

Low Life

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I awoke to a hammering on my door. I stretched, arching my back, like a hesitant cat. A glance out of the window told me it was late into the afternoon. Last night's takeaway was spilled sloppily over my once white top, gathering at my shorts to form gloppy piles of rice and chicken. Even the flies avoided the rancid remains, instead they buzzed around the light of the muted TV.

Groaning, I pulled myself out of the armchair and trudged towards the banging at the door. The walk was short, but I was groggy and disoriented and took my time to answer it. Opening the door, I revealed Johnnie, my bookie. He was sporting a leather jacket and had greasy jet-black hair as well as a wiry mustache. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of aviator Ray Bans. He was a short man with an even shorter temper and was used to getting his way.

"Your payment is due," he announced in his thick Brooklyn accent. He pronounced each word with relish as if he enjoyed watching people squirm when they couldn't pay. I knew there was no money, any spare cash that I did have was sucked up in the bar on Friday.

"I haven't got the money," I mumbled.

His ratty features formed a grimace.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "If you don't have the money," he cracked his knuckles and removed his shades.

I backed up, raising my hands in surrender.

“I’ll get you the money,” I pleaded, “Give me a bit of time and you will get what I owe you.”

He glanced me down from head to foot. “You have until this evening to give me what you owe otherwise,” he opened his jacket revealing a pistol tucked into his waistband.

“Meet me at the back of Tommy’s, eleven, don’t be late, or else.” He walked out of the room, leaving me stunned.

What was I going to do?

I paced back and forth in my living room, racking my brains, trying to think of a way that I could pay the \$2,000 I owed him. Johnnie was known for being ruthless, often beating his victims to a pulp, but he wasn’t that good with money and offered some of the cheapest rates in Manhattan. He ran his business out of the back of Tommy’s, the local Irish bar. It was a tough place, full of the local crews, but it was still a busy hangout.

I tried to consider my options, I could face Johnnie and get my teeth knocked out or I could try find the money. I had a bad reputation for going behind on payments, but I was good at cards and could normally weasel my way out. I had lost it all to bad play. I had been drunk and out of my range, not a good combination. I was sure there was some way I could make quick money, but how?

I decided to leave my apartment, fresh air would help clear my head. I slipped on my sneakers and went out onto the bustling street. It was rush hour. Taxis and cars were bumper to bumper, honking and revving at each other. The sidewalk was full of people going about their business. Suits cradled their phones while vendors yelled and advertised their fake Rolexes and street meat.

I decided to head towards midtown. There were always people out. I walked towards Times Square, keeping my eyes peeled for any signs of quick cash. Posters often lined the streets advertising ‘great deals.’ While I was walking, one caught my eye. “Make money quick with our organization, Won’s Kitchen Wonders, just off the Columbus Park.” I decided to give it a shot, what was the worst that could happen?

The building was old with dirty French windows and crumbling brick walls. I parted the beaded string door and walked in. Ancient freezer units marked with extortionate prices collected dust against the white paneled walls. An elderly Chinese woman sat at the register.

“Hello,” I said politely, “I saw that I could make some money here? Is there a job available?” She got up and gestured for me to follow her into the back. In the storage room there were three young men sitting around the table, smoking.

They were all Asian with spikey black hair and neck tattoos. One was fidgeting with a zippo, flicking it, and holding the flame against his palm. As I entered, they stubbed their cigarettes and looked up. The elderly woman muttered something inaudible to them. The tallest got up and started to pat me down. He pulled out my phone and tucked it into his own pocket. He nodded to the others and sat back down.

“So, you want work?” the one with the lighter asked.

“If possible, yes; a short-term job, I’ll do anything you need.” He eyed his associate and nodded.

“Well, there is one thing you could help me with. I have a shipment coming in at seven tonight, the foreman, has a package for me, if you collect it and bring it to me, I’ll give you some money, you understand.”

He scratched his neck lazily, rubbing a tattoo of a red dragon. I now understood who they were. They were part of the Scarlet Dragons, a ruthless gang, famous for their torture of cutting off their victim’s ears. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.

I backed up slightly, “You know what, its fine. I’m sure I shall find something else.”

He smirked, “Well you can’t leave now.”

“What’s the package?” I questioned.

“Never you mind, just bring it to me. When you arrive at the docks tell the gatekeeper that Pitbull sent you, he’ll understand.”

“What’s in it for me?”

He stretched out in his chair. “How does two racks sound?”

“Sounds good,” I answered.

“Great, and don’t be late ‘cos TJ doesn’t like when people are late,” He gestured to his other associate who grinned bearing silver clad teeth.

“Can I have my phone back” I asked,

“Oh no,” he replied smiling. “Wouldn’t want you calling anyone now would we.”

I walked out on to the street. A cold front was coming in. The harbor was a twenty-minute walk away and it had just gone six. I had time but didn't want to push my luck. I knew I had wrapped myself up in some dodgy business. Maybe I would have been better facing Johnnie rather than this gang, but I didn't have much choice now. I filled my lungs with the evening air and went on my way.

It was getting darker now, the autumn-colored leaves dotted the ground, becoming mush underfoot. Streetlamps illuminated the path. Shopkeepers were pulling down their shutters. The homeless huddled around trashcan fires, protecting themselves from the night's chill. My breath curled in spirals before disappearing into the night. The Hudson river was dark and murky, the icy water lapped against the sea wall rippling as ferries passed.

The harbor was deserted. A couple of moored boats swayed slowly with the current. The only light was coming from inside a porta cabin, I decided to head over. Inside a burly man sat behind a desk. I knocked on the open door, he looked up. "Who are you?" he asked aggressively.

"I am here to collect something," I replied nervously. "Pitbull sent me."

He relaxed at this, sinking back into his chair. "Good, good. Yes, I do have something for you." With that he reached under his desk and pulled out a black leather briefcase. "Tell your boss I'll be expecting my payment soon." With that he handed me the briefcase. "Now get outta here."

The case was heavy, requiring a firm grip. Now all I needed was to return this and collect my money. I smiled, taking in the beauty of the evening lights. Suddenly, I heard a crack behind me. I turned around to see what it was; But the harbor was empty, nothing was there except a nest of cooing pigeons.

I stopped to look closer, maybe there was something?

"Move, move, move!" A dozen men in full black tactical gear ran out of the shadows, aiming at me. I wanted to run but my feet were rooted to the ground. "Stay where you are!" they yelled. "Drop the package and get down."

Flashlights blinded me as they advanced. "Suspect is not co-operating. Get down now!" The briefcase popped open as it hit the ground. Vacuum sealed notes and firearms spilled

out onto the floor. My stomach dropped, "Suspect is armed, engaging in combat." He raised his rifle, took aim, and fired.