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Opening Extract from...

King of the Weeds

A Mike Hammer Novel

Written by Micky Spillane
and Max Allan Collins

Published by Titan Books

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KING OF THE WEEDS

A MIKE HAMMER NOVEL

MICKEY SPILLANE

and

MAX ALLAN COLLINS

TITANBOOKS

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In memory of
the screen's first Mike Hammer,
BIFF ELLIOT
(1923–2012)

CO - AUTHOR ' S NOTE

Shortly before his death in 2006, Mickey Spillane told his wife Jane, “When I’m gone, there’s going to be a treasure hunt around here. Take everything you find and give it to Max—he’ll know what to do.”

Half a dozen substantial Mike Hammer manuscripts were found in the “treasure hunt,” often accompanied by plot notes, rough outlines and even drafts of final chapters. These lost Hammer novels spanned Mickey’s career, from the late ’40s through the mid-’60s and on up to *The Goliath Bone*, which he was working on at the time of his passing.

Mickey conceived *King of the Weeds* as the final Mike Hammer, and a sequel to *Black Alley* (1996), the last Hammer published during his lifetime. He set it aside after 9/11 to respond to that attack in *The Goliath Bone* (2008). The time frame here is the late ’90s, with Mike in his mid-sixties; realistically, he should be around ten years older, but readers will just have to live with that—Mickey did.

It has been my great honor to complete these six substantial Mike Hammer manuscripts, and my love and thanks go to both

Mickey and Jane Spillane. A familiarity with *Black Alley*, incidentally, is not a requirement here.

M.A.C.

CHAPTER ONE

When you suddenly realize you're about to be killed, all your mind does is tell you that you were dumb. You had the experience, you had the physical abilities, you had the animal instincts.

But you were dumb.

Maybe you had played the game too long. Maybe that last round of injuries had left a deeper wound than you thought.

The little man in the tailored navy blue suit, a raincoat draped over his right arm, was waiting on my floor when the elevator opened and I stepped out. He never raised his head to look at me, the brim of his pale blue hat even with my nose. He smelled faintly of too-strong aftershave. I thought nothing of it, but did wonder why that raincoat was dry on a rainy morning like this.

So I got off and began to walk away, knowing—just a stupid fraction of a second later than I should have—that he was a killer and I was the target, and I jerked my head around to see the face of the bastard who would take me down. He was just inside the elevator, his foot holding the door open while he aimed the silenced gun at me from six feet away, the weapon emerging for a good look at me from under that draped raincoat, and both of

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us knew there was no hope for me at all, because it was six-thirty in the morning and no one but me would be on the eighth floor this early.

Reflex action worked before thought, and while he fired I was dropping and turning, clawing for a gun that wasn't there any more, but my movement didn't spoil his aim. Both shots pounded into my chest right at the heart region and I hit the carpet with my breath hissing through my teeth as the killer got on the elevator, his back to me, and the door *snicked* shut.

I fought to get air into my lungs, but the double stunning blow was like a paralyzing hand trying to squeeze the life right out of me. I let my torso twist a little and the motion allowed other muscles to take over and I was able to breathe, barely. In ten seconds I tried again and sucked down a bit more air. Rushing things wouldn't help. Nobody was going to see me lumped down on the new carpet. Thirty years ago, hell twenty, I'd have realized his bullets hadn't killed me and sucked up the pain and headed for the stairs to chase him down, my .45 in my fist.

What I did today was stay floored a good ten minutes until I was breathing almost normally, then somehow got my feet under me and stood unsteadily up.

There were two cigarette-burn holes in my damp trenchcoat as I stumbled to my office and opened the door that read MICHAEL HAMMER INVESTIGATIONS. Only when I had locked it behind me did I reach inside the flap of my coat and yank out the paperback dictionary my secretary Velda had asked me to pick up for her at Coliseum Books. I had stuck it in my inside coat pocket on the elevator when I'd reached in my pants for my keys. Two

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twenty-two caliber holes were punched into the volume and never wholly penetrated the two and a half inches of paper.

Mister Webster had saved my life, and as I stumbled to a chair, dropping my trenchcoat and suitcoat and unbuttoning my shirt clumsily, I thanked whatever kismet had made Velda dissatisfied with her word processor's dictionary on the new computer that replaced her old typewriter. Still, there was one hell of a black-and-blue blossom blooming on my chest.

Soon I heard Velda's key in the lock, and when she closed the door and turned, her body snapped into momentary rigidity, her eyes wide with the shock of seeing me sitting where I shouldn't be, turned toward her in the visitor's chair at her desk, my shirt wide open, the bruise on my chest like a bull's-eye in a target.

But there were no melodramatics. No wide eyes, no girlish scream. This was a woman, a beautiful woman who could make men decades her junior stop and stare. A woman who was a partner in this business, with her own P.I. ticket and a .22 automatic that had punched other people's tickets, when need be.

She tossed her attaché case on her desk like a bored postman delivering the mail and was out of her poncho in another second, standing there in front of me—statuesque, raven-haired, with a shoulder-brushing page boy that thumbed its nose at changing fashion, and a body that made a silk beige blouse and brown knee-length skirt seem provocative.

On the fourth finger of her left hand was a two-carat emerald-cut diamond set in gold. We'd been unofficially engaged for decades. Officially so for about a year, like the ring said.

Her eyes took me in—she knew something was as wrong as

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it could be, but there was no blood showing anywhere. I was breathing regularly and didn't seem to be in severe pain.

Her voice was low and throaty, her tone business-like, but the concern was under there. "So what happened this time, Mike?"

"I got shot. Twice." I nodded down at the discoloration on my chest.

Her eyes followed mine, tightening to see if an entry wound was hiding in all that purple, but not finding one. "I don't see any new holes."

I shook my head. "No. No new holes. But it hurt like a son of a bitch. Like Mike Tyson laid a couple on me."

"So did you borrow that fancy lightweight body armor again?" she asked, looming over me.

"No. You were there to save me, kitten."

She blinked. "Remind me."

"I was wearing that dictionary you had me pick up." I pointed to her desktop nearby.

Then she smiled, nodding, getting it. She picked the book up, opened it until she could see the tail of both .22 slugs, then felt the pair of bulges where the noses had come to rest. She folded down the back cover and thumbed some pages away.

"They stopped at page six-nineteen," she said. "If you play the numbers today, make it that one."

I had to grin at her, such a cool cookie, but I wondered how she would have reacted if she had tripped over my body coming out the elevator.

The clock on the far wall said it was five minutes to seven and it wouldn't be long before the photographers from the magazine

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outfit down the hall would be coming in.

So I said to Velda, “Go out by the elevator and see if you can find any shell casings. Ring the elevator up and look in there too.”

She didn’t ask questions. The game was on now. The first move had been made, a sudden, decisive and explosive move that was supposed to take out a major player, and it hadn’t worked.

But what game were we playing?

Velda came back in three minutes, shaking her head, hands empty. “Nothing. No brass on the floor at all and the elevator was clean.”

“What I expected. He stood just inside the elevator, the rod in his right hand, and it ejected to the right. The casings would have landed on the floor in there, and he retrieved them on the ride down.”

“Expecting you’d be dead by then.”

“Oh yeah. He was a real pro, all right. He nailed me with two shots an inch apart while I was falling and twisting and if I hadn’t had your little book under my coat, those slugs would have torn my heart apart worse than any woman ever did.”

Velda ignored that, but her tongue made a nervous pass across her lips and a small shudder touched her shoulders. Then her eyes narrowed in thought. “Your back was to him, wasn’t it?”

I nodded.

She stated, “Pro killers who use a .22 go for head shots.”

“Generally.”

“And you couldn’t have been more than three feet away.”

I shrugged and it hurt some. “More like six. I came out of the elevator too fast. He had to move back a step and re-position. He was moving when I realized what was going down and started to

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turn. My heart area was a secondary target, and a better one, and he didn't miss. He saw me hit the deck. Some place he's licking his lips and counting his money."

"Not if he's the pro you think he was."

"Yeah?"

"Mike, think it through. He'd want definite confirmation. So would his contractor."

"So you figure... when he finds out he missed... he may try again."

"He's *going* to try again."

I grinned at her. "Still sure you're up for marrying me?"

She took a deep breath and picked up my trenchcoat where I dumped it on the floor nearby. Her fingers found the twin holes but were too big to go in them.

"I guess so," she said, going over to hang up the coat, "but it would be nice if your hobby wasn't getting shot."

"I'm weaning myself off that, doll."

But just her speaking of it brought on the big ache.

On that cold, cold night, I had come to the piers under West Side Drive to warn Don Lorenzo Ponti that a hit was going down, courtesy of a rival family. I had no great love for the man, in fact had caused him some trouble earlier but thought I might catch the blame if I didn't give him a heads up.

When I pulled in behind the black limo, I saw no sign at all of an ambush. He stepped off that old cargo ship he'd sneaked home on, and I was getting out of my car as the first shots rang out, and then they came rushing out of the woodwork, with military precision, the Gaetano soldiers, guns and breath smoking in the chill. I'd been too late to do my good deed, and with bullets flying in a war I wanted no part of, I made it back for my car...

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...but the don's crazy kid Azi saw me, read me as a hostile, and came at me head on, his .357 belching fire and metal and catching me twice in the left side. I went down on my back and half-rolled and then he was on top of me, that big barrel pointing down at my face, but he took a moment to savor the thought of splattering me to hell, and my fist with the .45 swung up and one fat ball-and-cap slug took the top of his head off and ended a nothing life.

So that made me the big winner, only Azi's two bullets had churned into me like torpedoes intent on taking down a sub and then my guts were vomiting blood through two new orifices...

My hand ran down where I had been hit last year. It was healed now, but I'd always know when it was going to rain. I still couldn't quite take the weight of my .45 snugged down under my arm on that side and had gotten so used to it not being there that I rarely carried it any more. No need, right?

Right?

"Mike... Mike! I lost you there for a moment."

"I'm here, kitten."

"Who was it? Who did this to you?"

I described the killer as best I could, but it was pretty sketchy, mostly just the natty blue suit and hat and the slightness of him. I hadn't expected the attack, and his face had been obscured by his hat brim.

"And I saw very damn little when the slugs were pounding into me," I said.

"You're going soft on me."

"One thing—he smelled of aftershave."

"What kind?"

"Beats me. I'm strictly an Old Spice guy. Maybe something foreign."

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But I'll know it again if I smell it." I tapped my nose. "I didn't make it in this business so long not having a good one of these."

She was frowning in thought—that trick of hers that managed it without wrinkling much of anything. "He was here waiting for you."

"Right."

"Well, how'd your new friend know you'd be here this early?"

"That's no secret. I'm always here early."

"But it's not standard business hours for this or any building," she reminded me. "And our answer machine gives office hours as starting at nine."

We liked having some time to deal with paperwork and ongoing casework before seeing any paying customers.

"So he's been watching us," I said.

"Him or somebody he works with, or for," she said. "Which I don't love."

"I don't love it either, knowing that we've been under somebody's gaze and neither one of us picked up on it."

She nodded, her dark eyes hard. "Us or any of the Hackard Building lobby staffers. They know by now the kind of attention Mike Hammer can attract."

"Well, I don't attract the attention I used to."

She wiggled a finger at the growing bruise, already a rhapsody in sick discoloration. "Really? You'd never guess. What the hell is this about, Mike? What enemies have you... have *we*... made lately?"

"Let me mull that," I said. "Meantime, better call Pat, then make us some coffee."

"Woman's work never being done."

"I'm not chauvinistic, I'm wounded."

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“You’re a wounded chauvinist.”

Velda did all that, giving Pat the basic facts but asking him to come alone. Soon she and I were seated on the couch in the outer office, waiting for Pat, my feet up on a chair, hers nicely crossed, as we sipped coffee—Dunkin’ Donuts special blend, the best medicine this side of Four Roses.

“What if this isn’t a *new* enemy?” I asked. My shirt was still unbuttoned and I occasionally ran my fingers lightly over the massive bruise.

She arched an eyebrow. “Well, you have your share of old ones. Anyone in particular?”

I shook my head, but then something came to me. Just conversationally, I asked her, “You see that piece in the *News* last week? About the Rudy Olaf case getting a fresh look?”

“Rudy Olaf... why do I know that name? But, no, I didn’t see that piece.”

I shrugged. “It was a glorified squib. And this goes back to before you were working for me. I’d just gone into business, Pat was walking a beat. This was way, way back, doll. At the beginning.”

“Mike, you’re talking forty years ago!”

With a nod, I said, “It was the case that made Pat Chambers. Nobody ever became a captain quicker on the NYPD. Of course, nobody has stayed one *longer*...”

She smirked at me. “No captain of homicide ever had a best friend like Mike Hammer as an albatross around his neck, either.”

“Kitten, that’s unkind. I’ve helped Pat close out all kinds of cases.”

“Yes, but usually with the working end of your .45.”

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I waved that off. “That was the old days, sugar. But we’re talking about the *very* old days with Rudy Olaf. He was a kid, like Pat and me... well, he was a little older maybe. He was a combat veteran, European theater. I was in the Pacific, as was Pat. We both lied about our ages to get in, did you know that?”

“I may have heard that a couple of thousand times. But Rudy Olaf? He may be old news to you, Mike, but he’s new news to me.”

I stared into nothing in particular. “Like I said, it was the case that made Pat, so it’s an embarrassment that it’s being re-examined after all this time. Funny thing is, it was just dumb luck. We were sitting in a diner after Pat finished walking his beat, still in his uniform, having coffee... of course, not as good as this, doll.”

“Skip the soft soap. What happened?”

“The most wanted suspect in town wandered in. Pat made him from an APB description that had gone around to all the precincts, went over for a friendly chat and the guy saw all that blue coming his way and made a break for it.”

“And you didn’t just shoot him?”

“No, Pat tackled him out on the sidewalk. My role was strictly to find a call box to phone it in.”

“Pat couldn’t radio it in?”

“Vel, this was forty years ago. Street cops weren’t wired into personal radio communications. Anyway, I made the call and in two minutes a squad car came on the scene and transported the suspect. Pat went with them. I stayed out of it until I was requested to give a statement later.”

She cocked her head and one wing of raven hair hung prettily. “What was Olaf wanted for?”

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“Multiple murders. Today we’d call him a serial killer. He had knocked off nine guys who had staggered out of saloons, luring them into oddball places, shot and robbed them, all in a two-month period.”

“Shot them dead?”

“As hell, kid.”

Velda didn’t need that new computer—she had a mind that contained computer-like information. I watched her eyes narrow while her sensors searched for answers she had stored away. When the expression on her face unlocked I knew she had finally found it.

“They called it the Bowery Bum slayings,” she said.

I nodded. “Today it would be the Homeless Homicides, but a rose by any other.”

She was frowning as the vague outlines of a very old, notorious case took shape in her mind. “He killed his victims. How did they ever get a description for an APB?”

“On the last kill, a kid saw Olaf coming up from the front basement stairs where he’d left his latest victim. Kid recognized Olaf as a guy from a tenement two blocks over.”

She squinted at me, trying to pull all this into focus. “What made a random character coming up some basement steps suspicious?”

“The kid heard the gunshot. Oh, he didn’t know that’s what it was at first—it was just a sound, a very muted *pop*.”

A slow nod from her. “So the gun was silenced.”

“Yeah. But it was loud enough for the kid to wait till the guy was out of sight and then go down to check things out...”

“And find a fresh body.”

“Very damn fresh. The kid walked over to the precinct house

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and told the story to the desk sergeant. A team hit the suspect's flop, but he wasn't there. A warrant was issued, the cops forced an entry, and inside, neatly arranged on a shelf, were four wallets, each one belonging to one of the dead victims. There was no evidence of a gun or a silencer, no money either, but that was enough for an APB."

She paused to search her memory some more, then said, "And it didn't hit the papers till later, right?"

"Right. Good recall, kitten. Yeah, in those days reporters had some goddamn sense—not that any information was offered to the press. Two days later, Rudy Olaf walks right into Pat's arms with me as a witness to a quick and careful arrest procedure."

The frown creased Velda's forehead again. "Olaf didn't get a death sentence, did he? Despite so many murders. It was life, wasn't it?"

"That's right," I told her. "General feeling was, had the cops located the gun, Olaf would have gotten the hot squat at that big emporium on the Hudson."

She smirked cutely at me. "Mike, you have got to stop talking like that. People are starting to look at you funny."

"Okay, excuse the archaic terminology. Sing Sing."

"No chair there now."

"No. They go the lethal injection route. Progress."

Velda got up, paced thoughtfully a little, then went over to her desk and hiked herself up on the edge of it, her dress inching up her thighs. She knew I was looking and tugged it back in place.

"Don't get any ideas," she said with a soft laugh. "You're wounded, remember."

"Wounded, not dead," I said quietly.

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“Such a famous case, and a serial killer...” She shook her head, the dark hair shimmering. “I’m surprised the media hasn’t made something out of it being re-opened.”

“You know how it is, kitten. Anything not emanating from Washington or a plane blowing apart from a terrorist attack or one of our embassies overseas being hit with a car bomb is hardly news.”

I leaned back in my chair and ran my hand over my chest. The bruise mark had spread farther than my stretched palm. Now the black and blue discoloration had streaks of red and purple beginning to show and the ache seemed to come from the ribs, rather than the flesh.

“Hurt, lover?” she asked.

“Stupid question.”

“So get back to old Olaf. After forty years, even a mass murderer with a clean nose might have a shot at parole.”

“But Olaf doesn’t want parole. He was eligible twenty years ago. But he’s never copped.”

“Never confessed?”

“Nope. Haven’t you heard? He’s innocent—like everybody else in the slammer.”

I didn’t have to remind her that in the last few years DNA test results had gotten a lot of wrongly convicted prisoners an overdue walk into the fresh air. The stink from a review of some cases has really made some notables squirm, so when Olaf’s came up, it was one of those “Man, let’s get him out of our face” jobs.

“But so what, Mike? They had a *witness*...”

“One witness—a kid with a juvie record. About two years later,

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he gets set up on a robbery beef and shoots his mouth off to another inmate about getting Rudy Olaf nailed for the sheer hell of it. Or almost the sheer hell—Olaf had cussed him out on the street one time.”

She gave me a doubtful half-smile. “That doesn’t even make sense. Why go to that trouble over somebody just cursing you out? After what the kid claimed got reported, he got talked to hard, right? To see if his story held?”

I shook my head. “No. The story got reported, but it was strictly hearsay. That young witness against Rudy Olaf died in prison. Shiv in the shower. Same old sweet song.”

Her eyebrows shrugged. “Well, some second-hand rumor attributed to a dead con isn’t enough to get *anybody* a new trial.”

“It didn’t stop Olaf’s lawyers from trying. And that second-hand statement went on the record book all those years ago... and is still there.”

This time her frown was deep enough to risk wrinkles. “Mike... something had to have happened recently to get the case looked at again.”

“It has. Somebody out of the past stepped up and confessed.”

“After all these years?” Her voice was tinged with amazement.

“Henry Brogan, an old crony of Olaf’s who lived down the street came in out of the blue and copped. Said he’d needed the money for medical bills—seems he had a very sick kid. So Brogan started pulling these small robberies and killing his victims to stop eyewitness identification. Then that kid ID’d Olaf, and Brogan seized the opportunity—he beat the cops to Olaf’s pad and planted the wallets where they’d be easily found.”

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“How did he get into Olaf’s apartment?”

“Brogan knew where Olaf hid his key. I told you they were cronies. Olaf had nothing worth stealing up there. He only kept the door locked to keep somebody from getting to his wine bottle.”

“Prints on the wallets?”

“Brogan was smart enough to wipe his off by smudging them.”

Still frowning, she asked, “But couldn’t the lab boys find *anything*...?”

“Some things slip by the board, kitten.”

“That slip took *forty years* out of Olaf’s life.”

I gave her a nasty grin. “*If* Brogan is telling the truth.”

Her frown vanished. “You doubt him?”

“Why, Velda? Do *you* like Brogan’s story? A sick kid—T.B., I think it was—and he decides to pay the medics by pulling a string of petty robberies in the damn Bowery? If you’re going to rob and kill, doll, it’s only a bus or subway ride to Park Avenue.”

“So you don’t buy Olaf’s innocence?”

I sneered at her. “In a pig’s ass I buy it. I feel sorry for Pat having this get stirred up, toward the end of a fine career.”

That got a sympathetic series of nods from her. “So what happens now?”

“Waste no tears on Rudy Olaf—he has himself a very high-priced criminal lawyer... Rufus Tomlin.”

Her eyes widened for a moment. “Big media ties there!”

“Big mob ties, too.”

She just stared at me for a few seconds. “Man of mine, you just got shot. Witnessing an arrest forty years ago doesn’t buy you that kind of attention.”

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“Not unless there’s an angle I’m missing.”

“Then who shot you, old soldier?”

When my only answer was an eyebrow shrug, she slid off the desk, got behind it, pulled a bottom drawer out, and withdrew a package. Then she looked over at me and smiled a tilted smile and came over and handed the unwrapped box to me. I could hardly move my left arm, so took it with my right.

It was heavy, much heavier than your average gift in a box of medium size, covered in silver-and-white paper, and when she saw me weighing it in my hand, she said, “That was going to be a wedding present, my darling... but I think you might need it more now.”

She didn’t help me. She let me peel the wrappings off in a clumsy way with my fingertips, slice the taped edges with a thumbnail, then gently lift the lid off to see a beautiful Colt .45 automatic, its blued metal totally non-reflecting as it should be, a little lethal device that came alive solely at the discretion of its handler. It had that faint smell of gun oil, an instrument almost an anachronism among modern-day weapons, but a frightening and frighteningly effective piece of machinery when its mouth was pointed at you.

“You trying to tell me something, kid?”

She smiled with pursed-kiss lips, then nodded. “I don’t want you dead, lover boy. You are in a dangerous business and if any more high-end hitters get paid to burn you, I want you to have a reasonable amount of protection.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my old piece.”

“Yeah? Then why don’t you wear it any more?”

“It’s just such a big hunk of heavy metal.”

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“Heavy metal is music, Mike.”

I hefted the new gun in my palm. “Music to my ears when I’m firing the damn thing, but—”

“Wear that on your right side for a change.” She was not about to let me off the hook.

I said, “I’ll take it under advisement... Give me your hand. Left one.”

She gave me a puzzled look, but then slipped off the desk, showing off those classic gams again, then wandered over. She held her hand out to me like a princess doing a loyal subject a great honor. I took her fingertips gently.

“I’ve got a gift for you too, baby,” I said, “but now’s not the time. I’ll just say it’s a band of gold with some diamonds and it matches up perfect with this two-karat number. I’m not about to die before I can give it to you.”

When she sat in my lap and kissed me, it didn’t hurt at all, and I could feel the hunger in her and I wondered how I had let all those years go by before finally making this permanent, and the two of us legal.

She whispered in my ear: “Somebody has a contract out on you, my dear.”

Not exactly sweet nothings.

“I know,” I said.

“This is no local shooter, either.”

“Yeah, and I walked straight into it. Dumb.”

She slipped off my lap and sat beside me. “Mike... he would have expected you to be carrying. You have a Wyatt Earp reputation and no pro is going to overlook that. He could expect you to be

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one heavy target to put down, so he was ready for anything.”

“The guy did his homework, sweetie. He would have known I was still recovering from being shot.”

“Come on, you can still move. Your rep saved you, Mike—he didn’t stick around to confirm the kill, because if you weren’t dead, he would be.”

“Once upon a time, maybe.”

“No maybe about it. But stop skating on your rep, Mike. You have a conceal-and-carry permit. Use it.”

I got up and started buttoning the shirt. “What gets me is *why*. What good would I be dead?”

Velda retrieved my tie and slipped it over my head, tucking it under my collar. “Eighty-nine billion bucks is a good *why*, Mr. Hammer.”

“Eighty-nine billion dollars is a good reason *not* to kill me, doll.”

“Not if somebody *else* knows where that hoard is stashed, too, my love.”

I nodded. In that case, eighty-nine billion dollars made one hell of a good *why*. Nations would go to war for that kind of loot, so eliminating one person should be a simple enough matter.

But who besides Velda and me could know that a certain retirement age P.I. had a stash that size tucked away in a mountainside?