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Opening Extract from...

Jail Bird

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Prologue

The death woman was coming. Winston Collins's senses were befuddled with ganja weed, but he knew *that*. He thought he had done a bad thing, but he wasn't too sure what the bad thing had been. His mama had told him he shouldn't be bad, and he had always done his best to walk a good path. But now . . . he wasn't sure what was going on. Only that they would *pay*.

He was hyped on ganja and grief. But he could still smell blood and cheap nylon carpet, could still feel the heat of the sun being magnified by the big plate-glass window as he stood there, sweat-sodden back pressed tight to the wall. And he could still *see*. He could see the crimson-soaked horror in the chair. And he could see . . . oh yes, he could see *her*, just passing by the window, all unknowing, her blonde hair catching the sun like a bright banner, her walk quick, urgent, as she approached the door of Jack Rackland's office.

It was her. The death woman.

Praise God and don't worry, be happy . . . now how did

it go? He was so upset that he had forgotten the words of his favourite Bobby McFerrin song. Suki would know.

But Suki was gone.

There it was, nibbling away at the edge of his brain like a rat chewing on rotten meat. Suki was *gone*, and Bev was hovering between life and death; he might lose her too and he couldn't bear it, couldn't bear any of it; it was all *her* fault. Lily King had brought death into their happy home. Winston had always been peaceful, easy-going; but not now, not any more. Lily King and her sidekick had ruined his life, and they had to pay for it.

He saw it all again: Suki turning over the cards and her troubled gaze coming up to meet his, her sweet lips saying, look, this is Lily King's card; it's death. And him laughing, oh yeah, sure hon, and do you want this dinner edible or ruined? He didn't give all that tarot crap a second thought. Give Bev a shout, the dinner'll get cold, he'd said to her, brushing it aside, brushing that *look* in her eyes aside, that look of purest fear. *God* how he wished that he had taken her more seriously.

But Suki was gone.

He relived it. Suki turning away, saying yeah sure, but there was something in her eyes, a darkness, a terror. Because in her gut Suki knew about Lily King, she knew there was big trouble coming, and he shouldn't have laughed at her all those times when he did, he should have given her more attention, taken more notice.

Too late now.

Suki was gone.

The pain of it hit him all over again.

All that was left was the death woman. Dealing out vengeance, dealing out a world of hurt to Bev, who might

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even now be going about the hard business of dying, and Suki . . . Jesus, he'd loved that woman. Loved her to bits.

Now she was gone.

And all because of this woman, and her lust for revenge.

The fire. Oh Jesus, the fire.

Somehow he'd got Bev out, and he'd been going back for Suki, all the while heaving and choking, the smoke – the horrible, rolling black *smoke* – snatching the air from his lungs; but the flames had been too much for him. The flames had driven him back.

Well, now he was here, and so was she. Lily King was opening the door, pushing through fast, and then pausing, freezing as she saw what was sitting in the chair. Winston's hand tightened on the bloody machete in his strong right hand. Now he was going to put an end to her evil ways. She moved in further, breathed out 'Jack . . .' and Winston was so close he could hear how fast and panicky her breathing was, and he thought, *Yeah. Now I've got you.*

He surged forward, raising his hand to strike her dead.

She heard the movement as he pulled away from the wall. Turned, her eyes widening.

Here it comes for you, bitch, thought Winston.

She liked revenge? Well, so did he.

Revenge was *sweet*.

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LEO

Leo King could never resist blondes. Ash, golden, strawberry, Nordic – he loved them all. Hell, he had even *married* one. Of course he loved his old lady, Lily. Of *course* he did. She was the mother of his children, he loved the bones of those two girls of his and he loved Lily too, but sometimes . . . well, he guessed it was a weakness, but sometimes he just got the urge to stick it in something *new*.

Like he was doing now. And it was being appreciated, too.

‘Oh, *honey*,’ the blonde he was humping doggy-fashion in the hotel bed was crouching on all fours, moaning and gasping, clutching the French headboard with long, elegantly manicured nails.

She’s going to scratch the damned thing, thought Leo.

Which was okay, fuck it. But if this had been at home, in his own bed – and sometimes, oh yes, sometimes he did that, and he felt bad about it but he did it anyway – then scratching

the furniture was a no-no. Because he'd felt just lately that Lily wasn't entirely in the dark about his little extracurricular bits of bedroom activity. Marks on the headboard would blow the whole thing wide open, and he didn't want that.

What Leo wanted was to carry on having his cake and eating it – this delectable little bit of fluff right here, who had been the first but who most certainly was not the last.

'Oh Leo *sweetheart*,' Adrienne screamed as he pumped away.

Actually she was a bit theatrical about sex, this one. Not like Lily, who was a real slow, sensual burn. He loved Lily, but this . . . ah, it was the thrill of the chase, the cornering of the quarry, the proof that he still had it, in spades.

Of course women never understood that.

They never appreciated that extramarital sex was simply *fun*, something a guy would do if he could, with whoever – the *whoever* scarcely mattered; it was just the doing of it that was the good bit.

Forbidden fruit, he thought. That's what it was. Forbidden, and therefore twice as desirable.

But now she was moving, he was slipping out. Fuck it, he'd just been getting into his stride there. She turned on the bed, great breasts, high and firm and brown-nippled, slim waist, brown pubic hair, so *not* a natural blonde, but who gave a fuck? She lay down on her back and clasped him with her wide-open thighs, smiling up at him dreamily.

'Let's do it this way for a change,' she panted.

That annoyed him. He liked doggy-style the best. He'd thought about why over the years and had concluded that he liked it best that way because the woman in the bed could be anyone, anyone at all, you didn't have to see her face, you didn't have to tell her you loved her (that came later, or

earlier if she was proving resistant to all his other best lines), or have it rammed home to you that it *wasn't Lily*: doggy-style, you could be shagging anyone or anything, you could be putting it in a hole in the *fence*. It was simple, and it was – nearly – guiltless.

Okay, he was nearly there anyway. He pushed back into her warm wetness and she pulled him in close, skin to skin. She was a fabulous lay and so he was willing to forgive the interruption – this time.

'*Jesus!*' she was yelling in his ear now. '*Oh God – Leo!*'

And now she was applying those nails that had marked the headboard to his back.

'Ow!' he complained as she ripped the talons down his flesh. '*Jesus, take it easy . . .*'

Marking him was completely out of order. She knew that. She knew the rules. No love bites, no tooth marks, no scratching. No evidence for Lily to find and start to complain over. Although Lily was a good girl, never really nagged. Lily wasn't an in-your-face sort of woman. She was quiet. Restrained.

A doormat? sprang into his brain.

No, not that. Was she?

Anyway, here was this stupid bitch Adrienne, breaking the rules, flouting them in his *face*, but oh Jesus, that felt so good, she was a fantastic lay; she was just the best.

'*Arghhhh!*' shouted Leo as he came.

He collapsed onto her, gasping.

'*Jesus, you're heavy,*' she complained mildly.

Leo was a big bull of a man, dark haired and dark skinned and tipping the scales at eighteen stone. Considerately, he heaved himself off her and collapsed onto the bed.

'*That was good,*' said Leo, eyes closed, a broad smile on his chops.

‘Yeah,’ she said, and cuddled up to him, smoothing her hand over his chest hair.

Knowing what was required of him – this was what they *all* required, after sex, he’d found – he dropped a kiss onto her cheek and gazed deep into her eyes. ‘Love you, babes,’ he murmured.

‘Love you too,’ Adrienne whispered, her eyes intense as they stared back into his.

He groped around for something else to say. She was waiting for something. He came up with: ‘You’re something special.’

‘Hmm.’ Adrienne knew she was special. She’d been his mistress for over ten years now, even since before he’d wed Lily. But now . . . well, what she had begun to suspect had been proved to be the case. Jack Rackland had done a thorough job and dug up a whole heap of dirt. She knew that Leo had been keeping secrets from her. From Lily, too. But then – Lily was no concern of hers.

She cuddled in against his chest. Her face grew serious. ‘Do you really think that I’m special?’

‘Sure you are.’ Leo stifled a yawn. It always knocked him out, chilled him like nothing else, having sex.

‘I think you’re special too,’ she whispered, her fingernails circling on his chest, her eyes fixed upon the little whorls she was forming in his dark chest hair. *And I’m sick of sharing you*, she added silently.

‘Thanks, babes.’ Leo’s eyes were fluttering closed.

‘That’s why I’ve decided,’ she said.

Leo heaved a contented sigh. ‘Decided?’

‘I’m going to tell Matt. Then you can leave Lily, and we can be together.’