

## **Sex, Death, & Honey**

The lady, Rita, was old beyond her years, fifty going on seventy, her face leathery and wrinkled, riddled with moles and skin tags. She had a respectable set of mutton-chop sideburns, cigarette stained false teeth, and the phlegmy, bullfrog voice of a longtime smoker.

Her neighbor, Cameron Finke, was an inconsiderate fuckwad, the useless second-generation spawn of a local rich guy. He had a rock band and about a dozen little groupies. They would start tuning up at around nine every evening, and continue to tune up until inebriation or sexual exhaustion shut them down. They were experienced partiers, and blessed with the stamina of the young, so these party/jam sessions usually lasted until the early hours of the morning. Sometimes the band progressed past the tuning up and ventured into the playing of actual songs, a lot of eighties and nineties heavy metal mostly, but to call these songs covers would be an insult to cover bands around the world. They were more like parodies.

Finke held these nightly sessions in a renovated shop, accessible by a narrow alley that passed between his square of property between Second and Third Street, and the parking lot of the adjacent mini-mall. My one quick glance through the shop's open bay

door the previous evening revealed a drum kit and various instruments on pedestals, a mini-bar and fridge, and a row of thrift shop sofas.

I knew enough about the guy to be wary of him, but not enough to stay entirely clear.

My name is Butch Quick, and I have been called many things, including an inconsiderate fuckwad. I am the mostly useless nephew of another local rich guy. Like Finke, I'm on the payroll of my wealthy relative. Unlike Finke, I don't have a garage band, or a contingent of barely legal groupies. My uncle owns a classic car dealership, a Bail Bonds office, and a drinking establishment that passed for a nightclub only because of its lack of competition. It was the only place in town that hadn't given in to the new country music trend. It has live music every night, mostly unknown local bands, but every now and then he scores some real talent. Quiet Riot, Ted Nugent, and Lynyrd Skynyrd have played there.

Depending on Uncle Higheagle's current needs, I am a repo man, bouncer, bounty hunter, parts runner. I have no preference; mostly it all pays the same.

Finke manages real estate for his grandpa; a few run down duplex apartments, half a dozen lots between his house and Elm Street, and the mini-mall next to his house. The mini-mall boasted a thrift store, a liquor store, the local DMV office, and a large empty space that used to house The Great Wall, an all you can eat Chinese Buffet.

Rita claimed to have lost half of her cats after The Great Wall opened. Having eaten there once myself, I had some sympathy for her claim.

The reason for my interest in Cameron Finke, a 1968 Mustang convertible, was not currently at the property, and having nothing else to do I sat down for a *beverage* and

a smoke with the chatty Rita. She knew Uncle Higheagle in passing and was willing to talk, not because she particularly liked my uncle or me, but because I think she sensed a way to screw over the neighbor from hell. She was also several *beverages* into the day and in a very sharing mood.

“... and I just know they’re smoking dope over there.” She made a sound in her throat that I think was supposed to convey disgust. What the sound did convey was a great wad of snot, which she spat to the side of the small glass top lawn table we shared. “I can smell it across the street!”

She shook her fist at the innocuous little house across the street from us and made the phlegmy sound again.

The house was small, white, with a well-maintained square of grass in front and a row of neatly trimmed shrubs along the alley. From the outside, the shop looked like any other shop. Between the two buildings was a slightly larger square of lawn than that up front, fenced, with a Beware of Dog sign.

It was an unassuming place; I almost expected to see a little old lady weeding her garden on the other side of the back yard fence, or a hunched old fella puttering outside the shop.

At the moment there was nothing but Finke’s rottweiler stalking the fence line.

“... called the cops and the big shits stopped here with their lights flashing ...”

“Is he usually gone all day?” She was arriving back where our conversation had begun a half-hour earlier. I decided if I was going to get down to the shit that mattered I’d have to be more aggressive.

She looked a little incensed, and I thought *here's a woman used to having her say all the way to the end*. After a few seconds she seemed to decide to let it slide.

“Not always.” She shrugged, made her deep throat sound, sipped her beverage. She lit a cigarette, slipped into a morose silence, gave me a reproachful look, clearly meant to imply her displeasure at being interrupted.

*The silent treatment*, I thought, and couldn't help a smile. “Thanks,” I said, pushing up from her proffered lawn chair before she decided to forgive me. “I've gotta run.”

She rose across from me, fumbling her drink back onto the glass-top table, nearly spilling it. “But you didn't tell me what's he's in trouble for.”

“Nothing big,” I said, and felt bad as her excitement ebbed. Truth is I kinda liked the old lady. I sympathized with her too. I've had my share of shithead neighbors.

“Don't worry,” I assured her, flashing what I hoped was a convincing conspirator's grin. “It's still going to sting him plenty.”

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Sometimes when I'm interviewing people they just assume I'm with the Paradise Valley Tribal Casino, tracking down unpaid markers or hunting for cheats and crooks. I've never done anything to encourage that assumption, but I don't exactly discourage it. It gives me an air of intimidation. No one seems to mind the leg-breakers, so long as the leg-breakers aren't hunting for them.

As far as I'm aware the casino doesn't offer markers. It's strictly smalltime, pay as you play. This is Washington, not Vegas.

The tribal part I get; I don't actually live on the reservation but it's only twenty minutes outside the city, and as far as most people are concerned an Indian is an Indian.

Whatever laws Cameron Finke might have broken were not my concern. The only thing that mattered to me was the contract he'd broken with my uncle, and the red Mustang he'd stopped paying for. One way or another that car was coming back with me.

The only thing I knew about Finke's schedule is that he didn't have one. Sometimes he spent the entire day out of his house, sometimes he barely ventured outside it. When he did leave, it might be for hours, or only minutes. Sometimes he was alone, but most often not. His entourage was dynamic, changing almost day to day with only a few exceptions, the tattoo guy, who played guitar for his crappy little garage band, and the body builder, the guy who grunted and barked out metal lyrics. From what I could tell the position of bassist was as dynamic as the rest of his entourage, the current one a kid who lived in one of Cameron's properties. Rita said the kid usually left early.

Finke was a drummer.

I'd spent some time eavesdropping on their jam session the night before. It wasn't pretty.

The only time I could absolutely count on him being home was during the nightly party, which seemed to be impervious to angry neighbors and visits from the police, and in the early hours of the morning while he slept off the nightly party. Since I didn't expect Finke to be overjoyed about me taking back his big horsepower toy - they hardly

ever were - I decided to wait until the post-party crash to cancel his contract with Uncle Higheagle.

After concluding my visit with Rita, I drove home to catch some sleep. It was going to be a late night.

\*

Home was a small one roomer near the port. Somewhat larger than your average cell in the county jail, it had a miniscule kitchen and a single enclosed rectangle of a bathroom with toilet, sink, and shower stall. In the rental market, such units are called cabins, though this one had none of the homey, nostalgic appeal associated with the name. This is one of a dozen on Fair Street. The cabins were white, shabby, squatting between a gun repair shop on the Twelfth street intersection and a flea market on the intersection of Thirteenth.

I am the only longtime resident of this stretch of West Paradise Valley skid row. The usual tenants are kids working their way up, or addicts and tough luck cases working their way down. The occasional drifter drops anchor here as well, usually to cool his heels for a few weeks before moving on to wherever.

I try to meet them all at least once, but only in passing. We trade a few words, if they're the sort of folks capable of idle chat. I feel them out, then leave them alone. I am not a naturally sociable fellow, or a naturally curious one, but I like to know who I'm bunking down next to. I like to know who to watch out for.

I've shared my neighborhood with junkies and alkie, pimps and whores, newly single women young men who would live in a box if it meant breaking loose of the parental yoke. I spent a month with a serial killer for a next-door neighbor, but that's another story for another time.

I checked my answering machine, found one message from Uncle Higheagle about a car auction in Spokane that coming weekend. We'd Grayhound it up, then drive back with new stock for his lot.

I armed the security system – I didn't have much of value in my cabin, but I did value my life enough to want to hold onto it as long as possible – set my alarm clock for a nine pm wakeup, and went to bed.

\*

I drove my car, an old beat up Pontiac Ventura, to a twenty-four hour grocery store a few blocks down Third Street from Cameron Finke's place, and walked the rest of the way. By the time I reached Diagonal Street, the main drag that separated the industrial and commercial zoned blocks from the residential on that side of town, I could hear Finke's party winding up. I kept a distance, approaching only as close as the parking lot of the mini-mall's defunct Chinese buffet, then turned east past Second Street to the little park near the bridge that crossed the Snake River into East Paradise Valley.

I sat at the bench furthest from the road and watched the moon's reflection move across the surface of the Snake River's sluggish water, smoking through a pack of Camel Wides as the night unwound.

Two blocks over the party raged on. If Finke's band ever progressed past the tune-up phase, I couldn't tell. Don't get me wrong, I love good rock music, but what Finke's bunch produced couldn't be called good, nor music for that matter. The drone of loud chatter and laughter challenged it, but was not kind enough to overcome it.

I smoked, waited, checked my wristwatch occasionally. Twice cop cars passed by on patrol, the second stopping to shine a spotlight at me. I waved and it moved along. Neither car detoured toward the sound of the festivities at Finke's.

I dozed sometime past midnight, and awoke to the sound of 325 horses laying rubber on blacktop. A drunken female cheer rose up to encourage, and a second brief chirping of tires brought laughter.

I had no way of knowing it was the Mustang, but it was, and I did know it. On the whole I think Mustangs are overrated, but damnit I loved that car.

I rose from the bench, my knees popping in protest, legs stiff from my long sit-down, and walked up toward Finke's. It was time to have a little look.

\*

It *was* the Mustang, but by the time I had them in sight, still almost a block away but with a clear view across the mini-mall's rear parking area, the showboating was over. The party appeared to be over too.

Some of Finke's entourage left on foot, stumbling up or down Third Street, one crossed the empty parking lot in my direction, and others behind the wheels of their cars and pickups. Finke was backing the Mustang into his shop, the tattoo guy and body

builder standing to either side of the open bay like guards. The moment the Mustang's front bumper cleared the door the two stepped inside and the door descended.

That was the first kink in my night's plans; aside from the potential legal problems associated with breaking and entering, extracting a car from an ex-customer's locked garage is a logistical nightmare.

I started walking again; the drunk who had set out in my direction continued stumbling in my direction. I moved down second street away from Finke's house at a leisurely pace and pretended not to notice as Finke's friend turned the corner around the rear of the mini-mall and fell in behind me, only a quarter of a block away.

As a rule, I don't go out on jobs armed. Too much potential for trouble, especially if ... when a passing cop mistakes me for a car thief. I usually don't need to defend myself. Mostly I'm sneaky enough to never get caught, and on the occasions I do, my size is usually enough to keep me out of a fight, I'm a whopping six foot eight inches tall with the face of a Neanderthal, but mostly it's my red skin. It's strange but true; most white people still believe in their hearts that the next great Indian uprising is just around the corner, and that instead of arrows and spears we'll use casino money to arm ourselves with UZIs and shoulder fired rockets.

I'm not a violent guy, but I can defend myself if I have to. Most people don't force me to.

Some seem to enjoy the perceived challenge though, and the real scrappers usually turn out to be the ones you least suspect.

I'm not at all adverse to laying out the occasional unruly drunk, but not while I'm trying to work. Uncle Higheagle doesn't like me lumping up his customers, even the ones who sometimes forget to make their payments for three or four consecutive months.

The sound of feet scraping blacktop behind me stopped, and after a few more steps I stopped too, pulling the mostly empty pack of Camels from my breast pocket and lighting up. I turned as I cupped my hands against the light but steady breeze that wanted to put my flame out, and found my drunken shadow leaning deep into the thrift store's donation bin.

I stood my ground, smoking my Camel down to the butt, and when he still hadn't moved I approached him. Ten feet away, my suspicion hardened to a near certainty, and at five, his rough snoring confirmed what I thought. I passed the sleeping man on my way back to Finke's, and heard the rattle of his garage door ascending once again.

Keeping close to the side of the building, I edged to the corner, and saw the Mustang pulling back out into the alley. There was no showboating this time, and the lights were off. Something I couldn't identify occupied the front passenger seat next to Finke. The bodybuilder and tattoo guy filled the rear seat.

I could hear the sound of their conversation over the Mustang's idling growl, but couldn't make out the words.

Even as I tried to prepare myself for the disappointment of a wasted night, Finke opened the driver door and slid out. The other two followed, and Finke rounded on them. A few more seconds of indecipherable conversation followed, and Finke continued to the back door of his house, the body builder a few steps behind.

Mr. Tattoo remained behind with the Mustang.

There it was, my only chance to salvage my night's work. If I let Finke get back to his ride they would be gone, and I didn't have a chance in hell of keeping up on foot, long legs or not. To do it though, I'd have to get past, or go through, the tattoo guy.

I cogitated, and the tattoo guy walked around the back of the Mustang, giving Finke's rear door a quick glance.

Not quite ready to give up the building's shadows, I stood, waiting to move one way or the other.

Tattoo moved a few steps closer to the shop's open bay door, and after a moment of indecision, he left his post and went inside.

I've never been afraid of a challenge, and once I'm forced into a confrontation, I almost always stand my ground. However, I'm not above taking a lucky break when one is presented.

Moving quickly from my shadow and into the brightness of the parking lot's security lights, though not quite running, I closed the fifty yards to the Mustang.

Curiosity demanded I have a look inside Finke's shop to see what distraction had made my night's work much easier than it should have been, but I didn't waste any time. I eased myself into the idling Mustang's driver seat, put her in gear, and left the tattoo guy behind, still bent over the line he was snorting from the polished surface of the mini-bar.

As I entered Second Street, shifting up for my getaway, I heard shouts of alarm and anger from behind. I heard something else too, something I at first thought was the smokey, cracked laughter of Finke's unhappy neighbor, Rita. Before I hit third gear, blowing clean through the stop sign at the intersection of Second and Diagonal, toward

the port district, I realized that the sound was not laughter, but agitation, and unless Finke and his associates had somehow shrunk Rita to the size of, say, a largish bird, it was not his neighbor making the fuss.

I pulled the shroud from the cage in the passenger seat, and met Trouble.

\*

I'd never seen the bird before so I didn't know if its name actually was Trouble.

"Awk! Trouble! Here comes trouble!"

I used my powers of deductive reasoning, an ability my Uncle often calls into doubt, and deduced. I assumed.

As a rule, one should never trust my assumptions, but as the subject of my assumption seemed of small importance at the moment I didn't bother to second guess myself.

"Beer me, bitch!" Trouble advised.

"Shut up!"

"Blow me!"

The bird seemed uninterested in reasonable discourse, so I abandoned my attempts to reason with it and concentrated on driving.

Trouble, not so easily dissuaded, continued its verbal abuse as I put blocks between Finke's place and us. I watched for pursuit and saw none. If either of Finke's pals had their own rides, they had not been quick enough to catch my trail. Not completely satisfied with that second assumption, one of much greater importance, I

thought, I continued past the gunsmith's shop, past the block of scuzzy cabins that only the poor or shameless could call home, and turned right at the next intersection.

Trouble continued to squawk and bitch, and I continued driving for another fifteen minutes, turning and doubling back at random, before I felt safe to go home.

“Pop the trunk, muscle head,” Trouble squawked as I pulled into the spot next to my cabin, the one usually reserved for my beat-to-shit Ventura.

I thought I'd managed to outrun trouble that night, the kind that likes to sneak up behind you and bite you on the ass before busting your beak as opposed to the kind that merely insults you while flapping around its cage.

The thing with trouble is that sometimes it comes along, uninvited, for the ride.

\*

What I knew about caring for birds you could fit up a bug's ass and still have room for a cork, but I heard somewhere that if you stick their head beneath their wing or throw a blanket over their cage, they go to sleep. I didn't feel like sticking my hands anywhere near Trouble's head, or its meat hook of a beak, so I draped the shroud back over the cage and waited.

The bird did not go to sleep, but the cloth muffled its squawks and insults enough that I wasn't worried about waking the neighbors.

I'd take the bird, along with whatever personal shit Finke kept in the Mustang, to Uncle Higheagle the next day, but it looked like I was stuck with the noisy feathered turd for the rest of the night.

I jogged to the front door, the cage hanging from my left hand, while I exchanged the Mustang's keys for the ring in my pocket.

The bird's barrage of insulting chatter subsided to agitated whistles and hoots.

I let myself inside, setting my unexpected company on the floor beside the closet. Along with my jacket and boots, I kept a toolbox, my father's old revolver and shotgun, an ancient over-under double barrel that you have to reload after you got off your two shots, and a car cover.

I grabbed the car cover and went back to the Mustang, closing the front door against Trouble's ill-natured babble. I heard the bird shout again through the door, a phone number or an address. I couldn't tell for sure, I was moving quickly to shroud the Mustang before Finke and his chums could get lucky and bumble down my street, and I only caught the first few numbers.

My plan was to get back inside, set my alarm, and sleep until Uncle Higheagle called sometime the following morning. I'd take Trouble with me, drop the car off at Higheagle Classics, and catch a lift back to the grocery store parking lot to get my ride. I'd let uncle worry about Trouble, or any other personal shit Finke might have kept in the Mustang.

*Pop the trunk, muscle head!*

An odd thing for a bird to say, an odd thing for any animal to say for that matter.

I pulled the cover across the front of the car and unraveled it over the windshield and open cab. I was about to let the shroud's tail fall over the back bumper when my curiosity got the better of me.

I fished the keys from my pocket, shuffled through the half dozen or so hanging from Finke's pot leaf fob until I had the right one, then opened the trunk.

\*

The girl was young. Eighteen, maybe, but only by the skin of skin of her teeth. Sixteen or seventeen wasn't out of the question, it was hard to be sure the way teenage girls dressed these days.

She was a good-looking girl, or would have been but for the glue-gray hue to her skin and the explosive smell of shit around her. She was half curled into a fetal position, eyes open and glassy, her one visible arm puckered with needle marks, old and fresh.

Dead.

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