



A
SKIN KADASH
STORY

COFFEE, BLACK'

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by Bill Cameron

Twenty-five years a cop, seven working homicide, and this is what I've come to: staking out Starbucks in the middle of the night in the hope of catching a vandal in the act of bricking the windows. Welcome to retirement. I'm parked in the shadows outside the food mart at Seven Corners, a tangled confluence of streets at the southeast edge of Ladd's Addition. Starbucks is across Division, part of a corner development that includes a day spa, a pasta restaurant, and a cramped parking lot apparently designed in anticipation of the oil bust. Three nights, and the most exciting thing I've seen so far is a half-naked couple humping in the cob outside the kitchen shop on the opposite corner. I snapped a few pics, but even with the shutter wide open, it's going to take someone with more Photoshop voodoo than me to make the shots Internet ready.

Just after midnight, as I'm thinking about taking a piss behind the dumpster next to my car, I catch sight of a figure approaching down 20th. He high-steps across the parking lot, elbows flared, as if he learned his ninja moves off Cartoon Network. Jeans, black

hoodie pulled tight around his face, medium height, medium build. Cigarette held behind his back, a smoldering tail light. About what I expected, some nitwit tweaked on vodka-'n-Red Bull who thinks he's striking a blow against insatiate corporatism.

I slip out of my car and rest the long lens on the roof, sight through the camera's LCD. The light isn't good, a silver-jaundiced mix of mercury vapor and sodium streetlights, sky-glow, and the gleam from the quickie mart. It's adequate. I'm not shooting art photos. I just want to capture an identifiable face.

As I snap the first pic, I hear the scrape of a shoe and turn as a broad, dark shape swoops across the roof of my car. I duck, but not fast enough. Fabric nets my face and shoulders. Hands grab me from behind, shove me hard against the car. A sound whuffs out of me, half shout, half gasp. I drop the camera and thrash, grab the cloth on my head, realize I've got the arm of a jacket. For an instant, I'm in a tug-o'-war, unable to see my opponent. Then the sleeve starts to tear and someone hisses, "Just leave it, doinkus!" The hands release me and I windmill backward onto my ass. As feet slap pavement, fleeing, I hear the sharp, brittle crash of breaking glass.

I shout, yank the jacket off my head. My assailants are gone, the camera with them. No sign of the ninja either, but across the street I see a fresh lattice of cracks in one of Star-bucks' oversized windows.

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My employer is an insurance company, a circumstance I see as having the moral equivalence of working for the Russian mob. They've been buying glass at least twice a month since Starbucks went in. They bought me for five nights, about the cost of one double-paned window. The camera and lens have to be worth two

windows easy, maybe three. Helluva lot more than me, anyway. I'm not looking forward to explaining to the adjuster how I not only failed to stop the vandal, but also let some miscreant make off with his company's camera rig.

I drag myself to my feet and lean against my car. All I've got to show for myself is the jacket in my hands, and it's nothing to get into a twist about. Blue, softer and darker than denim, white cotton lining, one sleeve half ripped off. I check the pockets, find a matchbox embossed with a logo—a pair of stylized legs suggestive of wisps of smoke—and a happy hour menu from the Night Light Lounge, a louche neighborhood joint two blocks down on Clinton. Stakeout blown, I figure it's the only lead I got.

The Night Light isn't my typical hangout. Smoky, dense with poseurs and reckless youth. Local art on the walls, dim light the color of old cream. I find an empty table next to the open door—a nebulous link to fresh air. Eventually a waiter approaches, drops a Bridgeport coaster on the table, and stands there. I think I'm supposed to order.

It's the kind of joint that'll sell you a Pabst Blue Ribbon for a buck and a half or a microbrew for five. I refuse to pay five bucks for a beer, but I haven't absorbed enough Southeast Portland self-conscious irony to drink shitty beer from a can. I order coffee, black, and settle back to survey the crowd.

I see a lot of piercings and even more tattoos, some more artful than others. The best peek out, mostly hidden, around the edges of straining wife-beaters—de rigueur uniform for most of the girls on hand. The music is loud, the voices louder. Cigarettes trend toward Camel straights and American Spirits. With the state-wide smoking ban due in January, everyone around me seems desperate to take advantage of indoor privileges while they can.

I lock eyes with a woman sitting alone at a table in the middle

of the floor. She swirls her beer. Not a PBR. She's wearing a white camisole, Georgia O'Keeffe flower tattoo sprouting from her cleavage. Hair the color of Velveeta in a style bought off the cover of a grocery store tabloid. She's a touch thick, not quite shed of her winter fat, but she wears her flesh with oblivious self-assurance. I have no doubt a man ten years younger than me and with a flatter belly could pay her bar tab and bed her the same night, with no idea of the problems she'll cause over breakfast.

There's no sign of my coffee, and rather than wait around I heave myself to my feet and amble over. Her gaze brushes across me, and I lift the jacket for her to see. With no sign of recognition, she says, "Join me?"

"Sure, why not?" I drop into the chair across from her.

Some guy approaches the table from the direction of the back room, sees me, looks confused. "Dude—"

She cuts him off. "It's okay, Zeke."

"But he's sitting in my chair." He's wearing baggy shorts and an oversized Winterhawks jersey that conspire ineffectively to hide his bulk. Too big in every dimension to be my ninja—big enough, in fact, that if he decides to evict me I won't have much to say about it.

But she just shoos him off with one hand. "Idiot."

I have no opinion on that, but I am wondering why she gave me his seat.

She fishes through a purse next to her, hooks a pack of Parliaments. "Want one?"

I doubt she'll be impressed with, *No thanks, I quit*. Almost anywhere else, the smoker would be on the defensive, but here in the Night Light, I'm the outsider. So I pull out the box of matches with the embossed legs and offer her a light. I can't tell if her eyes linger on the matchbox, or if I just want them to. She inhales and says through smoke, "You're the cop that's been sitting outside

Starbucks the last few nights.”

So much for my unobtrusive stakeout. Jesus. “Not a cop anymore. I’m retired.”

“Well, you’re not going to catch them.”

“Them?”

“The anarchists.”

“Anarchists.” I lean back in my chair. “You’re kidding, right?”

“That’s what they call themselves.”

“And you know this how, exactly?”

“Everyone around here knows the anarchists.”

I can’t tell if she’s shining me on. “Is your buddy Zeke one of them?”

That nets me a giggle. “Zeke is about as militant as a kitten.” She looks over her shoulder to where her hulking boyfriend hangs off the end of the bar. He’s drinking PBR. I can’t quite make out his expression in the dim light, but friendly it’s not. She waves at him, then turns back to me. “I think he wants his seat back.”

“Tell me where to find these anarchists and he can have it.”

“If you don’t know about them already, maybe I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Now you gonna leave me blue-balled? You brought it up.”

She laughs again. “Okay, Mr. Not-A-Cop. You know the Red and Black?”

A café a block or so up Division from Seven Corners. *Worker-Owned*, proclaims a sign over the door. I’ve driven by, but never gone inside.

“You *are* kidding.”

“They have a problem with corporate coffee.”

“How about you? How do you feel about corporate coffee?”

She brushes invisible ash off her tattoo. “I can’t say as I’ve given it much thought.” Zeke joins us, puts his hand on the back of the chair like he’s worried I’m gonna walk off with it. I take the

jacket and head out into the clear night air, curious about my new friend's game. Never did get my coffee.

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The phone wakes me too early, the adjuster at Mutual Assurance. He's a big-voiced fellow named Hamilton whom I've never met in person. When I describe the events of the previous night, he says, "I apologize if I was unclear about this before, Detective Kadash—"

"It's just Mister now."

"Whatever. The point is we hired you to stop this crap."

"I thought you hired me to photograph the ne'er-do-well doing this crap."

"You didn't manage that either."

"This isn't just a little vandalism. I got mugged, for chrissakes."

"I thought you were a cop." I can almost hear his smirk. He's quiet for a moment. "Under the circumstances, I think we're going to go in another direction."

"What's that mean?"

"There's no need for you to continue the stakeout."

I guess I can't blame the guy, but I was counting on five nights. Nothing's getting cheaper except the value of my pension. "Maybe I could look into these so-called anarchists, get a line on the camera."

"That won't be necessary, *Mister* Kadash. Just invoice me for three nights."

I've never written an invoice. "I was just thinking—"

He hangs up without saying goodbye.

You'd think I'd know what I'm doing. Maybe I should take a class, learn how to do the job right if I'm going to pretend I'm some kind of private investigator. But that wasn't in the plan when I retired. The plan was to hang out at Uncommon Cup,

my friend Ruby Jane's café, and drink coffee. The only reason I originally agreed to the stakeout was because of her. RJ has been trying to get me involved in freelance investigation since I retired, but it took a coffee case and a fat paycheck to get my attention. Turns out she knows a guy who knows a girl who sleeps with the manager of the Seven Points Star-bucks. Apparently my name came up at some java maven's secret society meeting. Next thing I know, I'm salivating over how much insurance money five nights sitting on my ass is worth.

I figure the least I can do is let RJ know how it worked out.

I catch her at her Hawthorne location, a few blocks east of the Bagdad. The place is three-quarters full and hopping when I arrive, the air thick with chatter and the smell of coffee. Customers cluster around tables or hunker down in the soft, well-worn couches against the walls. I order a black coffee and grab a table to wait until Ruby Jane can take a break.

When she finally joins me, her eyes are bright. She doesn't blink as she examines my own sunken orbs. Her chestnut hair is shiny and full, a round cap that seems suffused with its own light. "Rough night?"

"I look that good?"

"I've seen prettier road kill."

I don't argue. I give her a rundown of my evening: the ninja, the jacket, the stolen camera. When I get to the Night Light and the woman at the table, Ruby Jane interrupts me.

"Wait. Orange hair, mammalian, acts like she owns the joint?"

"Yeah, that's her. Who is she?"

RJ is quiet for a moment, thoughtful. "Well, in point of fact . . . the competition. Her name is Ella Leggett."

"Oh?"

"She's got a shop at the other end of Hawthorne. Not direct competition, I guess—there's no foot-traffic overlap. But, you

know, another shop owner.” She purses her lips. “What did she say to you?”

“Not much. She turned me on to some anarchists.”

“Red and Black.”

I’m not surprised she knows about them, or about Ella Leggett. Ruby Jane makes it her business to stay informed about the coffee crowd in Portland.

“She thinks they’re responsible for the windows at Star-bucks.”

“She might be right.”

“Seriously?”

Ruby Jane shrugs. “It’s no secret George Bingham, the lead partner there, has been pissed ever since that Starbucks opened. He thinks it’s cutting into his business.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, the chains mostly appeal to a different kind of customer than indies do.” She tilts her head. “Maybe I’d spin a different tale if one opened across the street, but I think they mainstream the idea of quality coffee. That helps all of us.”

I recall Ella Leggett’s phrase. “Corporate coffee as a gateway drug.”

She grins. “Something like that.”

“But the anarchists don’t see it that way.”

“I’m not sure George qualifies as an anarchist. He and his team are just small-timers like me trying to make it work.”

“Still, you think they might take out their frustrations on Starbucks?”

“Maybe. Or maybe they’re just working to stay afloat. It’s something of an open secret the building owner wants them out so he can redevelop the whole block, add upper-story condos and high-end retail on street level. When you’re working your ass off just to make rent, there may not be a lot left over for extracurricular vandalism.”

“Chuckling bricks wouldn’t take a big bite out of someone’s free time.”

“You’re the cop.”

“Ex-cop. Ex-investigator too.” I tell her about Hamilton letting me go. “I should have taken that kidnapped dog with the MySpace page you told me about instead.”

“What are you going to do?”

Ruby Jane once described me as having the determination of a rat guarding a chicken bone. I’m not sure she meant it as a compliment, but I take what I can get. “Gonna earn out my contract.”

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I’m curious about Ella Leggett, but I decide to start with the Red and Black. It will probably turn out to be a dead-end; too easy, really, to blame the anarchists. But the sight of the glowering, dreadlocked fellow behind the counter, arms folded across his chest, suggests maybe I shouldn’t be so hasty.

“You must be George.” His stature matches my ninja, but I see no evidence of a hoodie.

“And you must be that asswipe who’s working for Star-bucks.”

Hamilton’s decision to can me is starting to look pretty good, considering how effective my attempt at a covert operation had been. I step up to the long, wooden counter. The wall behind looks like it belongs in a tavern, though on closer inspection the lined-up bottles turn out to be a variety of flavored syrups and cane sugar soft drinks. Booths run along the opposite wall. The place is half-full, the customers a mix of young hipsters and older tweedie types. Talking politics, I presume.

I want my usual—coffee, black—but I decide to test George and order a grande latte. “We call it a *medium* here.” I hand him

a five, leave the coins behind when he slaps my change on the countertop.

“What’s your beef with Starbucks anyway?” My tone is chatty. “Besides the jargon, I mean.”

He turns his attention to my latte, disinterested in enlightening an asswipe. He fills and tamps the portofilter, pulls the shot with his hand on a knob. He moves with fluid confidence, no wasted motion. The espresso dribbling into the shot glass is the color of warm caramel.

He notices me watching him. “You know what we got here?” “Cockroaches?”

“Ambience.”

I look around. Red stars on the wall, monochrome photos of Latin American men and women picking coffee beans. Radiohead posters, Che Guevara. The music is a hip-hop remix of a Ramones song.

“And you know what else?”

There’s no need for me to answer. He’s given this speech before.

“Free WiFi.”

I stare, bemused.

“At Starbucks, you have to sign up first, use one of their cards. They want your secrets before they let you surf.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t get it.”

“Maybe if I had a laptop.” Or secrets.

“Couple of times a week, I’ll see a guy sitting at one the picnic tables outside.” George steams milk as he declaims, rotating the frothing pitcher and checking the temp with the back of his hand. “On his comp, surfing the web. Drinking from a Starbucks cup.” He shakes his head as he adds milk to the espresso in a ceramic cup.

"I can see where that would piss you off."

"Hell yeah, it pisses me off." He presents the latte with a flourish, a work of art, the surface foam an artful swirl resembling butterfly wings. "Try it."

I take a sip. It's like drinking silk, as good as any latte Ruby Jane ever served me. Not that I'll tell her that. "It's excellent."

"Exactly. That's because I give a damn. Nothing's automated here, none of that homogenous chic interior design. This is an authentic café run by actual people with genuine pride in our work. We don't charge for our WiFi, but is it too much to ask that you at least buy your coffee from us when you sit down to use it?"

"You can't possibly believe that Starbucks is sending them down here."

"They're part of a larger problem."

"So you respond by busting out their windows."

That earns me a derisive snort. "I'd just be doing what they want."

"You think Starbucks wants you to break their windows?"

"They want the Red and Black to fail. Cast us as villains, turn the neighborhood against us. We don't have a corporate behemoth propping us up during slow times. One bad month, and we could lose it all. They're counting on that."

I'm dubious. I remember what Ruby Jane said about the chains, how they cater to a different customer base. I doubt anyone at Starbucks loses any sleep over the Red and Black. They've probably got their hands full with McDonald's. But that doesn't mean there aren't others who might benefit from R&B closing. The landlord, for instance, who maybe wants the space for something other than a coffee commune.

All that remains is to ask George where he was shortly after midnight last night. I don't see the point. He's not the tearful-confession type. I finish my latte and mutter a thanks, head for

the door. “Come back anytime.” I’m tempted to take him up on it.

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I find Hot Leggett’s Café in the ground floor of a building midway up the long block between Sixteenth and Maple on Hawthorne. Great spot for foot traffic from Ladd’s or the Buckman neighborhood to the north. The construction looks recent, reminds me of Ruby Jane’s description of what R&B’s landlord wants to do. I see evidence of a roof-top garden three stories above, espalier pears growing along the anodized balustrade at roof’s edge.

Inside, almost every table is in use by the kind of middle-years affluent types that seem to always find a way to spend half the morning kvetching over lattes in the neighborhood café. The furnishings are IKEA, the music reedy instrumental fusion, the aprons an ionizing shade of green. The only surprise is the Hot Leggett logo, a stylized demitasse emitting steam shaped like a pair of legs. I dig out the matchbox—the logo’s the same. I hadn’t noticed the cup the night before.

I don’t see Ella, but one of the baristas catches my eye. Zeke. He frowns, but finds a thin smile as I step up the counter and surprise myself by ordering a small cappuccino.

“Dry or wet?”

RJ would approve of the question. “Dry.”

He takes my three bucks and gives me back a dime. The same at Uncommon Cup would be forty cents less, but then Ruby Jane isn’t paying for chi-chi recent construction and eight hundred square feet of Swedish furniture.

Unlike R&B, the espresso machine is fully automated, bean to brew. A half-minute of grinding, bubbling, and hissing, then Zeke sets a to-go cup in front of me. Guess he doesn’t want me

hanging around. I take a sip. It's fine.

"Where's your girlfriend?"

He looks confused a moment, then recognition hits him.

"You mean my sister?"

"Ella is your sister?"

"You thought she was my *girlfriend*?" His laugh is scornful.

Last night he was the idiot; this morning I am.

"Either way, is she here?"

"I haven't seen her."

"You mind if I ask you some questions?"

"I don't know anything about the broken windows."

"What about this?" I show him the matchbox and he sniffs.

"I don't know why we have those. We're nonsmoking."

"Ella's not nonsmoking."

"It's still a stupid thing to spend money on. This isn't a bowling alley."

Color dots his cheeks. He's clearly not on board with the Leggett legs matchboxes. But when I tell him where this one came from, his face goes carefully blank. "That could be anyone's."

"I'm sure."

"We give them away."

"What size do you wear anyway? Jacket-wise, I mean."

I give him a hard stare, but he meets it without expression. I hear movement and a pair of women in hand-woven cotton blouses approach the counter, their salty hair pulled back with contrived insouciance. They smell like skin cream. There are two other baristas, but Zeke says, "Excuse me. I need to help these ladies."

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Chalk that one up to fumble-tongued luck. It never occurred to

me to check the jacket's size. Some investigator. But it's still in my car, and upon inspection I can see it'll never contain Zeke's beefy shoulders. Probably fit Ella just fine though.

I return to Uncommon Cup. Ruby Jane is working the counter, so I show her the jacket. "Would you wear this?"

She shrugs. "Maybe, though it's a men's cut and I prefer my clothing not to hang in tatters. Why?"

"I'm still working things out. Do you mind if I use your computer?"

She directs me to her little office in the back. Within a few minutes I learn that the owner of record of Hot Leggett's Café is Leggett Partners LLC—company officers, Ella and Zeke—while the business license for the Red and Black is held by one George Called Bingham, whatever the hell kind of middle name that is. No wonder he's an anarchist. Leggett Partners owns a scattering of small businesses and mixed-use buildings around Southeast Portland, a humble empire. That gives me an idea, but it turns out R&B's building is owned by a real estate holding firm out of L.A. It will take more digging to discover what connection, if any, exists between the holding company and the crowd here in Portland. I have one more thought and check on the Starbucks landlord. Not Leggett Partners, not the L.A. company, but a branch of the Schnitzner family, which seems to control half the commercial real estate in Portland. It's hard for me to think they'd give a wet fart about the Red and Black.

Up front again, I ask Ruby Jane if I can borrow her car. Too many people know mine. I can tell she enjoys the idea that her old beater Toyota might be party to a caper. She tosses me her keys and a few minutes later I'm rolling past Hot Leggett's. Zeke is still inside, working the counter. I loop through Ladd's and return to Hawthorne a couple of blocks up. There's a space on the street in front of an Ethiopian restaurant, close enough to see

who comes and goes from Hot Leggett's, not so close I'm likely to be noticed. Of course, with my recent track record, I probably shouldn't get too cocky.

This stretch of Hawthorne isn't as busy as the run nearer to 39th, but in recent years as more shops and restaurants have gone in, foot traffic has increased. Hot Leggett's is getting its share, as well as the froufrou ice cream shop and the furniture boutique adjoining. A loading zone in front of the boutique allows me an unobstructed view. On the backseat, I find a twoweek-old edition of the *Mercury*, Portland's hipster alt weekly, and settle in for a wait.

An hour into my vigil, the paper's snark exhausted, a white Prius stops in the loading zone. Ella jumps out and trots around to the passenger side, gesticulating toward the café. I start the car. As she climbs back into the Prius, I hear her shout, "Hurry the hell up, idiot!"

Zeke storms out of the café, carrying a nylon duffel bag in one hand and flipping Ella off with the other. He gets behind the wheel, and an instant later bounces Ella's head off her headrest as he peels out. I keep a couple of cars between us as we head down to Powell and then across the Ross Island Bridge. Traffic bunches us up through the south edge of downtown until the Sunset Highway, but they don't seem to notice me. Ten minutes later we take the Sylvan exit, make a couple of turns, then park in the lot outside an anonymous office building. Three stories of glass and stucco hunkered below an ivy-clad hill. I wait until they're inside, then head for the foyer. No sign of them, but a quick scan of the building directory gives me a pretty good idea of where they've gone.

Suite 210, Mutual Assurance of Oregon.

Mutual Assurance is a single large room, a cube farm. From the landing, I can see the front desk through glass double doors, no receptionist. A sign on the counter next to a telephone reads, *Press 1 for deliveries*. I don't plan on making a delivery, though if my guess about what's in Zeke's bag is correct, I might make a pickup.

I hesitate, then figure I got nothing to lose and push through the doors. It's hard for me to picture Ella Leggett with her orange hair and tattoo in this leaden space. The air is heavy and cold, the sounds of white-collar work deadened by the B-flat hum of fluorescent lights and acoustic ceiling tiles. At first, I don't see the siblings, but then I glimpse their heads moving among the cubicles off to my left, a third figure—a man—with them. I tack right, keeping them in sight as I mosey along the outside wall with forced nonchalance. I pass a number of occupied cubes, but no one speaks to me—well-trained to avoid questions or, heaven forbid, confrontations.

The trio stops at a cube, huddles together to confer. I watch, hands folded in front of me. A woman catches my eye from a nearby cubicle, and I stare back until she drops her gaze. Maybe she's afraid I'm there to downsize her.

After a moment Ella raises her voice, but all I can make out is a petulant squeak. Zeke throws up his hands, semaphore for *Calm the hell down*. When the three return the way they came, I scoot up the passageway between cubicles from the opposite end, stop when I see the nameplate affixed to cube wall fabric. *N. Hamilton, Adjuster*.

The camera, long lens attached, rests on the desk. My first instinct is to grab the whole rig, but then I realize there's no need for felony theft when a misdemeanor will do. I slip into the cubicle and open the back of the camera, pop out the CompactFlash card. When I step back into passage, hands in my pockets, the man I assume is Hamilton is coming toward me.

“Can I help you?” Definitely the adjuster’s voice from the phone. He’s an unremarkable specimen, round head, brown sidecar hair, suspicious eyes.

“Restroom?”

He looks into his cubicle, seems relieved. Like I could hide the camera in my sock. Or maybe he was afraid I took a dump on his chair. “It’s out on the landing.” He points with his chin. “To your left.”

He has no idea who I am. Something to be said for doing business strictly by phone.

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Back at Ruby Jane’s, I hand her the camera card, ask her if she can download the pics.

“Easy peasy.” She leads me back to her office and plugs the card into the CF jack on her computer. After a moment, a blank window appears on the monitor. Ruby Jane shakes her head.

“There’s nothing there.”

I sit back. It only makes sense they already downloaded the pictures.

“Don’t panic.” RJ snatches the card. “This is a coffee shop. If there isn’t a geek sitting out there right now, there will be before the afternoon is over. I’ll find someone who can undelete whatever was on here.” She leaves me there, stewing in my own techno-cluelessness.

I turn to Google, hoping to redeem myself by trolling for background info among the dot-govs. An hour later, about the time my eyes are boiling out of my head from reading too many poorly formatted web pages, RJ is back with the flash card and a CD. “There were a lot of fragmented files, but we were able to recover some photos from a couple of days ago with intact

metadata and one picture from last night.” She inserts the CD into her computer, and this time the window opens populated with thumbnails.

The first dozen or so are of the couple in the cob across from my stakeout. I remember when they started building these cob structures around town, oddly shaped public benches tarted up with ceramic-shard mosaics and glaze. Some guy appeared at my door one day, all breathless as he explained that I, too, could join the cob revolution and transform my front yard into a community living room. I live in the kind of neighborhood where people grow grapes and sweet corn in the parking strips, so a mud-and-straw bench with a thatched awning wouldn’t draw a second glance. But when it became clear I’d be responsible for construction and materials, I told the guy to go sell crazy somewhere else.

Others don’t share my reticence, including the folks who run the kitchen store across from Starbucks. And amazing to an old curmudgeon like me, people actually use the cobs— and not just my humping couple.

As I’d suspected, the photos are murky, but I can make out the guy leaning back on the cob bench, the woman straddling him. Their faces are in a shadow, but that doesn’t really matter. Even in the dark the radioactive cheez framing the woman’s head is unmistakable. I click through the images. In the last, the couple has turned to face the camera. On to me.

I click again and there’s the ninja in front of Starbucks. Better light, better focus. Hair hidden by the hoodie, but it doesn’t matter. The face is clear enough.

“What do you want me to do?” RJ asks.

“Fire up the printer. I got some calls to make.”

I catch Hamilton at his desk, which saves me the trouble of shakedown via voice mail.

“What can I do for you, Kadash?” No Detective, no Mister. His tone suggests it had better be nothing, but I disappoint him. I tell him to meet me at the Night Light at 6. “Ella can tell you where it is.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“Don’t be coy.” I hang up without saying goodbye.

The Night Light’s main area is smoke-free until 10, so I’m not surprised to find the gang tucked away in the back room. Zeke sits in the rear of the circular booth, taking up space and refusing to make eye contact. Ella is to his left, a beer in front of her and a smoldering Parliament in her hand. Hamilton sits hunched to Zeke’s right, nursing something urine-colored and on the rocks. When I arrive, Ella blows smoke my way. I slide in next to Ham.

I wonder if the coffee I ordered last night will finally appear. “Should we get appetizers?”

Hamilton isn’t in the mood. “Get to the point.”

I chuckle and toss the CF card onto the table, along with some printouts from Ruby Jane’s inkjet. In the first, Ella’s face peeks out from inside the ninja hoodie. In the others, her hair shines out from the cob like a flame.

“What kind of a perv are you anyway, taking pictures of people like that?”

If Ella expects me to blush, I’ve got news for her. “I’m not the one screwing in the community’s living room.”

She looks like she wants to argue, but Hamilton is on point. “You were supposed to be watching Starbucks.”

“Is that you?” I tap the silhouette of Ella’s cob partner, then drop another sheet of paper on the table before he can answer. Hamilton snatches it up. He can read, but I don’t want to leave the others hanging. “Quotes from a half-dozen glass vendors to

replace the window broken at Starbucks last night. You might notice a number there from Allied Commercial Glass.”

“So?” Hamilton says, but Zeke is shaking his head, disgusted. I’m warming to the great oaf.

“It’s a lot less than the insurance payment you authorized to Allied for that same window earlier today.”

Hamilton and Ella exchange looks. I can see the wheels spinning, the hamsters scrambling. “You requested these quotes?”

I nod.

“There was probably more to the job than you realize.”

What Hamilton doesn’t know is I had help with the quotes. RJ’s friend of a friend, the Starbucks manager, has been dealing with these broken windows for years. He knows exactly what’s involved in the job.

Ella swallows beer, breathing smoke into the glass. I wonder if she’ll give up cigs when the big ban kicks in next year. She doesn’t strike me as one to go down easy.

“All you had to do was watch the store for five nights,” she says, “and then get paid.”

“Sure, help you guys cover your ass with a little sham due diligence for Mutual Assurance management. Almost worked too, especially with you feeding me crap about a coffee war. If not for these photos, I never would have guessed you were running a low-rent insurance scam, arranging to overpay a Leggett Partners glass company to repair your own vandalism.” And if the Red and Black happened to go down in the blowback, a Hot Leggett’s could anchor redevelopment there quite well. I don’t want to get into speculation, though, nor my suspicion that the scam is running at more than just Seven Points Starbucks. “What I am curious about is what the hell you were doing in that cob.”

“She wanted to spy on you.” Zeke’s voice has a bitter edge. “She thought it was funny. It never occurred to her you’d turn the

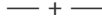
camera on her.” He drops his chin. “You stupid bitch, I told you to stay away from this guy. But no, you and doinkus here”—he thrusts a thumb at Hamilton—“have to go draw his attention. And that retarded stunt last night . . . well, he ended up with the pictures anyway, didn’t he?”

That shuts everyone up. Ella stubs out her smoke. Zeke fumes into his chest. Hamilton picks up the CF card, gazes at it with a rueful smile. “So, what do you want, detective?”

Detective. I’m back on the case.

When I was still a cop, that question wouldn’t have even come up. My job was to make cases, not express personal desires. But now I’m a guy living on a barely sufficient pension, without prospects. I don’t give a shit about their scam. “I’ll settle a full five night’s pay, and the promise you’ll throw me a little work every now and then.” I look Hamilton in the eye. “And I’m telling you right now, I don’t write invoices.”

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