

Even

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Extract

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ONE

When I saw the body, my first thought was to just keep on walking.

This one had nothing to do with me.

There was no logical reason to get involved.

I managed two more steps. If the alleyway had been a little cleaner, there's a chance I might have kept on going. Or if the guy had been left with a little more dignity, the scene might not have bothered me so much. But the way he'd been discarded—dumped like a piece of garbage—I couldn't let it pass.

Maybe it was because I've had a few close calls in filthy alleyways myself, over the years. Or maybe because I have nowhere to really call "home," either. But whatever the reason, I could feel a strange connection with the washed-up tramp. It was too late to give him any practical help—he was clearly dead—but I thought I could at least get someone to come and take care of his remains. I felt I owed it to him. Or even to myself. If I was a Good Samaritan for this helpless guy now, perhaps someone would do the same for me when my time came. I didn't relish the idea of my bones returning to dust in a heap of cheeseburger wrappers and used condoms.

I stepped into the alley. The body was four yards away. It was lying

on its back with its feet toward the sidewalk. Its arms were stretched out the opposite way, pointing back into the narrow passageway. The wrists were close together—not tied—and the hands were partly obscured by the debris that covered the ground.

I moved closer and saw there were bullet holes in the tramp's clothing. I counted six. But it wasn't the number that caught my eye. It was the pattern. A neat T shape. Four across the chest, level with the shoulders, and two below, straight down the sternum. Very precise shooting. The work of a professional. A police marksman, maybe, or a soldier. Not something you'd associate with a dead tramp. And not something you can easily ignore.

Thoughts of calling the authorities suddenly took a backseat.

I examined the body from all sides. It was crumpled and slack, like a puppet with its strings cut. The best I could do with age would be ten years either side of fifty-five. There was no way to be more precise. His hair was graying and unwashed, and there was three or four days' stubble on the tramp's face. His nails were ragged and dirty but his hands were smooth, and he had the clothes of an office worker. He was wearing a navy blue cashmere overcoat, a gray single-breasted suit, a fine-weave oxford shirt—originally white or cream?—and a pair of scuffed, black, wing tip shoes. I had a picture in my mind of a ruined lawyer or stockbroker. He had quality garments, but all of them were stretched out of shape and each one had a variety of tears and holes and stains. The coat and jacket had lost all their buttons. The pants were held up with string. The leather soles were hanging off his shoes in several places. He'd lost his tie. Wall Street was only a few blocks away. If he had been some kind of professional, what a fall from grace the guy had suffered. He stank. I could smell piss and puke and booze. He was seriously unpleasant to be near.

I went through his pockets. I had to work slowly, because he was covered in blood and I didn't have any gloves. I started with his coat. At first it seemed to be empty, but as I pulled it open I found that a hard rectangular object had slipped through a hole into the lining. I worked it clear and saw it was a flat glass bottle, half full of a clear, colorless

liquid. The label said it was vodka. I didn't recognize the brand. There was nothing else hidden away with it, so I moved on to his jacket. The first inside pocket was completely torn away, but I found something in the other side. The tramp's wallet. It was still there. Whoever had killed him hadn't bothered to take it.

The wallet was slim. It was made of shiny black leather, and it looked old. The corners had worn away, it was in holes where it folded, and the silk lining was torn inside. It was slightly curved, as if he normally carried it in the back pocket of his trousers. The credit card spaces were all empty, but where the cash would normally be I found a dog-eared Social Security card. It gave his name—Alan James McNeil—and a number, 900-14-0471.

I put the wallet back and stood up. My next step would be to work back along the trail where the body had been dragged through the garbage. I wanted to find the exact spot where McNeil had been killed, and see if anything there would explain why the body had been moved or how the guy had ended up as a victim. But before I could start, I latched on to a sound from behind me. A vehicle. Moving fast. Coming in my direction. It could have been a coincidence, but I was doubtful. There had been no other traffic all the time I'd been in the alley. And the way the body had been left, it was possible someone was coming back for it. Someone with questions to answer.

I moved into the shadows at the mouth of the alley and looked out, down the street. I was right. A car was approaching. A large, pale blue Ford sedan with white lettering on the side and a lighting bar on the roof. An NYPD radio car. I couldn't risk being found lurking at a crime scene so I stepped forward to beckon it over, but before I could raise my hand the driver gave a short burst with his lights and siren. Then the car surged toward me. I watched it come closer and swing into the alley, wallowing on its suspension as it bounced over the curb. I had to step back or it would have hit me.

The car doors opened and two policemen climbed out. The driver drew his pistol. He held it two-handed, above the door frame, pointing steadily at my chest. The passenger was holding a short-barreled

shotgun. Given the width of the alley, it didn't much matter where he was pointing it.

"Stand still," the driver said. "Don't move."

The officers were both around five feet ten. They were powerfully built and looked in good shape. Neither seemed fazed by the situation. They'd moved calmly and swiftly when they got out of the car, reacting in perfect unison without needing to glance across or speak to each other. Now they were standing stock still, concentrating, alert without being anxious. Their neat blue uniforms summed them up perfectly. They were nowhere near brand-new, but still a long way from worn out. Trying anything with these guys would clearly be a mistake.

"Hands where I can see them," the driver said. "Slowly. Do it now."

You could see where this was going. They had the wrong end of the stick, but I knew there was no point trying to change their minds. Uniformed police are the same the world over. Once they set out to do something, they do it. Argue with them, and you just make it worse. So I raised my hands to shoulder height, fingers extended, palms toward them.

The passenger slotted his shotgun back in its cradle and came round toward me. As he moved closer I could see the name KLEIN engraved on a shiny plate beneath the shield on his chest.

"Hands on the hood," he said, reaching around to push me between the shoulder blades with his right hand.

I leaned on the front of the car and he jabbed at my ankles with his right foot. I shuffled my legs a couple of inches farther apart, and looked over at the driver. His badge gave the name KAUFMANN. I focused on it while Klein patted me down. He worked fast. He started with my left arm, running both his hands all the way down from my shoulder to my wrist. He did the same with my right arm, then checked my body, my waist, both legs, both ankles, and the pockets of my coat and jeans. He found nothing.

"Clear," he said from behind me. "No gun."

Kaufmann nodded, but he didn't relax in the slightest. His weapon was motionless. My eyes were drawn to the muzzle. It was still pointing at my chest. The tramp had been shot in the chest. Minutes ago, a few feet from where I was standing. I felt the skin covering my ribs begin to tingle.

"I'll tell CSU," Kaufmann said. "Don't worry. They'll find it."

Klein pulled my left arm around behind my back. I heard the snap of a heavy press stud being unfastened, then a ratchet closed rapidly. Cold metal bit into the skin of my wrist. He grabbed my right arm, pulling me upright at the same time, and secured the second handcuff.

"What's your name?" he said.

I didn't answer.

"Where's your ID?"

The cuffs were digging into both my wrists. He'd tightened them far more than he needed to.

"What happened here?"

I looked at the front of their car. There were a few minor chips and scratches in the paintwork, and a small crack in one of the headlight lenses.

"Did you kill that guy?"

Lower down, on the fender, there was a sticker offering a reward if you phoned a special number after a cop had been shot.

"OK, I've had enough. You're coming back to the station house. Let the detectives sort this out."

Klein took my left arm just above the elbow and led me to his side of the car. He opened the back door, reached up to put his hand flat on my head, and guided me inside. He made sure I was clear, then slammed the door behind me. The seat was square and hard. The car was wide, but there wasn't much room for my legs because of a thick glass screen that rose up from the floor, isolating the rear of the cabin. The surface was scratched and cloudy, obscuring my view through the windshield. I sprawled out sideways and tried to keep my weight off my hands.

The air in the back of the car was warm and stale. I could smell industrial disinfectant. It had a strong sweet scent, but it wasn't quite enough to cover the lingering odor of dirty, sticky humans. I looked around and saw there were greasy marks on the window next to me. From people's foreheads. Previous occupants must have rested against the glass. I started to breathe through my mouth. I wished there was some way I could keep my hands off the upholstery.

After five minutes another car arrived. It parked carelessly, sticking out from the curb at a lazy angle next to the entrance to the alley. It was another Ford. The same model as the radio car but with plain, dark blue paintwork. It needed a wash. There was a red, flashing beacon on the dashboard. Two men got out without switching it off. They appeared to be in their fifties, and were wearing suits and raincoats with gold shields hanging from their breast pockets. The men moved slowly and deliberately. Both looked a little overweight.

An unmarked, white box van pulled up on the other side of the car. Two men in navy blue overalls jumped down and walked over to join Kaufmann and Klein. As they came closer I could see woven cloth NYPD badges on their sleeves. One of them turned back toward their vehicle for a moment, and I read CRIME SCENE UNIT in tall white letters on his back.

The technicians started looking into the alley. The guys in suits looked into the car, at me. The taller one came over to my side and peered at me through the glass, like a kid drawn to a repugnant reptile at the zoo. His shield identified him as a detective, but it didn't give a name. Only a number set into the metal at the top. After twenty seconds of staring he called the others together. Kaufmann and Klein closed their doors so I couldn't hear what was being said. I watched them talk for a couple of minutes. They were very animated. Then the group moved to the front of the car. I could make out lots of hand movement from the uniformed officers. They kept gesturing and pointing at the body, at me, at things in the alley, and at something out on the street. I couldn't make out what it was.

The taller detective brought the conference to a close, and the offi-

cers came and got back into the car. Neither of them looked at me. Kaufmann started the engine and backed out into the street. Then the car pitched forward and we sped away from the alley.

And, I thought, away from any more trouble.

TWO

Ask me where I live these days, and I'd struggle to find an answer.

I do have an address, obviously, but that doesn't help much. It would just point you to a half-empty apartment in the Barbican, in London. One bedroom, Cromwell Tower, nearer the top than the bottom. I've owned it for years. Bank statements still get sent there, and copies of bills, but that's about all. I haven't set foot through the door in seven months. The time before it was fifteen months. Home for me has become a succession of hotel rooms. Different cities, different countries, one after the other, rarely a break in between. Memories of one place blur into the next. That's been the way for fifteen years now, so I'm comfortable with it. But I still recall the first hotel I ever stayed in. It was in Edinburgh, not long after I left college. I was broke. A soft drinks company was looking for recruits. For sales and marketing. I didn't know much about either, but the money was good so I gave it a shot. I filled in the forms. Then they invited twenty of us up to their local Holiday Inn so they could pick out the five best candidates. We were there for one night. When I went to check out the next morning, the receptionist asked if I'd enjoyed my stay. I said apart from the work, yes. And I was about to go when I heard someone else being asked the same question. A guy called Gordon, from Cambridge. Only his reply was very different. He wasn't satisfied at all. His pillows had been too

soft. His towels had been too rough. And worst of all, they'd sent up the wrong kind of honey with his breakfast.

They may have sounded petty, but Gordon's complaints really unsettled me. I could hardly move my feet to walk away. Each word felt like a sharp finger poking through my skin and gouging at my innards. How had such a shallow little weasel spotted all those flaws when they'd completely passed me by? What was wrong with me?

I mulled over the whole episode on the journey home and eventually the answer came to me. It was actually dead simple. I'd really been aware of it my whole life, in a vague kind of way. Gordon's bleating had just brought it into focus. It came down to this. What you see depends on what you look for. You can enjoy the positives, or seek out the negatives. It's your choice.

I'd gone one way, he'd gone the other.

I still take that path, as far as I can. I don't know about him. Because they didn't offer me the job.

I love the city at night. I prefer it to the day. The darkness draws out a wider spectrum of people, not just shoppers and office workers. Sounds carry farther. Everything you see feels closer and more personal. And the shadows are never far away, whenever you need them.

Kaufmann drove fast. Neither officer spoke. Away from the alley the streets were still busy. They were full of cars and taxis and limos and vans. A few people were still out walking. There were tall buildings all around, made of brick and stone and glass and concrete. They were squashed in on top of each other, bearing down, connecting you to the darkness up above.

The journey didn't last long. Less than six minutes. The station house was only a dozen blocks away and Kaufmann took a direct route, basically northwest, toward the Hudson. He stopped outside an eight-story, stone-fronted building midway down a side street. Police cruisers and unmarked sedans were parked at forty-five degrees from the curb, jutting out evenly like fish bones. We joined the end of the row. Klein came

round and opened my door. I shuffled out and he led me to the end of a metal railing that separated the sidewalk from the street. Kaufmann caught up with us and we followed him along to a pair of solid, studded wooden doors at the center of the façade. Big keystones were set all around the doorway and on either side a bright green lantern was hanging on a metal bracket.

Inside, the reception area was small and cramped. It smelled of dust and floor polish, like a school. The walls were painted apple green, which is supposed to be a calming color, and there were notices plastered everywhere. About a quarter showed monochrome photofit images of people the police wanted to question, and the rest gave pedantic warnings about every conceivable petty misdemeanor from smoking in the building to dropping litter in the interview rooms.

Kaufmann approached the reception desk and rested his elbows on the wooden counter. Another uniformed officer emerged from a back room and leaned over to talk to him. The pair of them spoke for a minute. They seemed to know each other. This was probably a familiar ritual. I wouldn't be the first person Kaufmann had dragged in at the dead of night. Finally the officer behind the desk laughed and slapped Kaufmann on the shoulder. He pressed a button, and a gate in a waist-high glass barrier to our right swung open. Klein ushered me through, then led the way down a flight of stairs that followed around three sides of a square elevator shaft.

The next corridor opened up into a broad square lobby area. The far wall was divided into two sections. The right-hand part was wider. It was made of metal. The surface was painted gray, with large rivets set into it at regular intervals. The remainder was blocked off by dull, dirty white metal bars. The other walls were made of whitewashed stone, and the floor had been covered with some kind of speckled, shiny material. It felt like being in a cellar. The atmosphere was cold and vaguely damp. There were only three windows. They were long and narrow, set high up in the left-hand wall. All were closed. It didn't look as if they could be opened. There were no handles, and they were covered by thick metal bars.

A uniformed officer sat behind a battered wooden desk to our right.

He was hunched over, concentrating on a computer screen. His badge gave the name JACKMAN. When he saw us he pushed the mouse away and stood up.

“Evening, fellas,” he said. “What have you got for me?”

“Just this one guy,” Kaufmann said. “Collar off a homicide on Mulberry Street.”

“You’re in luck, then. Got one vacancy left. Who caught the case?”

“Don’t know. Norman and Johns were at the scene. Said they’d be leaving it for the day tour.”

“No problem. I’ll find out later. What’s the guy’s name?”

“Don’t know. He wouldn’t say.”

“OK then—let’s have a look at him.”

Jackman took a shiny metal dish from a filing cabinet behind him and came around to our side of the desk. He worked his way methodically through my pockets and put each piece of my property in turn into the dish. He ended up with eighty cents in change, eighteen dollars in bills, and the card key from my hotel. He added my watch to the pile. It still didn’t look like much. Jackman stood and studied the dish, gently stirring the contents with his stubby index finger as if weighing up whether there was enough for a bona fide citizen to be carrying. After a moment he frowned, put the dish back down on the desk, and searched me all over again. He pinched his fingers along the seams of my clothes, squeezed the edges of my collar, and inspected the inside of my boots. It was a much more thorough job than Klein had done in the alley, but it turned up nothing more.

Jackman took the dish over to the other side of the desk and tipped the contents into a clear plastic bag. It was twelve inches tall by eight wide. Large enough for a gun or a knife. No wonder he seemed so disappointed with my sorry collection. He sealed the top, and held it up to the light as if to emphasize how little my possessions amounted to. Then he stuck a label on the bag and dropped it into the top drawer of the cabinet. Without looking he nudged the drawer with his elbow, and while it was still grinding slowly back into place on its worn runners he made his way around to the bars.

Klein took his gun out of its holster and laid it on the corner of the desk. Then he grabbed my elbow and pushed me forward. Jackman took a bunch of keys from his belt. They were large and heavy, something you might imagine a medieval jailer would use. He unlocked the center section of bars and swung them open. They hinged outward, toward us. Klein shoved me through the gap. Jackman followed him, then pulled the gate back into place and made sure it was secure.

The wall to the left was blank. So was the one at the far end. To the right was a row of cells. There were five. They were identical. The front walls were made of bars. There was a gate in the center of each, all with a heavy lock. The sides were gray metal, three inches thick, filled with broad rivet heads. I realized the panel you could see from the lobby was the outside of the first cell. The rear walls were whitewashed stone. They were all covered in graffiti. It was scratched, rather than written or painted. A pair of benches ran parallel with the side walls. They were made of metal and had been bolted to the floor. The only other item in each cell was a toilet. The bowls stuck out from the rear wall. They were also made of metal—stainless steel—and none of them had a seat.

Klein led me past the first four cells. They were all occupied. There was a single person in the one nearest the lobby. A young guy. He had stained, shapeless clothes, lank greasy hair, and sunken features. He was standing hunched over near the toilet, looking wide-eyed and confused. There were five people in the second cell and four in each of the next two, but I could see the door to the last one in the row was standing open. It was folded back on itself, flush with the bars. When we reached it Klein let go of my arm. Jackman took over. He pushed me into the cell, and kept going until my shins were touching the toilet bowl. My nose told me it was a while since anyone had cleaned it.

“Look straight at the wall,” he said. “Now, keep looking at it. When I uncuff your left wrist, immediately put your hand on top of your head. Do the same when I uncuff your right wrist. Understand?”

I didn’t reply, but he released my wrists anyway.

“Good,” he said. “Now, stand still. Do not move until you hear me close the cell door. Understand?”

I listened to his footsteps retreat across the cell floor. It sounded as though he were walking backward. He stopped, and the door slammed shut, squealing on its hinges as it was dragged through 180 degrees. I heard the keys jangle as he worked the lock, and then two sets of footsteps receded down the corridor.

The graffiti in my cell was fascinating. It covered every inch of stone from floor to ceiling. People must have stood on the benches and even the toilet to find space. I saw people's names, gang names, sports teams, including one English soccer club, political slogans, insults about the police, opinions of rock bands and movie stars. But mainly obscenities. And for some reason those were mostly in clumsy attempts at rhyming couplets, so they really made no sense at all.

I gave it a couple more minutes, then picked a spot on one of the benches and tried to get some rest. It wasn't easy. The giant rivets kept digging into my spine and shoulder blades so I had to slide my back to and fro along the wall until I found a comfortable position. But even then, wherever I looked in that narrow space my eyes couldn't avoid settling on one cold, hard object or another. The toilet, the other bench, the bars, the floor, the walls. This was definitely not what I'd had in mind for my last night in New York. I'd worked hard. I'd done a good job. I deserved a night to myself. But on the other hand, if the last few days had worked out even a whisker differently, I might not have had any time left to spend anywhere. Maybe this was just fate balancing the scales a little.

Without consciously intending to, my hand moved up to touch the back of my head. It was still sore. Two nights ago someone I was working with made a mistake. It was their miscalculation, but I was the one to pay the price. A piece of flying glass had cut me. A big piece. It had sliced my skin, right through to the bone. So I had to admit, annoying as the situation was, things could have been a lot worse. It wasn't as if I'd never been locked up before. It comes with the territory. As cells go, this one wasn't too bad. It was a bit small maybe, and pretty spartan, but relatively clean. And I was in there on my own. There's nothing worse than being crammed in with a horde of unwashed lowlifes, spewing out their

foul breath and trampling on your feet. Plus, I wouldn't be in there long. Not like the hopeless cases you normally find in these places. Sad, desperate people clinging to the fruitless fantasy they weren't going to spend the rest of their lives in jail. For me, clearly, it was only a temporary problem. A bump in the road. Nothing more.

Because in a few hours, I'd be on a plane back to London.