

**BLACK
MASK**

PRESENTS

**Bundle
of Joy**

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“Body Shots, \$10.00,” was written in a childish, cursive hand in pink grease pencil on a sign behind the bar. I didn’t want to know.

The roadhouse was just south of St. Louis on Highway 21. Blood Alley it was called, for all the wrecks on the twisty, little two-lane. Mostly drunks I had heard.

The dive, called Mick’s, was owned by my client. I was here to close a case and get paid. I knew I could close the case, getting paid might require some persuasion. I could do that too.

I didn’t like to work outside the City, but work had been slow in coming lately. And you can only put so much water in the beans.

I must have been staring at the sign.

“Ya pick a girl here, see, and she lays on the bar with whipped cream around her belly button and you slurp a shot of your favorite booze from her belly,” said a voice from over my shoulder. I didn’t bother to turn around, I knew the illiterate slur of my client.

Mick Cullen: Four hundred-plus pounds of wannabe-biker stuffed into a 4X-Harley-Davidson t-shirt like the skin on a summer sausage; jeans creeping down exposing a side of him I’d just as soon not seen; shoulder-length, dirty-blond hair tied in a ponytail; and a scraggly beard that didn’t compliment a nasty smile that exposed Tobacco-stained teeth.

Even seated Cullen had to look up at me. He didn't like it. I couldn't care less what he did or didn't like.

I ignored him, careful not to breath deeply as he wallowed up two stools down from me. Lunch was fresh inside of me and I wanted to keep it to stay there.

I thought again about writing off my bill and leaving. I should have cut my losses on this case a week ago.

..Promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.

It was all about Cullen's daughter. Cullen's attorney had died a month ago leaving a mess of child support records Alan Dershowitz and his groupies couldn't have figured out. Cullen hired me to find his daughter, supposedly out in California. She wasn't there.

Cullen pointed at the sign. "Wanna try one — on the house of course?" he said. More tobacco stains toward me.

"Pass," I said.

"I've tried all the girls that work here —in more ways than one," Cullen said with a wink, " It's part of the app-li-cation process."

Great. The bar was quiet in the early afternoon. A few old men nursed four-dollar beers for the privilege of dreaming of the half-dressed young women they could never have in their youth. Four punks in Harley garb played pool in the corner. For all the biker decor and influence I hadn't see one actual motorcycle out front.

My plan was simple. Get my money, tell the story, let it play itself out and walk away. No problem. Uh huh. Just keep telling yourself that Nash. A woman younger than my car with jet black hair and falling out of her skimpy t-shirt asked me if I wanted a beer. I was still nursing my first Michelob Ultimate. I was counting carbs.

The woman waited longer than was appropriate. I ignored her. She didn't like it. Cullen slapped her on her barley-clad backside and told her to go wash some glasses. the woman left, looking at me all the way.

Slow and Easy, Nash. Keep it simple.

"Let's talk in back, Nash," Cullen said.

His office was as expected. More Harley stuff: A wall clock with vintage Harleys at each hour, posters of different bikes, Harley this, Harley that. One thing was new: a large Nazi flag covered one wall. Great, a Brownshirt for a client.

Cullen fell into an overstuffed executive leather chair with more duct tape

than leather. Cullen gestured toward a bar stool made from a custom car rim. I chose to stand fearful of a staff infection.

“I found your daughter,” I said and waited.

“Well, o.k., where is she?” he said.

“My money?”

He looked at me hard, and slipped an envelope from his desk and tossed at me. I thumbed through what looked close enough to two grand in hundreds and stuffed it in my duster pocket.

I gave him the run down of tracking his daughter through several addresses, mostly bogus, in five states, a few of the contacts and snitches. Then I dropped the hammer.

“Your attorney and your ex-wife have been pocketing all the child support over the years,” I said.

Cullen looked at me, then the ceiling, the far wall, then pounded his fat fist on his desk rattling the contents.

“Suppose she’s not going to U.C.L.A. neither, huh?!” he said.

“She may have driven by it a few times,” I said.

He smashed his beer against the far wall. Some of it sprayed my duster. I ignored it and continued.

“Seems your ex and your lawyer had been intimate for some time, years actually, at your daughter’s expense,” I said, “When your ex died three years ago, the shyster kept it going. When he died last month, it all came out.”

“Son of a-fuckin’-bitch!” Cullen screamed. Another desk item hit the wall.

Now for the good part.

I gestured through the office window and the young woman with the black hair came into the office.

“Yeah?! What the fuck is it?!” Cullen vented at the woman.

The woman looked straight at me.

“Mick, meet your daughter, Daisy Sanchez,” I said.

Cullen was silent. He looked between me and the young woman who stood silent, crossed-armed starring at Cullen with a smug expression.

There was a short pause while Cullen tried to catch a joke that didn’t exist.

“Bullshit!” Cullen said, “I hired this here bitch over three months ago! She’s from right here in St. Louis and twenty three-years-old,” he blathered, “I had her checked out — birth cer-tif-i-cate and all!”

“Through whom?” I asked, “The same chiseler that’s been working you over forever?”

His mouth gaped. You could almost hear the gears working as he figured it out. He’d been set-up, by me and his daughter.

I’d found Daisy working and living in St. Louis. She’d been here for years. When I broke the truth to her, she hatched this scheme. Her idea of poetic justice. I liked it too.

Cullen shook his head. Veins bulged in his forehead. He launched his bulk out of the chair at me.

I caught him square in the left knee with the heel of my boot. An audible snap said it all.

He fell hard holding in the pain for a second or two until he saw his knee jutting at an impossible angle. The scream began low but quickly filled the room.

No one came running from the bar. Privacy was assured courtesy of Aerosmith on the jukebox. I had my Colt Government Model out casually anyway.

Cullen whimpered, clutching his knee, crying. His eyes shifted between Daisy and the piece of flat iron in my lap.

Then my mood staggered a bit.

Cullen’s misery thrilled Daisy more than I cared for. For all Cullen was, to have a daughter, even one he’d never known, gloat over his suffering, was not appealing. But I should have seen it coming. What did I expect, a Kodak moment?

“You could have checked on me your fat bastard!” Daisy screamed, “I went from one foster home to another...you... prick!”

She took an unexpected quick step and buried her foot in Cullen’s groin. Appropriate before the knee shot, but not now, not to me. Even though I had promised her her say, I was still the referee.

Daisy wound up for another kick. I snatched her ankle in mid-air and tossed her into a neutral corner. She landed hard, but she was quickly up for another try. I was up and had her around the waist and held her with my free arm. She looked at me with genuine hurt through dark, Hispanic, puppy dog eyes. Years of hate and hurt spewed Max Factor rivers down her childish face. She crumpled into me. I eased her into a corner where she vomited into a trash can.

Damn.

“You are both fuckin’dead!” Cullen screamed over his pain, “Fuckin’ D-E-A-D!”

I stepped across Cullen's crippled limb and screwed my .45 into his right ear like a bit into a thoroughbred's mouth. He winced, looking peripherally at the blue metal digging into his ear canal.

"Cullen," I growled, speaking slowly and concisely, "...if anything happens to her, even by accident, I will come here and kill you. Her fault, your fault, nobody's fault, I will kill you. If she gets hit crossing the street — you will be D-E-A-D."

Cullen's eyes were closed. No response. I tapped his mangled limb with the tip of my boot. He wailed out in response to the acute pain.

"Verstehe, Mien Fuhrer?" I said twisting the gun harder into his ear while gesturing to the swastika on the wall.

He nodded, grimacing through the pain.

I gathered Daisy and left. No one in the bar tried to stop us. The two rounds I fired in the jukebox as we passed made have had something to do with it.

Daisy was silent at first. Curled up in a fetal position against the passenger's door of my truck. No tears, no noise at all. But slowly you could see a metamorphosis take place. It was as if she was shedding an unnecessary skin. Years of forging for her own identity had refined the skill. By the time we hit St. Louis she was putting on fresh make-up and laughing off the incident.

She chattered. I listened. I wanted to laugh about it too. But that wasn't going to happen, today or anytime.

Her apartment in Dogtown across from the Zoo overlooking Cassilly's Turtle Sculptures was worlds away from Hillsboro. Daisy seemed worlds away from anything I wanted to understand.

As she stepped out of the truck I had to ask.

"You didn't do anything with Cullen to get in the door, did you?" I asked.

Daisy smiled. "Nothing I wouldn't do with you anytime, Nash."

I looked out the windshield as fresh bird droppings appeared on the hood. How appropriate.

I stuffed Cullen's two-grand into Daisy's tiny hands and went home to build a hangover.

THE END