

THE LOVELIEST TAIL
(a JOE HANNIBAL story)
by Wayne D. Dundee

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Subsequent to events in the soon-to-be-released novel, THE DAY AFTER YESTERDAY, Joe Hannibal's life will undergo some significant changes. This story is set prior to those events.*

When Clyde Grammercy peeled the skimpy halter top off his strawberry blonde playmate, exposing a pair of World Class breasts between which he eagerly buried his face, I should have been a reasonably satisfied fellow. A minute or so later, after the rest of her minimal attire had been removed and the playmate had in turn tugged down Clyde's trousers to better facilitate the frantic coupling they then began to engage in—all graphically captured by the telephoto lens of my camera—I should have been practically ecstatic. Not as ecstatic as the two love-birds, to be sure, but relatively so.

After all, I had just verified pretty damned convincingly that ol' Clyde was guilty of trying to work exactly the kind of insurance claim scam that the company who'd hired me suspected him of.

My name, by the way, is Joe Hannibal. I'm a licensed PI and documenting the activities of Clyde Grammercy and his anonymous playmate was being done strictly in the line of duty, not as some sicko pastime I engage in for my own purposes.

The whole insurance claim bit was wrapped in a tangle of legal mumbo jumbo about causal negligence and criminal culpability and so on and so forth, but the bottom line was that Grammercy had suffered a mishap at work resulting in alleged injuries for which he had filed a mega-bucks lawsuit. Nobody disputed the occurrence or the details of the mishap, not even that managerial incompetence was involved. The battle lines were drawn over the exact extent of the injuries.

Grammercy, a glorified go-fer at a sprawling corporate headquarters building in downtown Rockford, Illinois (our mutual home base), had been instructed by his supervisor to use a freight elevator previously reported to be malfunctioning. With Grammercy aboard, the car snagged on its first attempted descent, trembled violently for several seconds, then plunged a story-and-a-half before catching again and jolting to a stop between floors. Although initially diagnosed as "only shaken up", it didn't take long for Grammercy to begin complaining of headaches, insomnia, extreme body aches, and on and on. It reached a point where he claimed to lack feeling or function from the waist down. He got a doctor to confine him to a wheelchair. The inevitable lawsuit came next. Backed by a quasi-reputable team of lawyers, shrinks, and physicians, Grammercy laid it on thick, blaming the elevator mishap for "severe psycho-traumatic damage" that brought on the partial paralysis and all the rest.

With his lawyers at the helm to keep the legal action on course, Grammercy fled to Minnesota to stay with his parents in rural St. Cloud for a time, reportedly seeking relief from all the stress he was under. When he went, I followed. One of the insurance carriers who would be footing a big chunk of the bill if he won his case sub-contracted me to keep track and see if he continued to act as disabled a couple hundred miles away as he was claiming to be in his own back yard.

It took less than forty-eight hours for him to ditch the act, apparently (and stupidly) believing he was far enough away from any prying eyes for it not to matter. After only one quiet night on the farm with mom and pop, he went lead-footing in a borrowed car—sans wheelchair—to the Twin Cities where he hooked up with the strawberry blonde, obviously by pre-arrangement.

That had been yesterday. I had dogged the two of them through the balance of that day, as much of the night as I could, and into today. In that time I had snapped several shots of Grammercy standing, walking, going up and down stairs, and one beauty of him with his girl wrapped in his arms, whirling her, lifting her feet off the ground. Now, in the late afternoon, the clincher—this obligingly spirited rendition

of the horizontal rumba performed right on the balcony of their getaway luxury hotel suite within range of the camera I had aimed from a neighboring window.

So now that ol' Clyde had demonstrated for my lens and for posterity just how bogus his injuries really were, his goose was cooked and my job was finished.

There was only one problem, one nagging little thing that was keeping me from considering the matter successfully wrapped up ... That bothersome detail being the fact that, while I had been tailing Grammercy and his playmate, somebody had started tailing me.

The somebody was female—strikingly so. Very blonde, very shapely, very lovely. In fact, she was by far the loveliest tail I'd ever had attached to me. Intriguing as that aspect of it was, however, it didn't necessarily offer any comfort. Nor did it offer any clues as to the motive behind the surveillance. Okay, so it wasn't the first time I'd been followed by somebody and probably wouldn't be the last. But why now, why here? Was it connected in some way to the Grammercy case? Was it a spillover from a previous case, some old trouble getting ready to re-visit? Or was it the first hint of something brand new getting ready to hit the fan?

Those were the questions still bugging me as I closed the flap on my camera and retreated back into my room. But now that I'd completed the job I'd been sent to do, I promised myself I wasn't going to leave the rest of it unanswered much longer.

I had booked myself into the same hotel as Grammercy and his girlfriend. Neither of them knew me, there was no risk of being recognized. It kept me conveniently close to my work and, as it turned out, made possible this afternoon's hot bonus shots of the bout on the balcony.

At a desk in the corner of the room, I connected my borrowed laptop to the hotel's internet service, downloaded the collection of photos from my camera, and then e-mailed them to my insurance company contact back in Rockford. After that I stretched out on the bed and phoned him to let him in on the good news that was heading his way via cyber space. I also informed him I would deliver a detailed follow-up report when I returned to town but not to look for me for a couple of days because I had some personal business to take care of here before leaving.

It was near dusk by the time I'd showered and changed and left the room again.

The street out front of the hotel was well-lighted and busy. Four lanes of vehicles streaming back and forth in both directions; neon-splashed pedestrians milling on the sidewalks in the warm evening air.

The side street that ran between the hotel and its tall parking garage was a different matter. Dimly lighted by older-fashioned street lamps, a high percent of its curbing marked off for loading zones only, at this hour it was quiet and basically deserted except for the lengthening shadows that crowded in with the close of the day.

My lovely tail was parked there in one of the few legal spots, seated behind the wheel of a fairly new Monte Carlo. Exactly where she'd been since I followed Grammercy and his playmate into the hotel earlier in the afternoon. It was a vantage point from which she could see all the necessary entrances and exits.

Her surveillance of me for the most part had stuck to that pattern. The first time I spotted her had been inside the hotel bar where Clyde had gone to rendezvous with his eager girlfriend. The next day I'd seen her meandering along behind as I followed my quarry on a hand-holding stroll with his honey along Minneapolis's heralded riverfront. The rest of the time my shadow had been content to observe from some stationary post at a relative distance—apparently only interested in keeping track of my general whereabouts without needing or wanting to know my specific activities. It was almost as odd as it was annoying.

At any rate, it was about to come to a head.

I exited the hotel with an extra bounce in my stride, spruced up, slicked back, looking like I was all ready for a big night on the town. I angled across the street toward the garage where my own car was parked.

I could feel her eyes on me.

I did a casual scan of the street until I got to her, let my gaze linger for a moment the way any red-blooded male's would. I kept it cool, kept it loose, though, softly whistling a snappy little tune as part of the act. I was just a guy giving her an appreciative once-over, a schmuck without a clue he had a tail pinned to him. No harm, little girl. Heh heh heh.

I let my gaze take in her car, too. Then, part way across the street, I let the bounce go out of my stride and slowed to a near halt. An exaggerated frown pulled at my face and the tune I was whistling faded in mid note. I altered my direction and approached where she sat with her window down in deference to the warmth of the evening. I made a catch-all gesture and said, "Looks like you got trouble."

She shook her head. "No. I'm okay. Just waiting for someone. He'll be out in a minute."

"I wasn't asking," I said, layering on my own fabrication. This time I pointed more specifically. "I'm telling you—you've got a big stain spreading under your car. Fluid of some kind. Transmission maybe, or brake or power steering. Could be serious."

"That stain must have already been there when I parked. I keep this car fanatically maintained. Really. Hard to believe it has suddenly developed any kind of serious leak."

I rolled my shoulders in a fatalistic shrug. "Suit yourself. Stain sure looks fresh to me, though. Looks like whatever's making it is still dripping."

She held me at bay with a guarded smile, all the while studying me carefully, gauging me. A looker like her was no doubt experienced at getting hit on just about every way imaginable. Part of her had to be wondering if that's all this was. Another part—the part in sync with the tail job she was doing on me—had to be wondering if I'd somehow tripped to what she was up to, if this was an attempt to turn the tables, gain the upper hand.

But the part I kept playing to was the basic core trust that resides in most of us, the part that *wants* to believe not everybody is out to do nothing but take advantage.

I checked my watch, as if concerned about the time, then held up both hands, palms out. "Okay. But at least have your friend take a look when he comes out, will you?" I started to back away, angling again toward the garage. "Promise me, right? No sense taking unnecessary chances."

That sold it. I was clueless and harmless, just a guy trying to be helpful. So, having swallowed that, now she suddenly had to be worried about what *was* wrong underneath her car. Especially in view of the fact I appeared to be getting ready to take off somewhere and she'd have to be able to tag along.

Scowling with irritation, she shouldered open her door and started to get out. As soon as she did that, I reversed my direction and moved back in on her. I caught her poised half-in, half-out of the vehicle and leaned my weight against the door, effectively pinning her in that awkward position. For added effect, I slipped the .45 semiautomatic out from under my blazer and put the muzzle against her rib cage. "Just take it real easy," I said, "anybody'll get hurt."

"What the hell is this?" she wanted to know.

"I'll ask the questions. What you'd better do is answer them. Do what I say and tell me what I want to know. Otherwise this .45 might have to fix it so there *is* a stain on the ground by your car."

I snapped a quick glance up and down the block. Everything remained still, the shadows deepening around us. If anybody noticed the two of us standing like we were, we'd just look like a pair of lovers doing a little preliminary public pawing.

"You don't scare me." Her pink-tinted lips sneered the words from beneath cobalt blue eyes flashing defiance.

Up close, she was every bit as extraordinary as she'd appeared in the more distant glimpses I'd been getting for the past day and a half. Not just trim and shapely, but hard-bodied, buff. A real 21st Century kind of chick. She was dressed in matching denim jeans and vest, glossy black cowboy boots, a silver conch belt, sleeveless skintight tank top that accentuated the swell of her breasts and the flatness of her stomach. Her bare arms were deeply tanned and rippled with sleek musculature.

"You'd better be smart enough to be scared," I told her. "I don't take kindly to being spied on, so you've already got me good and pissed. You asked for this confrontation, not me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“Sure you don’t.”

“You really think you can get away with using that gun on a public street?”

“If I have to, yeah. If I didn’t, it wouldn’t be out of its leather. I don’t play around when it comes to guns.”

“Look, whatever this insane notion you seem to have—what you’re actually doing is interfering in something a great deal more serious than you realize.”

“Maybe I’ve got a better idea of what I’m interfering in than you think. Out of the car.”

I eased the pressure on her just enough to allow her to straighten the rest of the way up. I kept the gun in her ribs, though, the closeness of our bodies hiding it in shadow. I looked up and down the street again. Everything still okay, still quiet. But I intended to play this scene out all the way and didn’t want to press my luck by continuing it right there in the open.

I motioned with a jerk of my head. “We’re going into the garage together. Put your arm around me and lean in real tight when we start walking, like you can’t keep your hands off me.”

“In your dreams.”

“Just do it. You know about the gun, you can feel it. Any sudden moves, any stupidity—you risk paying a steep price.”

I was counting on the part of the parking garage where we would enter to be as deserted as the street. From the times I’d used it before, I knew the attendants hung out mostly on the adjacent side around the main entrance/exit off the busier avenue.

I pushed my captive up two flights of echoey concrete stairs to get us off ground level. I walked her to a far corner, threading between moderately filled rows of parking slots, distancing us from the stairwell. I wanted adequate warning in case anybody headed our way.

“All right,” I said when we’d reached a satisfactorily isolated spot. “Now let’s get down to it.”

She pulled away and backed against a massive concrete pillar. “So that’s what this is after all—just a cheap rape attempt?”

“In your dreams, sweetheart,” I said, mimicking her earlier words. “You know damn well what this is. You’ve been tailing me for the past two days. I want to know why. I want to know who sicced you on me.”

She looked incredulous. “Me ... tailing *you*?”

“As somebody who’s been at the game awhile, let me give you a little free advice: You got a lot of work to do on being more inconspicuous. Especially when it’s a man you’re shadowing. Any guy with the right set of hormones is going to notice—and remember—a looker like you.”

“Are you complementing me, or threatening me?”

“Take it any way you want. Just so I get some answers.”

“You aren’t going to believe me anyway.”

“Not if you keep trying to play dumb and innocent.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You know, you might get more cooperation out of a person if you didn’t come on like some oversized Humphrey Bogart—the gun, the tough talk, dragging and shoving a girl all over the place.”

I showed her a shark’s smile. “Will you pretty please tell me why the fuck you’re following me and who set you up to it?”

“Oh, yes. That’s much better.” She eyes me sullenly. “Okay, let’s try it another way. But first will you answer me one question? A minute ago you said you were ‘somebody who’s been at the game awhile’. Does that mean you’re some sort of cop? Fed? What?”

I gritted my teeth. “There’s that dumb and innocent shit again. The way you’ve had yourself glued to me I’m supposed to believe you don’t even know who I am?”

“Humor me.”

“The name’s Hannibal. Joe Hannibal. PI out of Rockford, Illinois. There. Now what? Are we supposed to exchange ‘Pleased to meetchas’?”

Something that could almost pass for an amused glint suddenly twinkled in her eyes. “Very well, Joe Hannibal, PI ... I admit it. You’re absolutely correct, I *have* been following someone. And that

someone is even from your fair city.” She reached very slowly, very carefully into a pocket of her vest and withdrew a flat piece of paper that, when she held it out to me, I could see was a photograph. “But *this* is the Rockford citizen I have been keeping an eye on . . . not you.”

I took in the features of the person in the photo with a couple quick eye flicks. When recognition hit, I may have goggled a little more than I wanted to show. The subject of the snapshot was none other than Clyde Grammercy’s strawberry blonde playmate.

“Her name is Sharon Wyeth. She works as a file clerk in the office complex of a large corporation back in your town. She’s here at the expense and in the company of a co-worker—a fellow named Grammercy. He works at the same corporation, in some menial capacity. He must have hit the lottery or something, however, judging by the way he’s throwing money around on gushingly appreciative little Sharon.”

“So now we know all the players in the game except for one,” I said. “*Whoever* you’re tailing, you must have a name.”

She considered a moment. Then, less grudgingly than I expected, she said, “Dakota Kiley. I’m not a licensed PI or anything but I do bodyguard work, bounty hunting, some related stuff. I operate out of Milwaukee. Off times, I run a gym there.”

I rubbed the side of my jaw. “Let me try to get this straight. You’re following this Wyeth girl, not me. I’m on the guy she’s with—Grammercy. That’s why I kept seeing you in all the same places.”

“And apparently being equal parts pompous and paranoid, you automatically assumed it was you I had my eye on.”

I was starting to feel a little silly, standing there with the .45 still trained on her. But, stubbornly, I said, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you, kid.”

She said, “Don’t forget, I kept seeing you in all those places, too. I didn’t jump to the conclusion you were some kind of mad stalker. I imagined you for just another tourist, perhaps a lonely businessman on layover or something.”

“I try not to take anything for granted—especially when I’m working a job.”

“So what’s the job involving Grammercy? What is he up to?”

I shrugged. “Insurance claim fraud. He’s trying to sue for big bucks on false pretenses. I’m guessing that’s the money he’s throwing around so loosely, counting his chickens way before they hatch. He doesn’t know it yet, but the very thing he’s being so extravagant on—gushingly appreciative little Sharon, as you called her—is exactly what’s going to blow the whole works for him. No pun intended. With his alleged injuries, see, he’s supposed to be a limp noodle from the waist down. You’ve seen them together—you think that’s the case?”

“Maybe Sharon has miracle healing powers.”

“Uh-huh. What’s her story? Why the tail on her?”

“It’s not her so much as who I’m counting on her bringing out of the woodwork.” From her other vest pocket, Dakota took a second item—this one a folded eight by eleven sheet of paper, a photocopy of a legal wanted poster. “The charmer you’re looking at there is named Horace Taxer. He’s on the lam for armed robbery, criminal assault, and a whole list of good deeds that make him a low rung badass, but a badass all the same. He’s big as a house, highly proficient in a variety of martial arts yet not above reaching for a knife or gun if the mood strikes him. He’s originally from the Milwaukee area, that’s where I first drew a bead on him. He skipped bail there and—as I only recently found out—spent some time hiding out in your neck of the woods before things started closing in and he had to flee again to parts as yet unknown. While in Rockford, he took up with Sharon Wyeth, became her big, cuddly, ultra devoted boyfriend. The insanely jealous type, as demonstrated by the series of broken noses and shattered teeth he handed out as forget-me-nots to a whole parade of unlucky slobs he caught daring to respond to Sharon’s flirtatious ways.”

“And now here she is carrying on a big-time fling with unsuspecting ol’ Clyde.”

“Indeed.”

“Any reason to think Taxer’s insanely jealous nature has abated in his new hideaway spot?”

“Absolutely none.”

“So if word should happen to leak to him, wherever he’s at, that his sweetie is going at it hot and heavy with some new guy on an out-of-town rendezvous, Horace might be inclined to allow his jealousy to overcome his instinct for self preservation and come storming in to break things up.”

“Could happen. You never know.”

“Then again,” I said, “who would be unscrupulous enough to leak word about Sharon’s little hot-sheet weekend in such a way that it might reach Taxer and risk him going ballistic like that?”

Dakota Kiley grinned impishly. “Who, indeed?”

I grinned back at her and finally got around to putting away the .45. Her story had me convinced. Why else would she just happen to be carrying the photo of Sharon Wyeth and the wanted paper on Horace Taxer? It made a lot more sense than the oddly-patterned way in which I thought she’d been tailing me. “I like your style, kid,” I told her. “Sorry I misread things and got in your face like I did.”

She shrugged. “No harm done, I suppose. There is one thing though ... “

“What’s that?”

“As someone who’s been at the game awhile, let me give you a little free advice.” Her right hand streaked behind her and from a rig that must have been at the small of her back, concealed under the fall of the vest, she drew with blinding speed a gleaming .357 Magnum revolver. The snout of this she jabbed immediately and painfully into my ribs. “You got a lot of work to do on being more thorough when you get the drop on a subject. Always take the time to frisk them for weapons and disarm them ... No matter how macho and in-control you feel just because you’re some kind of old war horse who’s trotted across the battlefield a few more times than the next person.”

I stayed real still and cast a careful glance down at the .357 burrowing into my side. “Point well taken,” I said.

I lifted my gaze and our eyes met. I was hoping to see that amused glint still in hers, but I couldn’t be sure. After a long count, she pulled the gun back, twirled it like Dale Evans, reholstered it. “And quit calling me kid,” she added somewhat petulantly.

Before I could think of a reply, we heard the scream. It split the night, coming from somewhere outside, a long, ragged, terrified wail. It sliced into the parking garage and reverberated back and forth through the different levels like it would never end.

Dakota’s eyes went huge. Maybe mine did, too. We were both probably thinking the same thing. Together we bolted for the stairwell, the slap of our hurried footfalls generating a fresh round of echoes that finally drowned out the last of the chilling scream.

We exited at ground level onto the previously quiet side street. It wasn’t so quiet any more. The scream had obviously been heard by several people in the vicinity.

On the other side of the street, a handful of hotel employees had emerged from various side doors to see what was going on. Several curious bystanders from the busy main drag at the end of the block came spilling down, some more eagerly than others. Faces were turning this way and that, eyes were darting in various directions, many looking up. A gaggle of voices mingled and grew excitedly louder.

“Did anybody see anything?”

“Who was it?”

“Hell, I don’t know—*what* was it?”

“Wow, man, what a blood-curdling scream. You always hear that expression: blood-curdling. That’s what this really was, you know?”

“Whatever it was, it was awful.”

“Did somebody get attacked, or what?”

“It had a kind of fading-away quality ... like somebody falling.”

It took a car, probably attracted by the trickle of people rapidly turning into a stream, to swing down the street and literally shed some light on the subject. The headlight beams carved a path through the knot of bodies and then came to rest on one that didn’t get out of the way. This body was done moving anywhere on its own. Forever. It was the form of a nude male, lying in a kind of flattened sprawl in the middle of the street. The shape was as still and stark as a freeze frame, except for the blackish red puddle spreading in an uneven halo around the head.

The car braked to a sharp halt, causing its headlight beams to flick up and down and cast the body in a kind of strobe effect. As one, the crowd coming down the street ceased its forward motion and re-coiled two or three steps. There were several audible intakes of breath, some low groans.

Only Dakota and I moved toward the corpse then. I got close enough to verify the sickening hunch that had started forming in the pit of my stomach right from the first ... Damn it all, the pitifully battered ruin of a person was none other than Clyde Grammercy.

I locked eyes with Dakota over the dead man for a hard second, then we turned our heads and together looked up at the luxury suite balconies jutting out high overhead. One of them seemed to loom more ominously than the rest. There was movement up there, and voices drifting down faintly; one frightened and pleading, the other loud and angry.

“Taxer!” Dakota spat the name. “The bastard is here. He did this. All the time I was watching for him—he must have shown up right after you dragged me into that damned garage.”

“If that’s the case, he sure as hell didn’t waste much time.”

“He wouldn’t. That’s Taxer’s way.”

I brought my gaze back down to ground level and looked around us. The crowd up the street was starting to edge in closer again.

I said, “We don’t have time to stick around and explain this to the cops. Not right now—not if we mean to try and wrap up Taxer before he gets away again.”

“I don’t mean to just *try*.” Dakota thrust an unwavering finger, pointing down at what was left of Clyde Grammercy. “We’re responsible for this—you and I, equally. I saw to it word got leaked to Taxer, luring him here out of hiding to find his lover in a cheating situation. You pulled me off the trap I had set for him at a crucial moment. Our high-handedness cost a man his life. I’d say the very least we owe this poor bastard is to bring down the animal who threw him to his death.”

I tossed another glance up at the balcony. “What goes up has gotta come down,” I muttered. “Yeah, let’s bring Taxer down hard.”

We hit the main lobby of the hotel running.

I liked the sensation of Dakota beside me, moving with the sleek grace of a jungle cat, a tigress on the hunt. I’d made up my mind about her under sudden and extreme circumstances, to be sure. A snap judgment that—given we had together now crossed a line marked by violent death and drawn guns and escalating threat—carried a high risk factor if I was very far off the mark. But any doubts were strictly academic; in my gut I felt confident she had my back as solidly as I would have hers.

Despite the lousy turn things had taken, we still had a little bit of luck riding on our side. My time as a guest of the hotel had given me a good feel for its layout. I knew that it was a refurbished version of the original structure that dated back to the early 1920s. Its historic significance and popular riverfront location had warranted the facelift but there had been limited opportunity for expansion as part of the process. Therefore it remained rather modest in size, only ten stories high. The top four floors housed the newer rooms and the so-called luxury suites and were serviced by a single express elevator that accessed strictly those floors. The other half dozen floors were serviced by the original elevator system, two cars located in the center of the wide lobby. That meant that Taxer, when exiting Clyde Grammercy’s suite on the tenth floor, had no choice but to come down the express elevator or use stairs for at least the first four stories of his descent.

If Dakota and I moved fast enough, we could effectively cover all his escape route options. When I pointed this out to her, she said, “You take the express, I’ll go the other way. I run stadium steps three times a week—I’m in better shape to handle those stairs.”

The assessment stung, but there was no arguing the validity of it. With more lives potentially at stake I couldn’t afford to get my hackles up about it.

“What about the girl?” I wanted to know. “You figure he’s killed her, too?”

“Hard to say. He never harmed her in the past. But those other times were only cases of flirtation.

What Taxer walked in on here was considerably more than that—he never killed any of the other guys before, either.”

“What if he tries bringing her out as a hostage?”

Dakota’s eyes flashed. “Don’t even *think* about bargaining with this asshole. No deals! If he has the notion to kill her, he’ll go ahead and do it regardless—and try with all his might to take us out in the bargain. Cut him *no* slack—he’s stone cold dangerous.”

“Got it,” I assured her.

I swung out the .45 again. Several other patrons in the lobby scurried bug-eyed at the sight of the hardware.

“Watch your ass, kid.”

“Watch your own ass, you old war horse ... And quit calling me kid!” Dakota snapped over her shoulder as she broke into a trot for the central elevator bank.

The express car came down empty. I went in SWAT team style, sweeping the .45 ahead of me in a two-handed grip, covering right, left, up, down. Nothing. Nobody. I hit the button for the tenth floor and the car whooshed upward.

The express lift was one of the showpieces of the hotel’s refurbishment. It was the external type, its car a brightly illuminated glass bubble sliding up and down on an outside cornice of the building. From inside the bubble, passengers were treated to a panoramic view of the riverfront and downtown.

At the moment I didn’t give a damn about the view. The only scene I was interested in was trying to get a focus on Horace Taxer. There was no way of knowing for sure what state of mind he was in. Given his penchant for violence, he might have snapped completely and now be on the brink of an all-out killing frenzy. On the other hand, his murderous assault on Grammercy might have had a mollifying effect and he could be ready to slink back into the defensive, evasive mode that had put him in hiding before.

Either way, if he was a calculating man he’d likely figure he had several minutes before he had to make his next move. He had no way of knowing about Dakota and I being present under the circumstances we were. Remove us from the equation, he’d reason that motel security and police arriving on the scene would eat up a fair amount of time piecing together what had happened before ever starting to zero in on the tenth floor suite where Grammercy had been thrown from.

Fine, I told myself. Let the fucker think he had all the time in the world. Dakota and I would have him in a box before he knew what hit him.

The car bonged to a halt on Ten.

I eased out cautiously, holding the .45 at the ready.

The hallway was empty and appeared calm and undisturbed. The room I wanted—1008—was four doors down, on the right. Two doors beyond that, on the left, I spotted the door marked for access to the stairs, the point where Dakota would be arriving.

I proceeded down the hall. In one of the rooms I passed, I could hear a TV program playing with bursts of an irritating laugh track. In another, I could hear a woman talking faintly, pausing every now and then the way you do when you’re speaking on the phone. Whatever happened in room 1008 preceding Clyde Grammercy’s fatal flight from its balcony had apparently been contained strictly therein and had not disturbed or alarmed anyone else on the floor.

The door to 1008 was ever so slightly ajar, closed but not quite to the point of engaging the latch. I paused in front of it, muscles tensed to a tight ache. No sounds came from the other side; I sensed no movement, no life. I glanced over at the door to the stairs. No sounds came from there either—no shouts, no one racing up or down the steps within the echoey shaft. So what was the signal? Was Taxer still in the room, lurking silently, alerted somehow to the fact someone was closing in on him? Or was he exiting via the stairwell, quietly and calmly because—in accordance with my earlier assessment—he figured he had plenty of time, no reason to hurry, no need to draw attention to himself by acting in a suspicious manner?

If Taxer was in the stairwell then that meant he would be encountering Dakota at any moment and I naturally wanted to be on hand to back her up. But I couldn't allow myself to be diverted from the room without checking it out first. If nothing else, there was the girl, Sharon, to consider. No telling what kind of shape Taxer had left her in ... if, in fact, he himself was gone.

I bumped open the door and went in quick and low, covering myself with sweeps of the .357. The room stayed as quiet as the shadows that filled it. No lights were on, only what came through the open balcony doors. I found a couple of switches and snapped them on, narrowing my eyes against the sudden wash of brightness.

There were no signs of a struggle. There'd been one, though; I knew that much going in. And then I spotted further evidence in the form of Sharon Wyeth, sprawled on the floor between the suite's two beds. The filmy nightgown she was wearing was torn to only a few remaining wisps, leaving her virtually nude. Examining her, I saw that her face was bruised and she was bleeding from one corner of her mouth and nose. She was unconscious, but still alive. The pulse at her throat felt strong, steady. She'd come out of this with some marks both inside and out, but at least she'd come out still breathing.

I took a second more to check the balcony. No Taxer there, either. Only a cold feeling in the air that he *had* been present and, peering over the low rail, the bloody evidence far below verifying that fact. Police cars and emergency vehicles were starting to arrive down there, splashing everything and everybody with whirling circles of red and blue light. No one bothered to look up at me.

When I returned to the hallway, this time I immediately heard sounds coming from the stairwell—footfalls ringing hard on the concrete-over-metal steps, shouts echoing.

Taxer and Dakota must have collided! It sounded as if he was retreating from her, coming back up. I bolted down the hall to intervene.

It was the heavy, steel-reinforced stairwell door that fooled me. Its density muted the sounds, made them seem like they were coming from farther away. I'd judged the closest of the footfalls to be half a flight or more down. Instead, when I jerked open the door Taxer was right there in my face! "Big as a house" was how Dakota had described him. Up close and looming unexpectedly like that, he looked big enough to have his own zip code.

He should have been as surprised to see me as I was him. If he was, it slowed him down only a micro-second. He dropped a massive shoulder and came barreling into me, trying to bull me out of the way. But I had the heavy door on my side. I used it to block the biggest share of the impact. After his forward momentum had been stopped, I whipped the door open and then closed again as fast and hard as I could, slamming it shut on him like a battering ram, rocking him back on his heels.

I couldn't see Dakota but I could hear her shouting something from somewhere down the steps.

I charged into the stairwell, thinking I had Taxer partially stunned. I was wrong. The big bastard was waiting with a sucker punch—make that a kick. His foot whirled in a lightning-fast arc, the heavy heel of his shoe crashing off the side of my face, knocking me back against the wall, hard. The taste of blood filled my mouth. He immediately threw a second kick, a reverse slash of the same foot, driving it into my gut. I doubled over and dropped to my knees. I lost my grip on the .45, startled by the sound of it clattering to the floor, catching a glimpse as it went sliding away.

Taxer closed in on me, trying to knee my face, but I twisted away and got a shoulder up, blocking him. He nevertheless drove me back against the wall again and pinned me there, grinding down on me. I felt suffocated and panicky, unable to gain any leverage, unable to fight back. I heard him grunting with effort and then the scrape of something hard, metallic on the wall above me. Scrunching my head back, I looked up and saw him struggling with a large red cylinder—one of those bulky industrial fire extinguishers that he'd yanked off its wall bracket. As I watched, he hoisted it high above his head, getting ready to slam it down and mash my skull.

The sound of a gunshot filled the stairwell with a deafening roar. The fire extinguisher jumped out of Taxer's hands, punctured and knocked away by the slug. Its pressurized load of CO-2 began to

escape in a wild, screaming hiss. The cylinder hit the floor and bounced, somersaulting end over end, spewing a cloud of icy white mist that billowed and boiled, enveloping the landing, cutting visibility to zero.

I grabbed blindly, trying to seize hold of Taxer, drag him down. All I got for my effort was a clout to the side of the head that hammered me back into the hallway door.

When the frozen mist cleared, Dakota was poised at the top of the steps leading up from below. Her .357 was in her hand, raised and ready. Taxer was gone. So was my .45. I was sprawled in such a way that I was blocking the closed hallway door, meaning Taxer couldn't have fled that way.

Dakota gestured. "Had to've gone up. The roof."

I got to my feet, backhanding away some of the blood leaking from my mouth. "Thanks for the bullet," I said, nodding toward the ruptured fire extinguisher that now lay spent and silent, a few wisps of vapor curling around it. "Saved me a split skull, maybe worse."

"I ran into our man—almost literally—three flights down," Dakota explained. "I gave chase but held fire for fear of setting off a ricochet in this damned stairwell. When I saw him getting ready to brain you, I had no choice but to take the chance."

"You did fine, kid. I'm the screw-up here. First I let Taxer sucker kick me, then I coughed up my piece and gave him the chance to grab it. If he wasn't armed before, thanks to me he damn sure is now."

"He still has to make it off that roof. And it's *not* going to be through us!"

We started up the final flight of steps. The light had been doused at the top, but the door up there was standing open and I could see a star-sprinkled slice of night sky. I tapped a fingertip against one of the conches on Dakota's fancy silver belt and told her, "You'd better lose that. Go out with that on, you'll reflect whatever light there is and mark yourself as plain as if you were wearing a string of Christmas bulbs around your waist."

While she was shucking the belt, I hiked my leg and snared the little hideaway 9mm out of the spring clip in my boot. When I straightened up with it, Dakota took one look and said, "What are you going to do with that—throw it at him?"

"Get me close enough to the big fucker again," I growled, "I'll cram it down his throat and make him choke on it if I have to."

We broke onto the roof in a fast, flare-out pattern, me cutting to the right, Dakota to the left. The roof was tarpaper-sheeted and sprinkled with loose pea gravel. Scattered by our feet, the tiny stones made sounds like scratching rodent claws.

Wherever Taxer was, he wasn't waiting in ambush.

Dakota and I dropped into crouches and stayed that way for several beats, listening intently, letting our eyes adjust to the darkness of the shadowy roof. The winking, multi-colored lights of the city spread out all around us and overhead the sky was cloudless, clear. But the various stacks and pipes and vents that jutted up in wild disorder all across the broad roof cast a jungle of bizarrely-shaped, overlapping shadows, some as black and deep-looking as death.

After a minute or so, Dakota edged over to me and whispered, "All we have to do is wait him out, keep this door guarded. He's got no other way down."

I wiped some more blood from my mouth. "I dunno. I ain't much on waiting patiently for—"

The familiar report of my .45 came from some distance away. We both flinched, but no slugs smashed into either of us, none hit anywhere close. In fact, none even came in our direction. The curiousness of this was just starting to sink in when another shot sounded. Then a third followed quickly. But still no bullet whine, no rounds seemingly sent our way at all.

A patch of sparse light played across Dakota's bewildered frown.

Straightening up part way, craning my neck cautiously to scan the rooftop, I saw then what was going on. Dakota saw, too.

Taxer was at the far corner of the roof, perched somewhat precariously on the point just above the exterior cab of the express elevator. He was leaning out as far as he dared with one arm extended down and was firing repeatedly at the lighted bubble that hung suspended at its top limit just the way I'd left it. As we watched, one of the gold-tinted glass walls disintegrated and collapsed inward, cascading a shower

of broken slivers like golden rain.

“Oh, shit! If he makes it into that car and starts it down,” Dakota said, “we’ll never have a chance to head him off.”

She raised her .357, cupped it in a two-handed grip, and squeezed off three fast rounds. Shredded tarpaper and pea gravel erupted around Taxer’s feet as the slugs tore in low. The fugitive spun to return fire, a pair of shots that sang off wide but were close enough to cause Dakota and I to both duck. Then, whirling back, desperate and determined, Taxer tossed the .45 ahead of him down into the elevator car and went over the edge of the roof after it—catching the cab’s frame like a trapeze bar and swinging himself down and in, dropping heavily to the floor of the bubble.

“Double shit!” Dakota swore. Wasting no more words or time, she turned and plunged back into the stairwell, intent on trying to make a mad rush back down the flights of steps in an odds-against effort to beat the car to the bottom.

As for me, I can’t tell you exactly why I did what I did next. Maybe I just wanted to get my hands on Taxer again so bad I simply didn’t give a damn. Maybe Dakota’s out-of-shape insinuation and the fact I’d allowed myself to get sucker-stomped and have my gun taken away made me so pissed and wounded my pride enough so that I couldn’t help pulling a stunt of I’ll-show-everybody bravado. Maybe I’m kinda nuts to begin with. Whatever the reasons, they propelled me—recklessly, without conscious evaluation or decision—across the roof straight for the elevator and its crash-in passenger.

I heard the hum of the car being activated, the cables and counter weights beginning to move. Felt the vibration of them under my feet. The bubble started to slide down.

The car had descended maybe seven feet when I went off the point of the roof and dropped down onto it. I hit hard, no room to tuck and roll. The roof of the car was flat metal, painted bronze in keeping with the whole golden motif. It dented badly under my weight, clearly not designed to be a landing pad for feats of derring-do.

We continued to hum smoothly downward.

The expected slug from Taxer ripped through the top, missing me by a full two feet.

Four to smash the glass; two to keep me and Dakota pinned down; and now one more trying to pick me off ... Seven. He’d fired all of his rounds!

Digging the hideaway out of the pocket I’d stuffed it in to make the jump, I flattened myself belly down on the roof of the car and squirmed cautiously toward the edge. I had a sudden bad moment when a disturbing thought knifed in: What if Taxer had another piece besides the one he’d snatched from me? But it was too late to worry about that now. I’d already rolled the bones ... I could only hope they didn’t end up being my own.

Slowly, carefully, I leaned my head and shoulders over the side. The air rush was a momentary shock, making it feel like we were plunging downward way faster than I promised myself we actually were.

Taxer was waiting for me, braced inside the car in a kind of crouch. He was holding the .45—*my* goddamn .45—by its barrel. The slide was shot back, signaling the spent firepower. Making it now only an impromptu club, which was how he tried to use it. Swinging it at my head, heaving a mighty grunt of effort as he did. His movement was awkward and off-balance, though; he was clearly concerned about getting too close to the gaping opening he’d blasted out.

I jerked my head back, dodging the attempted blow. When I leaned over a second time, I shoved the 9mm in ahead of me. “Ride’s over for you, asshole,” I said, and shot him in the left kneecap.

The ambulances had come and gone ... and a few of the cops, too. There were still plenty of the latter left on hand, though. Milling around, their staticky radios hacking and spitting in the background.

At least they seemed to be done with me for awhile, giving me a break between rounds of grilling me with questions.

I sat beside Dakota Kiley on a stone retaining wall out front of the hotel. The river was

somewhere off to one side. I could smell the water, even if I couldn't see it through the clog of onlookers jammed in tight against the police barricades. It was the first chance Dakota and I had to talk to each other since we'd parted ways to make our very different descents from the roof.

"You are a crazy goddamn fool, you know that?" she was saying. "That's the real reason the police are hanging around, pretending to consider how many charges they might bring against us. The truth is they've got calls out trying to find a rubber room padded thick enough to hold as big a lunatic as you've proven yourself to be."

She looked slightly disheveled sitting there, but still nothing short of awesome. The breeze off the river stirred her cascading hair and the spinning red and blue lights from the perimeter of the scene cast a shifting pattern of highlights across her flawless face.

I said, "You're just jealous because I beat you down."

She shook her head. "I can't believe you."

"What I can't believe is that after all the trouble I went through to retrieve it, the lousy cops won't give me my .45 back. Plus they took my hideaway, too—the one you scoffed at, by the way, because you implied it was too puny to do any good against Taxer. Let's see, in all the excitement I sort of lost track ... how was it that bullet hole got in Horace-baby's leg again?"

"What are you—angling for a cut of the bounty on him?"

"Hey, not a bad idea. Real generous of you to offer."

Dakota cocked an eyebrow. "Speaking of not bad ideas ... you and me could make a helluva team, Hannibal."

My turn to shake my head. "Not sure the world is ready."

She grinned. "No, it probably isn't."

"Besides, I doubt if I could ever get used to thinking of you as a partner."

"Is that some kind of sexist remark?"

"Not really." I grinned, too. "It's just that I figure I'll always only be able to think of you one way, the way I first saw you—as the loveliest tail I ever had."

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