

Blood of Angels

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Extract

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Key West

They came for him where he worked. They came on a good, hot afternoon when business was brisk and Jim was thinking he'd give it another hour at most and then call it quits and start the evening early. The dock was awash with tourists of all shapes and sizes, cruising like a school of brightly coloured fish with no particular destination in mind. Meanwhile they ate. They munched. They wolfed down everything the cafés and strolling vendors of Key West had to offer, from burgers and burritos to ice cream and sugar-dusted churros still hot from the fryer. Those with a spare hand drank, too, sucking frapps and iced teas and sodas large enough for small children to swim in. It was just after three in the afternoon. The food being consumed couldn't be a late lunch or an early dinner. Jim was confident all of these people would have taken a meal at midday: he was equally sure they'd be hunkered down again at seven, moving up to linguine and grilled swordfish and fancier burgers washed down with cold glasses of Chardonnay. Meanwhile they browsed, like huge, affable locusts; like

lucky cows in an endless, reasonably priced pasture. Their dedication was striking. If you let your mind wander you could believe these bodies were merely transportation devices for roving digestive systems capped by mowing teeth. You wondered what would happen if the food supply suddenly ran out; you wondered if, after a pause, the heads that housed these voracious mouths would slowly turn to take in the people around them, and decide they must be the next course.

Or Jim did, anyhow. He tried not to, but the thought still came. He was leaning against the rail on the north side of Mallory Square, an expanse of terrace and promenade which linked the hotels and restaurants of that side of the island with the sea. The cruise liners docked here overnight, multi-storey behemoths which dwarfed the hotels, disgorging further herds of credit card-holding grazing stock. A scant but welcome breeze came in off the shallow waters behind him. Jim held a camera loosely in his right hand. A bag over his shoulder carried packs of Polaroid film and a flat box of the folding cards he'd had printed up to hold his pictures.

Jim Westlake took photographs of tourists. He'd been doing it for years. There was a licence he was supposed to hold but he'd never got one and it didn't seem to be a problem. He didn't bother anyone at their tables or walk up and down hollering, jumping in front of strollers with a cheesy grin. He'd never been a salesman and didn't look like trouble. He was sixty-one years old, just starting to sag a little in the cheeks but still broad-shouldered and tall. He wore pale blue slacks and a white short-sleeved shirt, which he hated, but looked the part. His hair was mostly grey and swept back and he wore sunglasses against the glare off all the decking. He spent his days around Mallory, or walking up and down Duval Street, and when he saw the right kind of people he simply offered to take a photograph. Many would shake their heads firmly, bothered by the prospect of unplanned expenditure, and some would walk by without even acknowledging his presence. A few would pause, think a moment, and decide what the hey, we're on vacation. They would have toured the Hemingway house by then, stood on the southernmost point and

taken a glass-bottomed boat out over the reefs. They'd be having a good time overall, and that's what photographs are for – to prove to others and ourselves that we've enjoyed ourselves, got some sun on our faces, forgotten about the daily grind for a time.

They'd most likely have their own camera around their neck, of course, maybe even a digital one, and Jim understood that the days of his profession were numbered. Pictures were no longer rare, immediacy no longer unusual. If you came to him you could get a shot of the two of you without having to ask some stranger, however, and Jim was good at getting kids to smile. The picture came slipped into a commemorative card with 'Having A Rest In Key West' printed on the front, and the stock was heavy and the typeface classy – a great gift for mothers back home, personal and yet effortless. The tourists could see that the photographer took pains, too: if he wasn't happy about the first shot, he'd take another – at no extra charge. He did this gracefully, slipping the first picture into his bag without even making you see it, so you didn't have to confront your bad side. Fifteen bucks wasn't cheap, but Jim had found he got more business at that price than for five. Five bucks was just some guy taking a picture. Fifteen was a genuine souvenir.

It was never going to make him rich, but Jim didn't want to be rich. Numbers were of no interest to him any more. He did okay, and okay is by definition good enough. He had believed that this might be the way he spent the rest of his days, quietly getting by. But when he saw the two men coming up the boardwalk, not eating, something told him they were headed his way.

One looked to be around forty, perhaps a year or two younger, the other in his early twenties. Both were fit and trim. The latter wore a black T and khaki army pants, and exuded a boisterous confidence that he was a force to be reckoned with. The older had on a charcoal suit and white shirt. He looked comfortable despite the heat, and also as if he didn't in the least care whether people took him seriously or not.

The younger man approached first. Jim smiled, held the Polaroid up. 'Want a picture?'

Living in Key West, you saw a lot of same-sex couples.

The young man said nothing, just stood looking him up and down. He was about five inches shorter than Jim. There was some kind of appraisal going on, but it wasn't clear to what purpose.

Eventually the kid spoke. 'You're James Kyle?'

There was a note of something in his voice. Jim shook his head regretfully.

'Got the wrong guy, son. Name's Westlake. Sorry.'

The young man nodded, but didn't move.

Jim played for sheepish. 'You here about the licence? I figured it wasn't such a big deal these days.' He nodded towards a small group of portrait painters, sat in a huddle at the bottom of Duval, promising to make people look like Brad Pitt and Dolly Parton. 'Plenty people just set up and get working, take their chances. But if it's a real problem, then, you know, I'll be happy to . . .'

He stopped talking, leaving a gap to fill. It stretched but the guy didn't fill it. Just stood there with an unreadable expression on his face. There was an old scar about an inch and a half long under the boy's right cheekbone. Jim wondered how he'd got it, and sent the perpetrator a nugget of goodwill.

'Look, son . . . what do you want, exactly?'

The young man turned his head. 'I can't believe this is him.'

Jim realized he was talking to the other stranger, who'd suddenly appeared by his side. That worried Jim a little, someone being able to get that close without him noticing. It made him feel old.

'It's him,' the man said. 'You remember me, James?'

Jim turned in his own sweet time, and yes, of course he did. It had been a long time, and the man had aged but only on the outside. The eyes were the key, eyes that looked fine at first but soon revealed themselves to be devoid of genuine warmth, emotion or life. Jim had been cold in his time, no doubt, but this man looked like he'd never been anything but: as if he'd slid out of his mother's womb

silent and calm and with bad thoughts already in his head. Jim didn't know his name, but he knew who he was. He was a man Jim had hoped – and come to believe – he would never see again.

He was the Forward-Thinking Boy.

'I remember. What do you want?'

'Got a job for you.'

'Don't need a job. I already got one.'

'We made an agreement, James.'

'Long time ago. I did what you wanted, then you stopped asking. I figured it was over.'

'No. You knew this was the way it could be.'

'Say I decide to forget about all that. Say I just walk away.'

'Then you'll be in jail before dark, unless you're already dead.'

Jim looked away across the dock. Seabirds whirled overhead. One of the glass-bottomed boats was chugging into harbour fifty yards away, shards of sun splashing off its windows. People waited to get on, and people waited to get off. Many were eating ice cream. It was all the same, but now it was different. There was sweat on the back of his neck, but the rest of his body felt cold.

When he turned back the younger man was still looking at him with his cool blue eyes, and there was something happening around the corners of his mouth. The muscles twitched, as if he was stifling a smile.

'What do you want from me?' Jim asked, dully now.

The older man reached into his pocket and pulled out a padded envelope. Jim took it.

'You would need to be in position in three days. And the instructions will be very specific.'

Jim put the envelope in his bag. 'Why me?'

'Because you owe us, and because I trust you to make it happen. Don't worry. You'll enjoy it.'

'I don't do that kind of thing any more.'

The man looked at Jim as though he were a fool. He had disengaged. This was over. He was ready to get on to the next thing,

whatever that might be. The younger guy still stood there, staring at Jim. With that little grin waiting to get out.

Before anyone knew what was happening, Jim had his left hand firmly placed at the kid's lower back. With a short-arm punch too small to be noticed by most passers-by – even if they hadn't been blocked by the deliberate positioning of Jim's back – he drove his right fist into the boy's stomach, just to the side of the central pillar of abdominal muscles. Planted it like a piston triggered by an explosive charge. The effect was like slamming the kidney between two bricks, and the expression on the kid's face was very worthwhile.

'Suck it up,' Jim said, leaning forward to whisper in the kid's ear. 'You're as tough as you think you are, it shouldn't be so hard.'

He patted the lad's shoulder and stepped back, unhurried, out of range. He was pleased to see the boy's face was sheer white, his neck tendons tight as mooring ropes. It wasn't just the corners of his mouth that were twitching now. The boy made a sound, finally, and it was like a dead person trying to grab one more breath.

Jim turned to the other man, who looked calm and unworried and very slightly amused.

'I'll do this. Then it's over,' Jim told him.

Then he turned and walked away.

Jim's house was a forty-minute walk north, tucked into a scrubby neighbourhood on a small island nobody noticed when driving to or from Key West. The house was small and did not have a swimming pool. It did not even have an especially good view, though if you sat on the porch and positioned yourself carefully you could glimpse the ocean through the trees. At certain times of year.

Jim sat on a chair so positioned. He was sipping from a glass of iced tea spiked with fresh mint leaves, and not seeing anything at all. His neighbour Carol arrived hectically home with her two children, and waved across the forty feet between their front yards. She got no response, which surprised her. Mr Westlake was private but unfailingly polite, and always had a smile for her little angels. He

had taken the cutest picture of them, a photo which sat next to her side of the bed. Perhaps he'd received bad news, she thought – he was kind of old, after all, and holding an envelope in his hands. She decided she would call around later, on some pretext or other, but then Amy and Britney started arguing about nothing in particular and she concentrated on getting them inside to where there was an all-singing and all-dancing comedian (the television, the blessed tube, the tireless mother's helper) which would take them off her hands and let her cool down a little and concentrate on her main job for this time of day, in this kind of heat, which was delaying her first glass of wine.

The screen door clacked loudly behind the family as it went indoors, and Jim came back to himself. He looked at the envelope in his hands but did not bother to pull the contents out again. Inside was a cellular phone and a piece of paper listing the name of a town and two lines of instructions.

Part of his mind had already started the journey. He had hoped it would not. He hated the man who had come for him, for knowing that it would, that he would not simply throw away the envelope and take his chances. If someone else knew you better than you knew yourself, where did that leave you in the equation? He stared through the gap in the trees towards the ocean, but the view did nothing to help. Had he really begun to believe that it was over, that a decade had somehow undone the past and dissolved it back to nothing? If so, he was evidently a fool.

He drank the last of the tea and went inside, where he washed the glass and left it to drain by the sink. He owned precisely one glass, one set of silverware, one soup bowl, and one plate. This had never proved inadequate. The house had been furnished and decorated enough that a casual visitor would not think it overly sparse. When he'd first arrived in the Keys this had been in case he had to move on again at short notice. In the intervening eight years, as his mind had calmed and his life found a balance, he had realized he simply liked it that way.

Why have two, when one will do?

Why have one if you don't need any at all?

He walked up the staircase to his bedroom, where a small suitcase was already packed. His clothes and camera were *in situ*. A space about seven inches wide and ten inches long waited to be filled. He went to the empty cupboard and squatted in front of it. Though his knees let him know how they felt about this, they remained up to the task. As the asshole in combat pants had discovered, Jim's body was not easily giving up the struggle against time.

He lifted the mat from the bottom of the cupboard and raised the loose board. Not the world's most original hiding place, but if he'd had the slightest concern that anyone might come looking, then nothing would have been hidden there. Under the floor was a shoebox. He pulled it out, replaced the board and mat.

He put the box in the space in his suitcase. He closed the case, locked it, and then left the room without looking back. He wanted to, but did not. He did not want James Kyle to see this place. It belonged to Jim Westlake.

Downstairs he made sure all the windows were closed, and the back door locked, before leaving the house. He walked down the path to his clean white car and put the suitcase in the back.

He sat motionless in the driver's seat for a moment, looking at his little house. Perhaps he could leave Jim waiting there for him, standing quietly inside. Perhaps he could do this thing as James, and come back, and carry on as before. Perhaps this afternoon had only happened because there remained that thing, that possession of James's, that object he should have gotten rid of a long time before. A small and battered metal saucepan. Didn't look like much, but . . .

If you wanted to be nothing, you had to have nothing. He knew that. Had known it a long time. And yet still . . . he had kept it. Just hadn't been able to throw it away.

This was why Jim had made such a good photographer.

He understood about souvenirs.

Eventually he started the car. As he pulled away from the kerb he saw his neighbour standing in the window of her kitchen. He lifted his hand to give his standard wave.

Carol smiled and waved back, glad the old guy was back on form, not realizing that it wasn't Jim Westlake she was watching but an unknown person named James Kyle; a man riding into the past from the present, driving from this world towards hell.