergency.” I kiss her on the forehead.

“You'll be alright, sweetheart. Jasmine'll be alright too,” I look over at Sean, he's loading up a Russian 7, “we're watchin' over her momma.”

Sean puts a pot of coffee on for us. I make sure I have a couple of extra clips for my nine. I put a switchblade in my back pocket, just in case things get too hairy. There's one more gun in my bag. I sit there staring at it for a while. It's a pearl handled .45. I took

it off the bar in the back room of Hattie's a long time ago. I pick the thing up and damn near choke looking at it.

"Dirty sunvabitch." I mutter.

"What?" Sean looks over at me.

"Nothing, little nostalgia trip." I wrap the gun up in some clothes and put it back in the bag. "You fellas stay alert out here; I'm gonna go keep her company."

I go back into the bedroom. Sapphire's struggling to find comfort in the bed, watching an old movie.

"Hey," she seemed a little spooked when I opened the door. "You've got nothin' to worry about. They'll have to run me over with a freight train to get to you."

She looks up at me and then a slight bit of that familiar smile comes to her face.

"And I want you to know I'm sorry you got dragged into this shit. And if you never want to see my face..."

"Michael," she interrupts, "you are the sweetest little thing."

I smile embarrassed. She moves up and kisses me, caressing my cheek.

"Goddamn I love you." I whisper when the kiss ends. We both look into each other's eyes after that. She looks away, and then back up.

"Love you." She whispers in a cute, slight, babytalk.

"Babydoll, I'm gonna go back out here for a minute, plan our next move. You just get to bed, alright. I don't want you to do anything but dream sweet." I kiss her forehead.

"I'll try." She tells me.

"And baby, I'm gonna get the sunvabitch who tried to take you from your little daughter." She smiles, she knows I mean it.

Back with the guys, I'm less than enjoying my black coffee and Lucky Strike.

"I'm killin' Nash." I blurt, extinguishing my Lucky.

"If wishes were horses..." Sean answers. We both nod.

"You could do it." Our muscle speaks. He's a black guy, looks about 300 pounds, most of it rock. Whenever I saw him in the Magnolia, it seemed like he knew how to conduct his' self.

"How's that?" I ask matter-of-fact.

"Nash is an early riser. He has to be to unload that safe in his office. He gets there around five or so." Our clock already says 3:40.

"The safe?"

"Yeah, he Boss' funnel, you know?" Sean and I look at each other, this is the best idea we've heard all night.

"How do you know this?" Sean asks.

"Man, I use to work Nash's door."

"Why'd you..." I search for the right word, "transfer."

"You rather stand by some asshole's door all day or work for a nice lady like Kay in a place where you can see the finest women in Alabama?"

"He makes a convincing argument." Sean laughs.

"Sure does." We all think this over a little. I break the silence. "Does Nash carry?"

"Snub .38, but you get close enough to him that don't matter no more."

*Who tells these dumb sons of bitches to carry .38's?*

“Even in the mornin’?”

“Prolly not, hell, he carryin’ it for show no ways. But, man, that building on lockdown in the mornin’.”

“No way in?” I ask, a bit perturbed.

“Unless you folla Nash in.”

“That might be just what I have to do.”

“Shit’s dangerous.” Sean warns me.

“Not if I take a friend.” We all stare at each other. “Sean, you stay here. You,”

“Carlos, Big C,” the muscle introduces himself.

“I want you across the street, watching when I go in. Follow me, but not to close. I’ll give you my Nine.”

“If he has the nine how’re you gonna handle it?” Sean asks. I pull the switchblade from my back pocket, click the button, the blade pops out. Carlos just looks up at me.

“Man, you got some steel balls on you.”

I smile, “aint the first time I’ve heard that.” The room chuckles a little bit.

“Look, I’m a check on Amy. Then me and you,” I point at Carlos, “are payin’ Nash a visit.”

I go into the room. It looks like Sapphire has found her way to sleep. She’s beautiful, curled up underneath the covers, dozing on her pillow. I give her a simple, soft kiss on the cheek.

“Love you,” I whisper. She’s a little less than half conscious.

“Whanow?” She doesn’t even open her eyes.

“You’re safe.”

Carlos and I leave for Nash’s office. I don’t wear the suit, I have no reason to stick out. I wait in a little shadow on the side of the door opposite to the one Nash usually approaches from. Carlos is across the street. As Nash approaches the door, I nod at Carlos. He slips back into the Dixie dark. I’m just waiting as Nash approaches. He strolls nonchalant, whistling.

He whistles quietly to himself as he gets to the door. Carlos wasn’t lying about Nash. He’s carrying a hard, black briefcase. *Boss’ scratch...* I watch as he unlocks the door, climbs up the steps. He doesn’t hear as I follow him up. I’m quick enough to get a boot in the door...*lucky he doesn’t lock it behind him.* Carlos crosses the street and I nod again. I go inside, closing the door slow and quiet behind me. I don’t lose my view of Nash, I don’t know my way around this office. I see where he goes. *Quick and quiet, Michael, quick and quiet.* I get to the office door and realize that it’s too late to turn back. I always knew when it was too late to turn back, too late to let him live. Nash opens the briefcase and looks it over. I slip into the room. Evidently, he hears me. Nash turns around. Nash is an old man, he has *Just-For-Men* box hair and a cheap, congressman style suit. When he sees me, he freezes. I’m quick to pull the switchblade from my back pocket...*better be awful comfortable to bring a knife to a gun fight.*

“How’re you Nash?” I open the blade.

“Listen, boy, I was just...”

“Just what, you sumvabitch? I aint one a your statehouse boys.” *He’s got the look, I’ve seen it a million times. Last time I saw it was across a kid’s face. A man gets a certain fear inside him when he knows he’s reached the end.*

“Why don’t you step away from that briefcase.” I command. He obliges.

“Look, Michael, son, you don’t wanna do nothin’ too...”

“Don’t call me son. Don’t call me nothin’ you dirty bastard. You don’t own her, understand?”

“Michael, you don’t wanna do this, Boss, he’ll...”

“I know exactly what I want. I aint Boss’ little bitch like you.” I lose a little bit of cool. “I bet you sucked his cock when you was back at Atmore.” He just stares. I’m starting to get tired of looking at him.

“You know she has a baby? You want to be the man that takes a momma from a baby?” *Son of a bitch doesn’t get it, he’s only thinking about himself.* He starts to cry.

“Turn around.” I tell him.

“Turn around?”

“You heard what I said.” He starts to sob a little, he knows what’s about to happen. He turns around.

“Deauh Jesus, please forgive...” I’ve heard enough, I pull the knife across his throat. Nash hits the floor.

“Cryin’ won’t help ya...and prayin don’t do ya noooo damn good.” I wish he’d heard that piece of advice before he hit the floor. I stare down the briefcase. My count puts it at about a quarter mil. *You owe Sean, Carlos too...Sapphire sure and hell deserves a little.* I decide to write Boss a note, I’m tired of this shit.

“Boss,

John David Foster, tonight, 7. Don’t bring no friends. ~Michael.”

John David Foster is a long dead fellow whose family decided to get him one hell of a headstone. It’s a landmark and, until Boss trusted me, it was where we’d always meet after I finished a hit. I remember the first time we met there.

“So, you’re the boy Joe found to take care a Luther?”

“Yes sir.” From my pocket, I drew the pearl-handled .45 that Luther had on the bar.

“You take trophies boy?”

“I figured you wanted some proof.”

“You’re all right boy. I might have a place for you in my organization.”

From then on, there was little chance at turning back. But that was before Gracie. That was before I knew what unconditional love felt like. All I understood was money, and I was ready to take it. Now, I wasn’t so damned sure. Funny, how you become certain of fewer things as the years drag by.

I leave the building quick, briefcase in my hand, blade still in my back pocket. Carlos is at the door.

“Let’s move, C.” I give him the keys to my car.

“Take care of it?”

“Took care of it.”

“What’s in the briefcase?” He asks me.

“What you think?”

Carlos nods, understanding. “Man, I don’t wanna be stealin’ nothin’ from the Boss.”

“You aint, I stole it...but nobody has to know you got a cut.”

“Sure about that?”

“Yup.”

Carlos starts up the car. I roll down the windows and light up a Lucky. *Hope that's the last time I have to do that shit...* It gets easier every time, but that was the easiest it's ever been. *Too easy.* I can see why I'm tired of the job. When we get back, I decide to rest. I haven't found any dreams in a long time and I need to catch up. I let my mind swirl as I doze. *I'm going back to Needham Creek...back to Gracie...back to life...plain old life.* I fall asleep.

*Kiss*

That's what wakes me up. Sweet, quick and right on my lips. When I open my eyes I see Sapphire staring down at me. I look up at her and smile.

"Sorry about the mornin' breath."

"It's alright babe."

"I got rid of him." I tell her in a creaking voice.

"Big C told me."

"I want you to have a cut of what I took. Get Jasmine somethin' pretty."

"You are too sweet to me Michael." She always says that, but I still I smile at it and kiss her on the cheek.

"Call me sugar." I tell her. She chuckles a little bit.

"Well get up Sugar, Sean fixed breakfast." I'm happy to hear that. I need something in my stomach after that night.

"What'd he fix?"

"Well," she looks over at the table, "right now you can either have McGriddle or McMuffin." I take both, and a cup of coffee. Sean comes in.

"Mornin' sunshine."

"Thanks for the grub, kid."

"Least I could do." He chuckles. "Now, how do you plan to split what's in that briefcase."

"Yknow what? I don't give a shit. Just as long as dollbaby there gets a cut."

"How much do you need?"

"I'll figure that out later. I wasn't in that one for the money. Just make sure Kay knows she owes me."

"Boss owes you too." Really needed to be reminded, Sean.

"He damn sure does. That's all between me and him." I say angrily. "I'll take care of that today."

"I ever gonna see your ass in Mobile again?"

I sit and ponder on that one for a while. I hadn't really given it any thought. I know he won't for a while. I need to just escape to Needham Creek. I answer as truthfully as I can.

"No time soon."

We divide up the money. Sean and Carlos seem smart enough to keep their cut on the dl. Unless they want to end up on the same shit-list as me, they'd better. I stash my money away in the duffel bag, right behind that old pearl handled .45. I'm starting to get tired of that old gun. I still aint quite sure why I've held on to it. I just took it because I was scared and green...and proud. Luther was power in Needham County, Luther was money. But all the power and money couldn't save him from a bullet and a boy with a lot of balls. He always told me, "you gotta take, boy." Well I took. Tonight, I'm takin' back.

Before I meet the Boss, I drive Sapphire home. I've seen her in sleek black dresses, lacy lingerie and even some crazy cowgirl get up. But it really feels like a privilege to see her, half made up, in blue jeans and my blue dress shirt. After I pull the car to curb, I just look at her for a second. I smirk.

"What're you lookin' at?"

"You."

She laughs and looks away. "Quit it Michael." I divert my gaze and stare out the windshield.

"Thanks for what you did." She says, hushed.

"Aint nothin'." I tell her.

"No, really, I don't think I've ever met a man who would do something like that for me."

"Well, now ya have." She smiles at that. I realize I have to tell her something. "Darlin'," I take a breath, "I doubt I'll be in Mobile for a while. I'll call ya, I swear I'll keep in touch. I don't..." I chuckle at my own thought, "I don't wanna lose another good woman." She kisses me. The kiss erases my mind and let's me know that I damn well better call her.

"You ever been to Needham Creek?"

"Never have."

"Well I'll take you up there, you can meet little Gracie."

She smiles. "I'd love to."

"Her and Jasmine are the same age."

We both smile at that. She leans in and kisses me. We're like two people submerged for that moment, loosing all our nerves and worries in a little kiss.

"Stay in touch." She tells me as she gets out of the car.

"You know I will."

She turns before heading towards the door, "and Michael." She's got a worried impassioned tone. "Watch out for yourself."

It's been a while since any woman knew to tell me that. "I will...I sure will." I watch her as she heads to the door...*At least I found her...*

...*Now to square away Boss.* I drive up to the cemetery. I know he got the message, and if he knows what's good for him, he'll be there. After parking, I light up a Lucky and stroll towards the grave. It's a huge headstone. The base has the faded engraving of the name across it "John David Foster." The i and d of "David" have started to weather away. "Beloved Husband and Father," it says beneath the dates. *Lucky John David.* On top of the base is an angel. Her wings are spread, but for whatever reason she's looking down. Eternally watching over John David's little patch of ground. She's staring down at me right now. That use to bother the hell out of me. I didn't like the thought of standing in that forlorn angel's unceasing gaze and the shadow she cast in the evening sun. For the first time, though, it didn't bother me none.

I have that old pearl handle in my pocket, I take it out and give it a look over. *I should just throw you in the bay you old son of a bitch...I never had any need for you.* Out of the corner of my eyes, I see an impeccable black Mercedes. *Well, at least he showed up.* Boss gets out of the driver's seat.

"You better not have nobody with you." I yell, without looking up.

Boss laughs, "I aint puttin' my men in front of no loose cannon."

I take a draw and smile at that, still looking down. When Boss finds his way into the angel's shadow, I take the .45 from my pocket and offer it to him.

Boss stares at it a minute. "What's that?"

I look up, stare him dead in the eyes and hand it to him. "I aint keepin' trophies. I'm lookin' to forget this life."

"Michael, you chose this life a long time ago." I open my jacket so that he can see my 9mm.

"That a threat?"

"A promise."

"After everything you done," Boss laughs, "I own you Michael. You dug your own grave after you let that little punk go." I don't laugh, I don't say a thing. I just stare at him, take the nine from my coat, and start to examine it.

"You gone kill me big shot?" Boss asks me, full of his damned self. I drop the full clip down to the wet ground. I'm not worried, I have another clip in case things get too hairy.

"If I ever see your face in Needham County, I won't kill you. But I'll kill your wife, I'll kill your mouth breathing son, I'll kill your dog, I'll kill your lawyers, I'll kill those idiots you keep around the office and I'll kill every damn crooked judge you have on a bench in Alabama."

"And they'll fry yo ass alive in Atmore."

"Nope," I smile big, "not with what I know. I'll find me a nice little straight prosecutor who wants to be governor some day. I'll bargain it down to life by telling him everything I know. I know a lot Boss, and nobody wants to see 'em close down the Magnolia Club."

Boss stared at me. He knew damn well I wasn't bluffing. Only thing that could make life without Gracie bearable would be sending him on a long trip to hell.

Boss kept staring me down and I just smirked.

"Alright." He answered staring me down. "You're out of the life."

"Sapphire's safe?"

"She's untouchable."

"Better hold on to your word, old man." I use to fear disrespecting him like that, now I wondered why I ever respected him in the first place.

"Measure of a man," Boss answers.

"You leave her baby motherless and yours'll end up fatherless." He just looks at me, it's been a long time since he's heard a threat like that. But he knows I don't make threats anymore, just promises.

"Michael, I don't need the trouble from you and Kay." He answers, waving his hand.

"And don't you ever stroll into Needham Creek you sunvabitch."

He shakes his head. And we both walk away. I light myself another Lucky Strike and take a picture out of my wallet. *I need to get back to Needham County...in time to tuck in my Gracie.*

Tense  
Shot +  
fix it