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Ken Bruen and Jason Starr

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PIMP

by **Ken Bruen** *and* **Jason Starr**

A HARD CASE



CRIME NOVEL

A HARD CASE CRIME BOOK

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ONE

*He is a hustler, the guy's a pimp.
But that's not what I'm talking about.*

ELMORE LEONARD, *LaBrava*

Max, Maximus, Maximum.

In the bathroom of a tenement apartment in Harlem, Max Fisher stared at his reflection. The plastic surgery had hurt like a son of a bitch and only now was the bruising beginning to fade. What looked back at Max was like Philip Seymour Hoffman after the autopsy. Max, a master of self-delusion, saw a youngish Jack Nicholson, and gave the thumbs-up to the face, went, “Ya still got it, kid.”

He was dressed in what used to be called a *lounging suit* but hadn't done any lounging since Sinatra had hit town. It was bright yellow and Max's latest babe muttered, “Looks like a canary's abortion, mon.”

Her name was Precious and the fact that she was neither young nor precious was not apparent to Max. She must have been fifty, had ratty gray dreads, was missing a few teeth. She was Jamaican slash West Indian, emphasis on the slash—she'd recently done a sixteen-year stretch at Cossackie for stabbing her sister in the face.

This was what Max had liked most about her, though—that she had “a past.” It was nice to have something in common with a babe. Though Max, of course, had only been in prison at Attica for a few months before he escaped, it was the highlight of his life. He looked back on it the way soldiers looked at war. He'd

risen up against the enemy—goddamn Aryans—and defeated all of them. Fuck, where was his parade?

Precious went on, “You’re not seriously wearing that, are you? You’re going to be chased by a swarm of bees, mon.”

Max had been in a daze lately, trying to get his shit together, and he wasn’t sure exactly how long he’d known Precious. Three days, a week? She was so annoying he wouldn’t have kept her around at all if he didn’t need her now for her contacts.

She was going, “Come on, Maxie, I can’t be goin’ around the city with you, lookin’ the way you be lookin’, embarrassin’ me. And how old is that jacket you wearin’ anyway, mon? It looks like something you found in the Salvation Army. I think I seen my uncle Cuvis be wearin’ that jacket one time...in nineteen seventy-two. And that color, mon, is so hideous it makes my eyes water from the pain. Nobody be wearin’ bright yellow jackets anymore, mon. You’re gettin’ dressed for a drug deal, not *Let’s Make a Deal*.”

Precious was laughing now, on a roll, enjoying her own dumb jokes. Great, so now he was dating the Jamaican Don Rickles. How’d that happen?

Max, sick of her lip, went, “I’m sick of your lip. If you knew who you were talking to, you’d realize how stupid you sound. The Max isn’t some schmo from buttfuck. The Max knows style. I’m what we Americans call a *trendsetter*. And I don’t have to watch Netflix to know that yellow is the new black.”

Precious, still laughing, went, “Pa-leeze, mon. You are the most unfashionable man I ever seen. You look like you get dressed in the dark, and go shopping in the dark too.”

She continued, clapping, giving herself a round of applause. Meanwhile, Max looked at her stone-faced. He liked that they were both homicidal and that she was big-busted—had to be thirty-eights, E’s or F’s—and he thought she had a sultry, jazzy

look, kinda like a homicidal Whoopi Goldberg. But the cons were starting to outweigh the pros. Her biggest con? She talked too much. Didn't women know that if you want to keep a man around you gotta learn how to—as they say in Ireland—shit the fook up?

What was he doing with this dreadlocked bitch anyway? He had enough problems, he didn't need another one. He wished he could remember how he'd met her.

Shit, his memory was turning into a serious issue. Max had never had great short-term memory—hell, his long-term memory hadn't been so great either—but lately he couldn't remember shit, probably because he'd been coasting on his own latest pharmaceutical high, a new product named PIMP.

PIMP for:

Peyote

Insulin

Mescaline

and a liberal sprinkle of Psychosis.

PIMP had been introduced to him in Portland by a young, long-haired hipster named Sage, who looked like he was right out of *Breaking Bad*, and maybe he was. After Max's big prison break from Attica—yeah, just thinking about those days gave Max some serious wood—he lived in Portland under his pseudonym, Sean Mullin. Figured some tree-hugging city in the Northwest was the last place they'd come looking for him and he got a job working at—where else?—an Irish bar. An out-of-work Irish guy in the U.S., who else would hire him? It was work at an Irish bar or fuck off. As Max often lamented, *we can't all be Liam Neeson*.

So Max grew a gray beard, dyed it red, and gained about fifty pounds. Jesus Christ, he looked worse than Louis C.K. Being a two-hundred-and-seventy-pound Irishman was a good disguise,

but being Irish twenty-four/seven he was losing his mind. Jaysus, how did Bono do it? Speaking in that accent all the time—fook, how many times can you say Jaysus in one sentence? How much fookin' Jameson could one man drink? The whole shebang annoyed the shit out of him. Make that the *shite* out of him. Sometimes he wished he'd never busted out of Attica because life on the outside was a whole other nightmare. The lamenting, the self-pity, the depression. If somebody'd told him what it was like to be Irish, he might have stayed in that cell.

Living a fake life was hard enough for anybody, but when you were an extraordinary man like Max Fisher, when you were in the one percent and a mega genius to boot, it was even harder. Talk about riches to rags—he went from running a computer networking business, being a kingpin crack dealer and leading one of the biggest revolts in the history of the American prison system to serving skank beer to wasted frat boys. Some nights, when the college kids were shouting for pitchers of Bud to replace the ones they'd puked, Max wanted to waste all of them. Just go motherfucking postal on their ninety-nine-percent asses. Over the last few years if Max had learned one thing it was that murder was like fucking black chicks—do it once, you're hooked.

One night at O'Hennessy's—can't get more fuckin oye'rish than that, right?—this Kurt Cobain-looking dude started talking to him. He said his name was Sage and Max in his brogue went, "Where's yer mates Parsley, Rosemary and Thyme?"

Friendly conversation at first, then Sage, hair hanging over his face, went smartass: "You're not really from Ireland, are you?"

Max panicked. Had he been made? Yeah, he hated life on the outside, but he wasn't crazy, he didn't want to go back to freakin' prison.

"Ah, yes, me Irish, me Irish," Max said in his shitty fake brogue.

“You’re full of shit,” Sage said. “I have relatives in Galway, I went there when I was a kid and they don’t talk like you do.”

“Aye, that’s because me from Dublin,” Max said. “Aye, like me good mate, Bono.”

Sage—drunk, but also definitely wired on something—went, “Galway, Dublin, what the fuck’s the difference? I know how Irish people sound and you’re not Irish.”

Wanting to reach across the bar and strangle the kid, “Want some more Guinness, do ya?”

The guy squinted, went, “You don’t sound like Bono.”

Getting sick of this kid big time, Max said, “Aye, laddy, why don’t you run along now, ye whore’s ghost? Good on yah, bollix, fook on a bike.” Throwing all the Irish he could think of at the kid, hoping some of it would stick.

But the smartass kid wouldn’t let up, went, “What’s the deal? Why would a guy go around pretending he’s Irish?” Then later, couple more drinks in him, went, “Wait, you look like somebody. Who do you look like? I know I’ve seen you before.”

Max went to take another order, but the kid kept giving him looks all night. Max was afraid the kid was seriously on to him, would blurt out the Max Fisher identity. Max had a flash of himself as Matt Damon, running through Europe, his cover blown. The image invigorated him, reminded him of the player he was—the Max Fisher he’d been repressing since Attica.

Besides, he was in the mood to hit somebody.

So later when the kid went to the bathroom to take a leak, Max followed him in and locked the door. Now he was back in Attica in his head, during the time when he ruled the joint. The fact that such a time never actually existed didn’t matter to Max. He saw himself as the kingpin telling his henchmen—that’s right, in his mind he’d had *henchmen*—to stand guard outside the bathroom while he beat some Aryan dude to a pulp. But he

wasn't fighting an Aryan now in a bathroom at Attica, he was fighting some waify wiseass in an Irish bar in Portlandia. And it wasn't exactly a fight. When they got into the bathroom, Sage went, "What's the problem, bruh?"

Bruh, not bro. What was the world coming to? Sometimes he couldn't keep up, felt like the old man in *Shawshank*. He wanted to leave a note, *The Max wuz here*, and end the misery.

"You're my problem," Max hissed, glaring like Dirty Harry.

In Max's case, the glare was bigger than the bite—the bite was more like a nibble. He tried to connect with a hard right, but before he could cock his arm he slipped on the pissy floor, said, "Jesus," then tried to cover and went, "Jaysus," as he fell on his ass, hit his head on the back of the sink.

"You all right, bruh?"

Max looked at the dizzy image of Sage looming over him. The Max down for the count? This wasn't right—this wasn't right at all. Max felt tightness in his chest, went into one of his trances.

He'd been getting a lot of these episodes lately. He'd zone out and an interlude from his past would unfold. Now it was that truly fucked up time when he was an outlaw dope dealer, living off the grid like they said in *Weeds*.

Yep, The Max knew his TV—what else was there to do in freakin' Portlandia? Way before *Breaking Bad*, Max was your citizen turned to the dark side. That time when he was dealing and had to meet with some serious badasses and dude, those dogs were mean, like in your face, biblical fucking stone-cold psychos. In one of his less bright moments, Max had felt it would up his cred to speak Spic. You gonna be down with the *Hombres*, you better sing coyote.

So he got all them Berlitz tapes hooked up, but did a tad too much meth and passed out, Senior Lopez still lecturing to him.

The next day, when he did meet with one particular high roller, the lessons kicked in but the Spanish was high classical Castilian and for some reason stuck on odd directions so he kept rattling to the cartel guy, “*Donde esta el Starbucks?*” and “*Mi aerodeslizador es lleno de anguilas,*” or “My hovercraft is full of eels.” Worse, some weird stuff on concerts, as in “*Hay algo mas cutre que hacer air guitar en un concierto?*” Which he would find later meant, “Is there anything worse than going to a concert and playing air guitar?”

To see the expression on the face of a top cartel guy when you spat this shit in his face. Luckily he thought all gringos were crazy and let it slide.

At these times, recalling the glory days, Max would get all choked up thinking about Angela, his soul mate and partner in crime, the love of his life, his *una flor linda*. Or, English translation: treacherous cunt.

He’d loved her, yeah, but he was glad she was dead.

He saw her face before him now, her flowing hair, her intense stare, and then, as suddenly as it had come, Max snapped out of his vision. He saw Sage’s hand reaching down to him, and—not beyond a good sucker move—Max grabbed the hand, and pulled Sage down onto the pissy floor.

“The fuck, bruh?” Sage whined.

Max wrestled with him—okay, pulled his hair and scratched at him. After a few minutes of rolling around, grappling with the wasted hipster, Max noticed an extra-large Baggie that had fallen out of Sage’s coat pocket, bulging with some white substance. Max’s drug instincts kicked in, telling him it wasn’t Splenda.

“Whoa, whoa, what’s this?” Max asked.

“Hey, give that back, bruh,” Sage said, lunging.

Max pushed him away, then examined the contents more

closely. Looked almost granular, flaky, like kosher salt. Wasn't any drug he'd seen before, and he'd seen 'em.

"Let's have a taste, shall we?" he said, more Brit for a moment than Irish, but fuck it. He poked a finger in the Baggie and put a pinch under his tongue.

Holy shit! The rush was harder and stronger than that green drink they once served to him at a Brazilian restaurant in midtown, but that drink must've been laced with something because when he left the place, after half a glass, he tripped over a pile of garbage, needed ten stitches for the gash on his forehead. This feeling was like that, but on crack. Not *actual* crack, because there wasn't crack in this—Max Fisher knew his crack. But something. Was there hash in it? It was a high-low combo all right, like the perfect poker hand. It was hitting him from all directions at once—up, down, sideways. Was he imagining it or was his sphincter aroused? He didn't know what it was, but he was hooked, like when he got his first blowjob, on his twenty-fourth birthday.

He wanted more; *needed* more.

"Come on, seriously, bruh," Sage said.

Max, back to his prison persona, grabbed a fistful of Sage's hair and twisted it, and in his best Bogie said, "Spill it, Sage."

"All right, all right, okay, just quit pullin' on my hair, bruh."

Max squeezed tight.

Squealing in agony, Sage said, "P-P-PIMP."

"Pimp?" Max said. "Your pimp gave it you? Are you some kind of hustler?"

"N-n-no, that's what it's called. It's called PIMP, now can you let me the fuck go?"

Max didn't, said, "Where'd you get it?"

"I made it."

"Made it? What do you mean made it?"

“I invented it. It’s...it’s my own shit. Now can you please give it back?”

Shit, this kid *was* out of *Breaking Bad*. More importantly, Max was Walter White and this PIMP, holy Christ, this could be his ticket out of Portlandia, all the way back to the top.

Max stood up, accidentally grabbing onto the urinal’s flusher and some water and piss sprayed in his face. He didn’t care, though—nothing could bring him down from this high.

Still on the floor, Sage went, “H-hey, where you goin’ with my PIMP, bruh?”

“I had a rough upbringing,” Max said. “My father was killed when I was three, he was a mason and a chimney collapsed on his head.” Max didn’t know why he was saying this shit—maybe it was some side effect of the drug, making him chatty. He pulled himself together and went, “And my mother, my mother was distant, worked all the time, was never home, but she told me one thing I’ll never forget—*always* take candy from strangers.”

He kicked Sage in the face and left the bathroom.

Max told the bar manager there was an emergency, left his shift early, went to his apartment and, as that kid book says, “Let the wild rumpus start!”

And, man, did it get wild! The next two weeks were a blur, reminded him of that time in Texas when on a drinking binge he’d gotten, um, a little too close to some Chinese dude. Thankfully there were no Chinese dudes this time, but there was lots of fucking. Max was with the best-looking chickitas he’d ever seen—yep, better looking than the girls at Hooters—and they were in exotic locations—London, Paris, Venice, Attica. Max was in jungles, swinging naked from vines, and fighting in wars. He was partying with the ancient Greeks and he even hung out with Jesus.

PIMP wasn’t all sex and fun, though. Before the drug took

hold there was usually a short intense feeling of impotence, Max called it the Bieber effect. Also, once in a while, there was some incontinence, Max called it the Betty White effect. But these periods were always short-lived—or at least in Max’s mind they were—and then the shits ended and raging hard-ons took over. Max had the best sex of his life in his mind, banging everybody from Cleopatra to Britney Spears to Judi Dench. Dench was a dynamo and loved it from behind with Max yanking on her hair, glaring back at him over her shoulder, shouting, “Gimme dat big boy! Gimme dat big boy!”

Yeah, this PIMP was some seriously good shit.

The best part was the feeling of power it brought Max. It brought him back to the days when he was the CEO of NetWorld, the computer networking company in Manhattan, and his major way to get off was by firing his employees. Sometimes, just for a rush, he’d fire some technician, usually some Russian, for no reason at all. He’d call Slav or Vlad or whoever the fuck into his office and go, “You’re terminated, go home,” and feel the rush, like Trump and Schwarzenegger rolled into one. This was like that, but better, because he didn’t have to fire anybody, or do *anything*, to feel like he was the baddest motherfucker in the world. He just knew it and that was enough. Was it enlightenment in powder form? Not bad, he could use that. See, Max’s mind was already churning, working OT, planning his next move.

Oh, another thing about PIMP—it was addicting as hell. When the contents of the Baggie ran out it was a sad, desperate day. He went back to O’Hennessy’s and was told he’d been fired, but he didn’t care about that, he just cared about PIMP. He had to find Sage.

It took about a week of searching around, but he finally tracked Sage down, in some rundown off-campus apartment, the back unit of a house.

When Sage opened the door he saw the rage in Max, thought he'd get his ass whooped again, and when Max forced his way inside, Sage pulled a blade on him. Max judged things by the size of his cock and this blade was cock-size, about three and half, okay, three inches.

"Stay back," Sage said, arm with the blade extended in front of him, shaking. "Just stay the fuck back."

"I'm not here to hurt you," Max said. "I'm just here for your PIMP."

Knowing how ridiculous this sounded, but seeing no humor in it because he was crashing from his high and desperate for his next fix. He was damn serious—he'd kill the grungy drug addict, rip the punk's fuckin' head off if he didn't cough up the shit.

But Sage was going, "I'm not giving you shit, bruh. I've been doing some research on you on Google. That's right, I googled your fat, saggy ass and I know who you are. Your name's Fisher, Max Fisher. I know everything about you, bruh. I know about the people you killed, about your drug dealing, and I know about Attica. You're fuckin' homicidal, you're fuckin' crazy."

If he'd still been soaring on PIMP, Max would've taken all of this as a major compliment. Down, he liked being called homicidal, but fat, saggy ass?

"You callin' me fat, saggy ass?" Max asked, glaring empty and psycho like DeNiro at the mirror in *Taxi Driver*. For full effect he repeated, "You callin' *me* fat, saggy ass?" Let it hang there, then added, "FYI, where I come from, back east, all the players carry some extra baggage. Why do you think Tony Soprano had all that street cred? Why did Phil Hoffman get all the great roles? And why was I the CEO of a drug empire? When you've got meat you've got power. It's called being large and in charge."

"Come another inch toward me, I'll waste you." Nerdy white guy trying to be all *Menace 2 Society*.

Half wishing he'd taken out this asshole on that bathroom

floor when he'd had the chance—but not really, 'cause then where would he get more PIMP?—Max said, “Okay, let's say I am who you say I am, though I'm not saying that. But if you really think I'm Max Fisher why aren't you turning me in? I mean, I'm on the FBI's Most Wanted list. You get a reward, what, hundred grand if you turn me in? You gonna tell me you're allergic to the green and white?”

Sage didn't say anything, but it clicked for Max.

“It's the PIMP, isn't it? If you rat on me, then I rat on you.” Max smiled. “Well, looks like we have a situation here now, doesn't it?”

The ol' businessman Max Fisher was back in play, and he did what he did best—negotiated a deal. A seventy-thirty split in his favor. Sage would produce the shit and Max would market it. Powder form or pill, user's choice. And as far as ratting on each other went—well, they'd make that risk work for them. Like the U.S. and Russia in the Cold War, they'd each hold something over the other's head. Sage would write down the formula for PIMP and the history of how he'd invented it and sold it to barflies and businessmen all summer, and put this in a sealed envelope; Max would do the same with a confession detailing his crimes; and they'd send the two envelopes to a neutral lawyer, Nathan Schneermesser, Esq., Counselor-at-Law. For a fee, Mr. Schneermesser, Esq., would sit on the envelopes, with instructions to release one or the other in the event something happened—Max's confession if something happened to Sage, Sage's if something happened to Max. A perfect stalemate. Business relationships had been based on less.

With that out of the way, it was time for marketing.

Max had seen *The Social Network*, and knew if you wanted to start a trend, you had to get college kids hooked first. If it worked for Facebook, it would work for PIMP.

He distributed freebies at dorms, bars, off-campus parties, clubs. The kids called Max “Red” ’cause of his beard. The name helped hugely—not Max’s, the drug’s. Walking past the juice bars of Portland, Max heard, “Gotta get me with some PIMP, yo.” Kids were fucking Facebooking and Tweeting about it; PIMP was going viral!

Max, at his core, was a marketing guru, and he knew it didn’t matter what you sold, it mattered how you sold it—fuck, look at Amazon. Bezos started with books, cockamamie books, and now people were buying toilet paper from him in bulk—there was a lesson in there somewhere, and your last name had to be Bezos, Trump or Fisher to understand what that lesson was. It was that it all came down to the sell. Max had been watching lots of *Mad Men* and he saw himself as the Don Draper of the new millennium. He knew if PIMP was going to take off, if it was going to rock the nation as the new super drug, he needed a pitch, a tagline, and Max, like Donny D, had one ready to roll.

PIMP: It knows how to take care of you.

Boom, gotchya, slam dunk. Can you say homerun? Winnah winnah, chicken dinnah! He could see the jumbotron flashing, the crowd going wild. In the boardroom inside Max’s head, his employees were congratulating him for coming up with that little gem. Then he was on stage, bowing, enjoying the standing O.

Max tried out the line on newbies—in the bathroom at bars and clubs he’d hand out PIMP samples and when a kid said, “Why’s it called PIMP?” Max, ready, hit with, “’Cause it knows how to take care of you.” This was perfect because that was what people wanted. Kids today, they didn’t want to do any work—they wanted apps to do the work for them. They’d had Generation X and Y, they should call this one Generation Z—for zippo. These kids today had no ambition, wanted everything handed to them. Well, PIMP was the perfect drug for

Generation Zippo because all you had to do was pop a pill and chill. *Pop a pill and chill*, there was another one. The brilliance was overwhelming Max now. If he didn't watch out his head would explode.

Then one night tragedy hit—or fortune, depending on how you look at it. Max was at Sage's, picking up some product, when Sage OD'd on PIMP—or maybe he'd been doing coke or shooting up, whatever, but he went into convulsions and then passed out on the kitchen floor. Max considered reviving him, but reminded himself that this was the kid who'd threatened him with that fucking huge knife, and maybe someday would develop the *cojones* to blackmail him, find some way to rat him out to the cops in spite of the fact that “Nathan Schneermesser” was just a name he'd made up, tied to a P.O. Box he'd rented, meaning that Max had the formula for PIMP and Sage had bubkis. So he just kneeled next to him while he was dying, went grim in full brogue like Liam in *The Grey*, and whispered, “You're going to die now, Sage, but it's okay, ya just gotta let go, feel the peace come over you,” and then realized, *Eh, who'm I kidding?* and said, “*Adios, muchacho,*” and left the kitchen.

Max wiped the place down, filled Sage's car with as much PIMP as would fit, and headed east. First he thought he'd stop in some town in the middle of nowhere and indulge in some local ho action, but the PIMP and the death had ignited something in The Max, and he couldn't resist the urge to shake his little town blues and go back to New York, the big time, and get his whole life back.

Yeah, he knew he was taking a risk going back east. The beard and weight helped, but last time he checked he was number six on the FBI's Most Wanted list—he couldn't just waltz back into Manhattan.

So when he got into town he called in a favor from an old

crew member from Attica. He got the plastic surgery—a botch job, but at least he didn't look like himself, and that was the whole point, right?

Next, to get his business going, he needed to produce PIMP, a shitload of it, and for that he needed *das capital*.

Enter Precious. She claimed she had a contact in the leading Jamaican gang in East New York, Brooklyn. That was good—there were lots of projects there and the second-best place—after a college campus—to start a trend was in the hood. PIMP would be the new Air Jordan, the new hip-hop.

In his room at Precious' Harlem tenement, Max was saying to her, “So who do I talk to?”

“His name's DeMarcus, mon,” Precious said.

“DeMarcusmon?” Max asked.

Precious rolled her eyes. “Just DeMarcus,” she said. “Mon.”

He wanted to slap her. So he slapped her.

“Hey, what's that for?”

“A reminder of who's in charge,” Max said. Then, “What's he look like?”

Massaging her face, Precious said, “Big, dumb, got dreads.”

Thinking, *Kinda like you*, Max said, “So what do I do, just walk in, ask for him?”

“How else you gonna meet the man?” Precious said, as if Max was stupid.

On his way to Brooklyn in a fuckin' Zipcar, Max had a bad vibe and he felt like an idiot. He should've had Precious come along, make the introduction. Old Max wouldn't've made that slip-up. It showed that, far as he'd come, he still had a long way to go.

He should've listened to his instincts because when he got to the place, some kind of warehouse off Utica Avenue, a thin white guy, curly brown hair, glasses—a fucking hipster—put a

gun to his head the moment he arrived, took him to a room in the back.

“You DeMarcusmon?” Max asked.

“Do I look like my name’s DeMarcusmon?” the guy asked.

Wiseass. These days it seemed like Max was flypaper for wiseasses.

“So what do you want?” Max said, when they arrived in a dimly lit room in the back. The room had no furniture, but there were three big black guys in the room, all with Uzis.

“I want to know all about PIMP,” the white guy said. “I want to know where you got it, how it’s made, how we can make more.”

“Yeah? And what if I’m not in the mood to talk?”

Stuffing the barrel of the gun into Max’s mouth so deep Linda Lovelace would’ve been impressed, the guy went, “Then you die, right here, right now.”

Fucking Precious. Another big-busted babe had fucked the Max over.

He shoulda known.