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end of the line

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At twenty-two years of age Jacob has been around the block more than a few times however, at this very moment, he is in a flat out race for his life.

Sexually active teens and young adults are a natural condition of the species and though many western cultures have historically frowned upon them acting on these powerful urges—nowadays they are encouraged to do so. It's not that people are less virtuous than before it's just that things have changed and the once forbidden fruit is now a dietary staple. Then again, what's the point of moralizing to those who are already in the know?

First off, medical science has finally made good on a centuries old promise and viral diseases are a thing of the past. The common cold as well as the ravages of STDs are all but forgotten in the minds of man. Secondly, crimes such as rape and pedophilia are notably rare and so much so as to be practically unheard of on court dockets. Predators today are smart enough to take their act into virtual reality and leave real-reality alone for once.

Such is the measure of progress.

Lastly, the neuronet has invaded all levels of culture and society and there are no mysteries left for the young to discover. Innocence is lost before the advent of puberty with the simple push of a button. It could be said that condoning such behaviors puts the kids back in synch with their hormonal clocks but the truth be known is that good judgment does come from experience.

If you can't put the Genie back in the bottle, after the fact, then might as well use it to learn the young'uns something. Because of the net an unplanned pregnancy is an honest accident and a rather

uncommon one for that matter. Young ladies all know what it's like to push something akin to a cantaloupe out from between their legs without having to carry a child to term and that, in itself, has gotten all of their attention. Also, young men can experience first-hand the humiliation young ladies go through by unwanted advances or the terror imposed by the threat of attack. From this understanding males have become somewhat sensitive and caring and, in turn, more attractive to the young ladies by getting in touch with their feminine side while still preserving a sense of masculinity. Just imagine how far a guy can get with the fairer sex by not beating their chest and baying at the moon.

On the other hand, at an impressionable age, Jacob learned that many older women don't like to play soft games and they tend to appreciate the endurance and stamina demonstrated by many a younger man. Especially those few that know how to beat their chest and bay at the moon—not obviously so but bold enough to get their attention just the same.

Being a quick study, Jacob took these lessons to heart.

Early on, *exempli gratia*, Jacob managed to make time, many times, with three of his mother's dearest and most attractive friends. By and by his mother has wondered why these ladies have accepted her in their clique but none of them have elected to volunteer a reason. Things are best hidden in plain sight and it is truly an anomaly where all the members of a coffee klatch, save for one, hold tight to their own version of the same dirty little secret.

Jacob also studied anatomy under the tutelage of his high school science teacher during his senior year. These private coaching sessions went on with her for quite awhile but, by his insistence, Jacob received a fair grade based on the merits of his studies. It goes without saying that he studied long and hard for his scores.

The final example being that he has spent the last year and a half sharing the bed of his most recent employer. Normally this would not prove to be a problem but Jacob fell prey and succumbed to the advances of her eighteen-year old daughter. Off and on for several months, that is.

More on than off to be exact.

Admittedly this would not endear him to his employer and one would expect that his services would be terminated forthwith when these encounters were ultimately exposed. In retrospect this was bound to happen sooner or later. One would also believe that the phrase '*You are so dead!*' could be uttered in the heat of the moment, with some sense of passion, yet not acted upon in earnest.

One couldn't be more wrong.

Monique Ribot, his employer, is the head of a concern that puts out a great effort in making substantial amounts of money off the greedy in mind, the weak in spirit, the poor in judgement, and by their own heroic efforts not to declare any of it. The labels *organized crime* and *the mob* are so out of date as to be laughable but by definition are surprisingly accurate in this very instance.

Such clandestine under-the-radar activities require significant amounts of muscle and those that look to encroach on her markets, or simply *piss in her Cheerios* as the saying goes, may find themselves rudely and abruptly life-challenged.

Thus, we return to Jacob and his current predicament.

Monique usually starts her day with beignets accompanied by dark coffee with chicory that would be sliceable if it were to sit for too long. Other times she will opt for a seven-minute egg, toast, and a whiff of orange pekoe. Either way, it is the exceptional morning when Jordan, her daughter, is not there to break that night's fast with her mother. Since Jordan's latest beau was not around the night before, she felt it was safe enough to enter her daughter's room unannounced. Now, Monique has always tried to respect Jordan's space and choice in sexual partners, however poor those choices have been, and to discover her adult child this morning with her feet-in-the-air was not totally unexpected, but it was the *who* that had mounted her was.

The Madame, also known as The Frog in industry circles, was not just taken aback by these proceedings before her, awkward as they were, she was driven into a blind-rage. Expressive and complete with her eyes rolling back to white and the cursory gnashing of teeth. Acting out with the intensity of a one-shark feeding frenzy is just one of those extra little perks unique to her position as the biggest fish in the organizational food chain.

Jacob knew all along it was a bad plan to hook-up with his boss' daughter the way he has, and a dear friend did suggest that he reel-it-in before such curiosity got the better of him, but in Jacob's mind lil' Jordan is of-the-majority and she does have legs to die for. The irony being that *to die for* is not just an expressive colloquialism this time around, and Jacob is now compelled to run like the wind so as not to die for that knowledge.

After over three hours of escape and evasion consisting of grand-theft auto, driving, reckless endangerment, crashing, running, hitching a ride, and now running again, Jacob has only progressed 41 kilometers. Finding himself in down town Los Angeles dressed in only gym shorts and sandals, Jacob doesn't exactly blend in with the stylish Bunker Hill lunchtime crowd.

Jacob is getting desperate—all because he can feel them closing in. He doesn't know why he knows this he just does. Jacob has always known these things and this awareness has saved his ass from harm on more than one occasion. This time however, there is nowhere to hide and to say that his predicament is scaring the shit out of him is, unfortunately, just a figure of speech.

Before setting out on that day's activities each of The Madame's solders and lieutenants will swallow a tiny disposable RFID transponder. This is so that in the event anybody turns up missing the organization will be able to track them down and find them, more often than not, buried in a shallow hole out in the desert. Early yesterday was when Jacob swallowed his last capsule and at this very second, while he weaves through the people on the sidewalk, he would offer up his right testicle just to defecate nice and proper.

Without performing this act, and soon, he is a dead man.

Jacob knows that there are five of Monique's best crew out there, all his friends, but now he's been deemed 'obsolete' and that's really-really bad. Better a pariah be. And though compadres to the bitter end these people have a rotten job to do and Jacob does not fault them one bit. Unlike Jacob, they have been selected for their loyalty and ability to enforce with a quiet touch and, as much as Monique does not like to bring attention to herself and her way of life, she is not at all interested in adhering to protocol today. She wants blood and lots of it. Not so much to punish Jacob but mostly as an object lesson for the benefit of her troops.

The message being, *I am not to be fucked with.*

Such opportunities are rare and one in her lofty position must take advantage of them as they come and, though Monique can get another boy-toy with ease, she would rather forgive his transgressions. In all honesty, Jacob wasn't all-that but as a lover he did wield a power over her and that was a first for any man. Gear and attitude can go a long way but this *nobody* always knew what she needed as if he could read her mind. He knew what buttons to push, and when, and it pains her to order this talent to waste.

Business is business and to maintain discipline examples must be made of the rank and file but, now that she thinks about it, Jacob was not the lug nut he made himself out to be. He got too close and gained her trust, and for that it's just as well that he become a memory. This steels her resolve that, at times, the herd must be culled of the weak, the stupid, and in this case, the ambitious.

Especially those randy little fucks who happen to dip their wick in the wrong wax.

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They are right on top of him.

Jacob knows they don't see him yet, but they are there.

His only option is to keep moving because movement is life. The transmitter in him is a simple RFID chip that, when pinged, gives nothing but a vector. To triangulate on this signal takes time so as long as Jacob changes his surroundings every half-minute or so, and significantly so, they will not be able to get a fix on him.

If he could drop his drawers and pinch-a-load in the midst of these lunch goers he would. Yes, it would not be the most attractive of sights, and those around him would lose their appetites, but only then could he make a clean getaway. If Monique's goons can get a visual on him then it would not matter, and as fate would have it his luck has simply ran out.

Nancy, an attractive and voluptuous dark skinned East-Indian, dressed in a gray pants suit, white blouse, and sporting a bad attitude, slaps Pete Suitors on the arm and shouts, "There he is! Three o'clock!"

Jacob was already beating-feet before he heard her.

He doesn't even look back as Nancy and Pete tear-ass after him. Jacob is quick and he puts some distance between them as he races ahead and down an escalator towards the foot of Bunker Hill.

Right behind Nancy, Pete radios, "He's heading towards Sixth Street! Cut him off at the Klick!" Releasing the transmitter, he then huffs, "I can't believe that we are chasing after this stupid shit. Would he listen? Oh, hell no! The young pups never listen!"

Nancy hits the top of the escalator and grunts, "The little prick deserves a medal if you ask me! You sure we can't let 'em go?"

"I used to have his job, Nance. Sorry, we gotta cap him."

"You and the Frog? No way!" Nancy laughs as she pushes people aside. "You and the Frog!"

"When I was first on the payroll."

"That must have been ages ago!"

"Bitch, you saying I'm old?"

"No, you're just too old for the Frog." She smiles back, "You're not too old for me."

Jacob bursts from the crowd on the sidewalk and stumbles into the intersection, and with the screeching of gravity-breaks he

jumps and rolls over the top of a car that almost took him on as a hood ornament. He lands on his feet, leaps over the next one and bolts for the huge building in front of him called One-Klick.

Pete is amazed by Jacob's luck and ability to jump. That last ground car was occupied by the other three of Pete's crew, and if they didn't hit their breaks the chase would have been over with. Pete rips past them, hot on his tail, but Pete is now astonished that the kid has just slipped into One-Klick. Unless Jacob knows the layout this was a rather stupid move. Then again, this building is a one-kilometer tall engineering marvel with 222 floors and 35 compound elevator shafts. When you throw in a maze of stairs, ladders, ducts, and passageways Pete now thinks, *Maybe this move isn't that stupid?*

As Pete runs towards One-Klick, Nancy punches the hood of the car and points to the other side of the building, "Hey, wake up! That was him! Cut him off at the other side!"

In the main lobby, Jacob doesn't have a clue where to go. He notices Pete and Nancy entering from the north but, before he could make a break for the south entrance, the ground car pulls up there and the other three goons pile out of it.

Cut off, Jacob leaps back into an elevator landing. He looks at the people waiting for a lift and they look at him as if he just crawled out from under a moss-rock. If he were to go up it will make it harder for Monique's crew to triangulate and this would buy him time but he doesn't have time to wait for the lift.

Pete and his crew are moving in.

Just past the elevator landing is a double glass door with a sign next to them that reads *Steel Annex* and, with so few options, Jacob bolts for it before they get sight of him.

Jacob bursts through the doors into the lobby of the Steel Annex and is stunned by the décor, which is all black. The rock walls, the furniture, the floor, the ceiling, and even the receptionist desk is black. Depth and textures abound but there is no visible egress from this room—no escape to be had. Jacob turns to look back at the shadows of Pete and Nancy as they converge on the smoked-glass doors. He bumps into the receptionist desk and spins around.

The receptionist, Maggie, looks up from her paperback book, an outdated technology that is still hanging on to this day, and gives a genuine smile to the practically naked young man standing before her, "May I help you?"

Jacob is instantly taken by this youthful blond, beach-babe. The California white bread variety that exists only in the wet-dreams of both men and women alike.

Jacob fumbles his words, "I, ah, don't know. Can you?"

"End of the line, Jake." Says Pete as he enters the lobby. "I wish things would have turned out different, but 'cha screwed up big time this time, son."

Nancy and the crew slip in and slowly spread out.

Realizing he can't get away, Jacob turns back to Maggie and shrugs, "Well, it's been nice knowing you."

Maggie leans over and asks Pete, "May I help you, Sir?"

"Ya, go take a break." grunts Pete as they approach.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I won't be relieved from my post for another twenty-minutes however, I can have some refreshments brought out to you if you'd like?"

Pete tries to reason with Jacob, "Come on, son, let's get this over with, okay?"

As Pete reaches out to take Jacob by the arm—a scorpion gun snaps around from behind Maggie's heavy chair, and within a second its laser lock sight paints a red dot on Pete's chest. Realizing that this *girl* isn't just a hired underling he pulls his hand back.

She happens to be military, an SA trooper, and to tangle with any one of them is not exactly healthy. Especially a pretty one with a minigun and a service industry smile on her face.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I believe that the young gentleman would like to stay awhile." Maggie pushes a button on a hidden console in front of her and calls out. "Mr. Jamison, would you be so kind as to bring out six coffees for all our guests."

Pete has a good understanding what their situation is, and he is hoping that the other four would likewise keep their cool but, as luck would have it, that was not to be.

"Fuck 'er! Let's do 'em both!" Is the last thing Nancy was to say in this life as she pulls a pistol out from under her jacket.

With two quick rips in the air both Nancy and the goon opposite from her, also in the process of pulling a weapon, are cut down with the scorpion gun that settles back to lock on Pete. No doubt Pete was impressed but the other two, who opted not to pull their weapons, are scared to statues. Not so much by the death of their buddies but because of the two scorpion guns that have dropped from the ceiling to lock onto them.

Retaining her receptionist charm, Maggie asks Pete, "Sir, with this unpleasantness now behind us, would you like cream or sugar?"

"What?"

"For your coffee, Sir."

"Ah...no, thanks."

"Would you like the bodies bagged for pickup at the dock or would you rather them just disappear?"

Pete thinks about it and, "Disappear."

"We'll tidy this up then. Have a nice day, Sir."

Taking this queue, Pete motions for the other two survivors to leave and, without looking back, they move quickly out the door. Pete, on the other hand, stops at the door and looks back to Jacob.

Pete has liked Jacob from day one. He's known him since he was a little kid and always thought of him more as a son than the lowest man on the totem pole as Monique's shag de jour. The thought of having to kill this little pup bothered the crew so Pete was going to take care of it, but now he thinks this may be a better outcome?

Pete may be looking for a new job that very afternoon but them's the breaks. It's time for a career change anyway.

With some relief, Pete smiles warmly, "Take care, son."

As the door closes behind Pete, Jacob just stands there dumbfounded by it all. He is alive and that is not exactly the outcome he was expecting.

"You hungry?"

Jacob turns back to Maggie, "Huh?"

"Are you hungry? I'll take you to lunch."

"Ah...sure? Yea, I could go for something to eat."

"Put this on or we won't get in anywhere." With a big grin on her face, Maggie tosses Jacob a black tee shirt, "Have a seat and we'll take off in a few."

With shirt in hand, Jacob decides to drop into one of the cushy lobby chairs and wait for Maggie. Why not? Where else was he going to go now that he is *persona non grata* here on Earth?

Jacob takes a moment to look at Nancy who is laying askew before him. While Maggie calls her Mr. Jamison to send for a mop-up, Jacob ponders over Nancy's torn and lifeless body.

'*There by the grace of God go I.*' Jacob wonders.

He does not know why this phrase comes to mind, he is not a believer, but it does hark back to when he was a child and his aunt

who was a minister in a revival of early Christianity. A return to one of the many ancient sects that believed in the inherent goodness of the corporeal world, love, acceptance, charitable and good deeds without recognition, and inclusion for all. People who believed that, ultimately, the whole of mankind and the spirit world would be saved.

Including the devil himself.

Then it dawned on him. One day when he was little, Jacob and his aunt were stuck in traffic. Crawling past the wreckage of an accident they both saw a corpse laying on the ground, just like Nancy, so his aunt uttered this simple prayer. He has always wondered what it meant but now he knows.

Another thought then comes to mind, *'If there is a God I wonder how long he'll smile on my dumb-ass, if he smiles on my dumb-ass! Then again is God a she? If so, then maybe I have a chance if that were the case?'*

It was also said of his aunt that she was psychic and as crazy as it sounds she usually knew when Jacob was up to some mischief. She always said that God had big plans for him and for the first time he wished that she were around to clue him in because his life just took another turn for the surreal.

Thoughts abound and memory serves him up yet another oddity for the moment at hand. Jacob's mother compared him to a pet cat he had as a child. A fuzzy Manx named Mooch. This ornery beast was loveable enough but was always slithering in and out of trouble. Mooch should have been killed off a number of times but the hairball refused to lie down and cooperate.

And with that thought, Jacob suddenly realizes that he just used up life number one.

He has eight left to go.

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