

THAT'S
HOW
I ROLL
ANDREW
VACHSS

A NOVEL

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THAT'S HOW I ROLL

Andrew Vachss



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my beloved brother Olaf

29 December 2010 @ 11:30 p.m.

*he chose the night to depart
bringing a new star to the sky*

*a warrior's star, casting its own light
a guidepost to the path of righteousness
a warning to predators
and now the True North for all our tribe*

my brother:

*welcomed by Odin
waiting for us
and always, always watching*

My name is Esau Till.

~~What I've put down here isn't some "Death Row Diary," like the bloodsuckers wanted to pay me to write. Don't look for a last-minute confession to crimes I was never caught for. Or for the apology some think I owe.~~

This is a bomb. The last one I'll ever build. You'll never even know it exists unless someone stumbles over the tripwire I left behind.

That will happen only if I am betrayed. I don't expect that, but I still have to plan for it.

No bomb I made ever failed, which is why people paid me so much to build them. In my chosen line of work, you have to earn a reputation before you start earning real money.

My bombs were always custom-tailored to the job. Now, the only ingredients I have for building this last one are my own words. Those words should be more than enough, but they won't ignite unless they are believed.

I know if I'm caught in one single lie people might well disbelieve my entire account ... and they'd be entitled to do so. All it takes is a single clutch of termite eggs to bring down a whole house.

People say the truth can't be killed. Maybe not. But from my own experience, I know it can be buried so deep it might as well never have existed at all.

Oh, you might get your ear close enough to the ground to hear it ticking. But no matter how close you listen, you're still just hearing strange noises deep down in the dark.

Your eyes won't help, either. The brighter the light you shine, the more the darkness thickens.

Only the most powerful explosive will light the way. So this bomb must be like the most carefully constructed house.

I know it must stand up to the most microscopic examination. And it must stay standing, no matter what attempts are made to defuse it.

For this house, each brick will be embedded in the cement of gospel truth. No flood will ever carry it away. No fire will ever incinerate it. And the most powerful wrecking ball would just bounce right off.

I never broke my word when I was alive. That's the one thing I get to take with me, and I intend on doing just that. I'm building this house out of nothing but truth, and no more powerful explosive has ever been invented. Once revealed, it will be denied by some, and "explained" by others.

But it can't be changed.

When that last button is pushed, the roof will fly off. Inside, just a few empty rooms.

And a map.

I'm marking that map with an "X" for each spot.

If you're looking for buried treasure, don't waste your time. But if you dig deep enough, if you keep digging, you will find that pure truth I promised. It's all there.

Whether that truth frees you or destroys you no longer matters to me.

I'm done.

Me and Tory-boy, neither of us came out right. I was born with this spine thing. I'm past forty years old, and I've never once stood on my own feet.

Tory came along about eight years after me. He was a big, handsome baby. It took a while before you could tell he carried the same curse I did.

I've been protecting Tory-boy all his life. I won't stop doing that just because the State is getting ready to end mine.

Nobody expects anything less from me. They have confidence that I'll come up with some way to keep right on protecting my little brother.

People who truly know me, they know I'll find a way. It took a lot of time and a lot of lives, but I finally forced that knowledge upon them—etched it too deep into their minds for them to ever believe otherwise.

If you're reading this, you'll come to know my life.

Not the fairy story I told on TV, or in court. You'll know what parts I left out of those stories.

By that, I don't mean the crimes I never spoke of, or how I got them done. What good would it do if I explained how I could make our satellite dish throw out a plasma-cutting beam? People already know enough ways to kill other people. They seem to be getting better at it. The whole human race, I mean.

So, when you come across certain people's names in here, keep in mind that I am breaking no vows. Yes, I know I'm building a graveyard. But I'm really only marking the tombstones—those who betrayed me put themselves beneath them.

I don't feel any guilt. When it comes to such things, I don't feel much of anything. And what I *do* feel is no more complicated than this: I know the difference between the best possible result and the best result possible.

The best possible result would be for everyone to keep their word. Then my Tory-boy would still be protected, even long after I'm gone.

But if certain people break their word—and you'll not be reading this if they haven't done so—all that's left is the best result possible.

Revenge.

I never trusted a word out of a government man's mouth from the time I was old enough to understand how they were to blame for everything that had happened to all of us.

If the government could look away from—well, you'll see for yourselves—they're even worse than the Beast they had kept on feeding for so long. If it wasn't for me, they'd still be doing it.

here's only two people on this earth I trust.

My little brother is one of those two, and he would never reveal who the other one is. All I had to do was say "secret" to Tory-boy, and *nothing* could ever make him tell it.

Maybe you'll think badly of me when I tell you this, but I promised the truth, so I have to say how I know Tory-boy would keep anything I told him was "secret" to himself, no matter what. He was still very small when I started training him. As soon as I thought he was ready, I hid some money—just a couple of dollars and some coins—and I told Tory-boy where I stashed it. Then I told him it was "secret." And then I let it slip to Rory-Anne that I'd hidden some money.

She knew better than to try and make me tell, but Tory-boy was not even four years old. And she did things to him I can't write down, not even here. Listening to my brother scream cut me so deep I don't have the words for it. And knowing it was me who had caused those screams cut me deeper ... cut me in a place I didn't know I had. But I had to know. If Tory-boy couldn't keep a secret ...

He wouldn't tell. Three times, Rory-Anne tried. My brave little brother would not tell. Twice he passed out from the pain. After the second time, Rory-Anne came to me. She told me, straight out, what she was going to do to Tory-boy if he didn't tell. Or if I didn't. She wanted that money, and she was going to get it, even if she had to kill us both.

I looked her right in her degenerate eyes and said I didn't know what she was talking about.

After that third time, she gave up.

That's when I could finally hold my little brother. I begged his forgiveness. He didn't understand what I was saying, but he knew—I *know* he knew—what I meant.

Tory-boy would never tell any secret of mine.

I know things can just happen. And I know my Tory-boy. He could die in a car accident. Or get himself shot over nothing. Killed by the kind of man who'd lose a fair fight and backstab the winner as he walked away. Where we live, even the most diligent watchmen couldn't prevent something like that.

But the only one capable of detonating my last bomb, *that* person would know the difference.

If you are reading this, I have been betrayed. So this is being revealed to you, just as I promised. Revealed by someone I know would never betray me.

I have someone nobody knows of; someone not in the life I chose for myself. Someone pure. Someone who could deliver my last bomb with a clear conscience. To that person

delivering my message wouldn't be informing; it would be doing the right thing.

They might decide to wait a good long while. That's because they're in this story, too—couldn't leave them out even if I wanted to.

But somehow I don't believe it will happen like that. The person I am trusting with this wouldn't *want* me to wait; they'd want me to show the whole world as soon as possible how I kept my word.

My last word.

I know this all would be easier to understand if I started at the beginning and went from there. But the place where I was born, the place where I spent my entire life, it's got a time rhythm all its own. It's more than a dot on a map—it's a living thing, as immune to the laws of physics as it is to the laws of man. Sometimes, things don't happen in normal sequence. If you were born and raised there, you'd feel it, too. As if the earth itself stopped rotating in one direction, reversed itself, and then went back to the way it was turning before.

I don't mean to say that this is the only such place on earth. I *know* there's others. I can't say how I know this, but I can feel that truth of knowledge inside me.

So I can't tell my story any other way except how I'm writing this down. The only way for me to tell the truth is to tell it as I experienced it.

I know I'm not helping you believe me, telling my story this way. But no matter how it may sound sometimes, this is no tale of magic; it is cold, hard fact. And if you read my story, you'll know why I had no choice but to tell it.

This is how I saw it happening:

A mob of bears surrounded the hive, ripping at it like tall-timber chainsaws, desperate to get at the sweet stash of honey they knew was inside.

Bears chasing honey don't worry themselves about filing environmental-impact statements. They know they don't need any of those weasel-word excuses for tearing things up—nobody is ever going to call them to account. You could pass a dozen laws a day, it wouldn't make any difference to them.

Legislation is just words. The real law is the law *enforcers*. It doesn't matter what you call them—sheriffs, police officers, cops—those people, they're the only true law.

But, for all that, they're still not the ones in charge.

No matter how fierce the attack got, the hive stayed quiet. No swarm of drones rushed out, stinging, to protect the inner core. Layer after layer yielded to the slashing claws, but the

core itself stayed untouched, as if in some impenetrable glass cage. The bears could see it, but they couldn't touch it.

It didn't matter to the bears what kind of stingers might be waiting on them. They knew honeybees weren't close to the worst they might have to face. They knew all about hornets, mahogany wasps ... all the way down to fire ants. All nest-guarders come loaded with serious venom, and they're always willing to spend every bit they have.

But that didn't discourage the bears. For all they gave a damn, the hive could have been surrounded by five-pound scorpions. Those bears knew the value of that special core of honey, and they were ready to pay whatever it cost to get at it.

No matter what force was protecting that honey, they knew they could take the pain, walk right through it. What they didn't know was that the greatest danger to them was that honey itself.

Bees might succeed in discouraging a single bear, but they can't kill one. They have the desire, but they don't have the power.

Bears *can* kill each other, but they've got too much sense to do that. When mating season comes, if any two males catch each other's scent, there's going to be blood, sure. But that's blood, not death. Soon as one bear realizes he's not going to come out on top, he moves on.

You might think it's their place on the evolutionary chain that gives bears that much sense. Sharks are natural-born killers, but they don't have the intelligence to get out of the water when they're facing something that could turn them into a meal. Even with the best electronic sensors on the planet, they can't tell the difference between pieces of an abandoned ship slowly sinking to the ocean floor and a pod of killer whales with newborn calves.

Whatever drives sharks doesn't have a reverse gear. The instant they pick up a trace of blood in the water, they go straight to whatever's shedding that blood, and commence ripping a chunk off for themselves.

That makes more blood. And that brings more sharks. Soon enough, they're in such a foamy red frenzy that it doesn't make any difference where the blood's coming from ... even from themselves. Before long, they're all slashing blind. That's not a good time to be a shark.

I've never seen a real shark, and now I know I never will. But ever since I read that there was a special kind of shark that can actually go from the ocean right into a river, and back out again, that just fascinated me. A bull shark—that's what they're called—is also the only shark that has a memory. There's no place to hide from something like that, unless you spend your life on dry land.

The more I read about that special shark, the more I wanted to be one myself. More like a mirror image of one, I guess—I wanted to become the kind of creature nobody would be safe from on dry land.

Maybe I'm just making myself sound too important—I know I have to guard against that. But I think there's some value in me writing this down. I don't have any such pretensions about the account of my life, but I know there's been times when a record of truth actually changed the world. Some of it, anyway.

Actually *changing* things, that's a high bar to clear. No conspiracy theory could ever do it. No interpretation of the Good Book, no "expert analysis." What's required is scientific truth.

I know what you're thinking just about now. You never heard of "scientific truth." No reason why you would. I made up that term because nothing else can explain what I did and why I did it.

I won't deny that some part of me wants to brag on myself. Maybe all the years I've spent in this cell caused me to finally grow an ego—or maybe just acknowledge something I had never allowed to interfere during all those years of doing my work. Any ego surfacing in me that's only *now*. Only after I was caught.


Unlike so many others in here, I wasn't caught because of my own boasting. Nor from taking false pride in the things I was able to do. If you burn a building to the ground, you have to first make sure that you know every single person who's in that building. And make *real* sure that you're willing for them to burn, too.

I understand all kinds and types of people may be reading this. So, whoever you are, don't mistake my motives. I don't owe you—*any* of you—one damn thing. I never asked you for anything in my life, and I'm not asking now.

Don't waste your time trying to decode me. Save your "profiles." Forget any "psychiatric autopsies." You'll never know me. What you're reading isn't some "story." It's *my* story, but it's all fact. If you actually knew me, you'd know my story couldn't be any other way.

What I'm writing down here will pay off the only debt I have left—my life story is an accountant's ledger. It will pay anything on my debit side, and I'm not asking for a discount.

That's what I want people to say about me after I'm gone: "Esau Till, that was a man who paid his debts. Every single one. And he always paid in full."

 No mainframe computer could have predicted the intersection of runaway trains that caused me to get caught. And whatever put me in a position where I could get caught, *that's* the true mystery. No matter how much I think back on it, no matter how deep I go, probing with the long, sharp-tipped points of my mind, I still can't reach that part.

The mind protects itself, so I understand I might be avoiding the truth. I understand that maybe it took nothing more than a single petty emotion to bring me down. Envy is a sin. Not because the Bible says so, but because it can make you do stupid things. When you're born and raised like I was, you figure it out quick: if the only thing keeping you alive is your intelligence, acting stupid is committing suicide.

So, despite my circumstances, I never coveted what others had. And when I learned how I could change those circumstances, there was no need for me to envy such things, anyway. Houses, cars, jewelry, things like that. Things, that's one key. But understanding yourself means you have to be able to open a two-key lock.

You might be able to look back and see where you went wrong. But that's a vision, not a tool. You can't use what you see in your past to go back and change it. Sure, you can buy things you never had before, but you can't change the "before."

When I found that second key, I realized envy is no sin—it can even be a motivation. Wanting what others have, that's not wrong. It can make you strive. Work harder. Reach higher.

You *can* change your own future.

You might want a Cadillac. So might another man. You each envy the man who has one. And you each have choices. You can work and save your money until you have enough for that Caddy. You can steal money other people worked for; it spends just as good as money honestly earned. Or you can just sit there, stewing in your own bile. That's poisonous stuff, bile.

When two men each want a Cadillac, they can go their separate ways to get one. Usually they keep going those separate ways for the rest of their lives.

It's only when you and another want the same thing—not an assembly line thing, something there's only one of—that *real* sin knocks on your door. If you open the door, greed and possessiveness come right on in and make themselves at home. Once they're in, they never leave.

Two men want the same woman. This can bring blood, but that's pretty rare. Most of the time, the man who's not the woman's choice gets over being rejected.

Sometimes, the woman doesn't even know she's wanted by that man. He might believe he wouldn't be her choice, and keep his own feelings to himself. So there's no rejection to resent ... or regret.

But what about the man who *does* get what he wanted so bad?

He could treat his woman like a princess. Be grateful every day of his life that he got so lucky. Work three jobs to buy her nice things.

Or he could treat her like a slave. Not just making her work, but beating on her when she doesn't work hard enough. Hard enough to support him when he quits his job or gets laid off. Hard enough to make him forget he's got twice the stomach and half the hair he used to have.

Some men, the only work they do is keep watch on their woman—go through the phone bills to see if there's any strange numbers there; sit outside a tavern where she's playing a few games of eight-ball with her friends to see who she leaves with; third-degree question her every time she comes back into the house.

And some are too lazy to do even that much. They just keep their woman in the house. Cut her off from her friends, even from her own family.

That sometimes works. But it's got strong potential for backfire, too. If a man catches his woman in bed with another man, and he ends the affair with a pistol, the jury's not going to treat him too harshly. They call it the "unwritten law."

But that only works for men. If a woman's husband staggers in one night, drunk and nasty, a whore's lipstick smeared all over him, she might be able to shoot him and get the law to treat her lightly, too. But only if she remembers to say he was acting like he was about to kill her. Self-defense. Around here, that means she only gets to fire once. A shotgun works a lot better than a pistol for that.

Now that I'm taking stock, I have to face up to things like that. Admit that it might have

been something as small and petty as my own possessiveness that brought all this down.

“Might have,” that’s speculation. But this, this is absolute truth: I was never going to let anyone or anything take my little brother from me. That was never going to happen, no matter what the cost, or who had to pay it.

I’d seen these same bears plenty of times—I’d been seeing them one way or another ever since I started earning money. The bears were all after the same thing. They all worked the same way. I’d seen them tear hives apart often enough. But this was the first time I’d ever *been* that hive-protected honey.

The kind of men I did work for, some of them would talk about how terrible the bears could make it for you if you stopped them from getting their paws on the honey. How much strength it took to hold them off. How that tested a man, deep inside.

Bragging? I don’t know. Maybe the men who never said a word about such things were the only ones who had really passed that test.

But I didn’t have to believe any of those stories to know how to behave when those bears came for me. All I had to do was act the way the storytellers claimed they had.

The whole thing was kind of stupid, because the one thing the bears *did* know was that I wasn’t going to talk. They never even *hoped* I would; it was as if something forced them to go through the motions anyway. Kind of like a dance, only with no music.

It was also a race with no winners.

The bears were racing to defuse one bomb, but all that time, I was busy building another. I even had a punch list, like the construction bosses always carried with them. I didn’t have a yellow pad, or an aluminum box to keep it in, but I had a better place to store things.

Step One came naturally. The locals always get the first chance—not only do they know the territory best, they’re already inside it before word reaches beyond their borders.

But this time, they knew they had to work fast, and that knowledge drove them something fierce. When you feel the Devil’s own breath on the back of your neck, you can’t even waste the energy it takes to turn around and see how close that hellhound is.

Even so, they couldn’t just crash through the brush without worrying about how much noise they made. Knowing the territory best also meant everyone in that territory knew *them* too.

They would have liked to have the hive completely surrounded before they made the move, but they didn’t have that luxury. They had always been the top dogs here, but they knew that was due for a change.

And quick, too.

Bigger and more deadly bears were on their way; you could already feel the ground trembling under their weight. The locals knew they would never be able to drain the hive dry

—the best they could hope for was to pull out anything that could hurt them before they were shoved out of the way.

Those bigger bears had no need to poke and probe and look for openings. They didn't have to pussyfoot around—no matter what popped out when they squeezed, nothing in the hive posed a danger to any of them.

Why be subtle when you don't care what kind of tracks you leave? When the bigger bears were all done squeezing, there'd be nothing left but a tiny little lump.

Just big enough to stick that goodbye needle in.

When you're arrested for murder, you don't have much to trade. The rule is, you have to trade *up*, like when a drug addict gives up his dealer. But if you've done *considerable* killing, talking about who paid you for those services might make the Law so happy that they'll spare your life in exchange. Or even turn you loose.

But once you get down to murder for money, the Law's not the only player at the table. No matter how high up those you talk to may stand, no matter what they promise, you know that even the *rumor* of you talking can end it all.

Once the Law has you like they had me, you *are* going to die. There isn't but one actual option left to you, only one thing you can still control. You get to decide who does the job.

If you make the Law do it, all they can kill is your body. Your spirit lives, and your reputation carries on.

When you die the right way, there's no reason for anyone to seek vengeance on your loved ones.

Just the opposite, in fact.

The crime that finally brought me down made national news. But that was just because of the body count. National news doesn't always bring in national Law.

All the killings had been in one state, so there was no way the Feds could just ram the way in and take over. That's what the local Law kept telling themselves, anyway. They ran around saying "jurisdiction" to each other like it was a holy word ... the way people in the movies hold up a cross to banish vampires.

That only works in the movies.

Keeping the Feds out of our business, that's like a religion around here. But if a federal agent gets killed—they *are* coming. Get in their way and, no matter how big you are, lawman or not, you're nothing but a pile of hot asphalt waiting on the steamroller.

All I could do was be patient. Deep inside, alone, watching the layers of protection I'd taken so many years to build up slowly come off.

I knew this would happen someday. I thought I was ready for it, because I'd had so much practice. When I knew pain was coming, I could go someplace in my mind. Someplace else. From there, I could watch it happening, happening to me, but I didn't feel it. I'd learned to do that as a child. Maybe not "learned," because I hadn't studied on it—one day, I realized it had just happened. After that, it always did.

And now it was happening again. I was watching what the big bears were watching. Only this time, what they were watching was an illusion. They weren't getting any closer to what they really wanted. But the closer they thought they were getting, the easier it was for me to keep checking steps off my list.

It seemed like everyone in the world wanted to talk to me. But even if they weren't undercovers, they damn sure weren't showing up because they cared about me.

And I surely didn't need any "spokesman." There was no shortage of volunteers for *that* job.

I didn't worship "the media" the way most folks did. Longing for attention is for killers who *haven't* been caught. Like that Zodiac sex fiend in California who kept sending letters to the papers. Or that Unabomber psycho who wanted to see his stupid "manifesto" in print. Now he has the rest of his life to read it.

I'm nothing like them. I'm not crazy. I never wrote taunting notes to the police; I never got a thrill out of what I did. I was just an assassin, good at my trade. Like any skilled workman, I charged a fair wage for my work, and I never expected payment in full until I finished each job to the customer's satisfaction. Contract killers aren't all the same. The only thing we have in common is that we all commit murder for money. Speaking for myself, it was *only* for the money.

But there's more to this work than making people dead. The contracts always have other terms and conditions to them, and those hold forever. It didn't matter if I was caught—so long as I didn't cross those lines, I was free to strike any deal for myself that I could.

Only I didn't want a deal.



ust as the local bears got their first turn at me, the local boss bear—the District Attorney himself—took his before anyone else.

He came to the jail alone. Well, not really alone. He had a couple of assistants with him and the Sheriff's men were real close by all the time. They weren't there to protect him; it was their job to bear witness to the act of Christian charity that the big boss was going to deliver.

When everybody was in place, he reached down and shook my hand.

“You'll never face the death penalty in this county, Esau,” he said. “Folks around here, we all know what you've been through.”

He never specified on that, but he sure as Satan knew why I hadn't stood up when he held out his hand.

I knew he would never try for the death penalty anyway. Not around here. Not for someone like me.

I'd read up on this, and I knew the defense could ask for a change of venue—that's moving the trial to another part of the state. But if I had planned on actually putting up a defense, I'd've never let that happen. I knew what the DA knew—no matter who they picked for the jury, as long as it was from folks around here, they'd never vote to execute me.

They'd never vote to elect that DA again, either. They take insults like that real person around here.

That's why the words tumbled out of his mouth like a rolling bakery line of fresh lemon tarts, with a little strand of barbed wire hidden in each one.

I knew they'd come that way—you can't use a harpoon when you're fly-fishing.

But they kept using the wrong bait. I couldn't come right out and tell them what to use either. I did that and they'd all think I was the one holding the casting rod.



I'd known this time was coming. I'd known it for many years. The only excuse I had for the hive not being fixed up just right was that I hadn't planned on those other visitors—they weren't any reason to expect them.

The design did just what it was supposed to do: the more the bears dug at it, the stronger the hive got. Pull off one layer and the others would fold in on themselves, only wrapped much tighter. I was sure I'd made that honey armor-plated.

But, like I said, I hadn't built it expecting the Feds. I had counted on never having to deal with them, because I'd been so careful to stay away from anything that might draw their attention.

It's not like TV. This place could be home base for a dozen serial killers, and still the local Law would never call on the Feds for help. Around here, you could be anything from a U.S. marshal to a census taker; you'd still be a Fed.

Nobody likes the Feds. That goes back a long way, and its roots are deep.

But I shouldn't have counted on all that to keep me safe.

Step Two kind of came by itself. Once the Feds took over, they acted just as smug and arrogant as you'd expect. Came straight out and said it, first words. Anything anyone in the whole state could do for me, the Feds could do better. A lot better.

They could even fix it so I'd never spend another night behind bars.

When the locals were trying to get me to hand over the honey, they called it "cooperating." That word tastes foul in the mouth, just saying it. Like collaborating with the enemy.

The Feds were much smoother. They called it "debriefing," like I'd been out on an undercover mission. That didn't taste as bad. If I'd been with them all along, all the talking they wanted me to do wouldn't be a killer pointing the finger at the people who'd hired him. No, it would be a special kind of federal agent, reporting in from the field.

They even said they'd get that put in the papers, so everyone would know what a hero I'd been.

I knew that what people would think of me had nothing to do with what they might read in the papers.

Maybe that's why the Feds can never get in deep enough—all they ever have is a bunch of paper reports. If they needed someone to infiltrate a terrorist network, they had to recruit one who was already inside. Never occurred to them that they should put their own terrorists out there, and let the networks recruit *them*.

It's not just that they aren't patient enough, they're too ... disconnected, I guess is the best way to put it.

They know how to put their own people in with certain groups, but they can only pull them off when their agents are the same as the people in the group. White, I mean.

Maybe that's why it never crossed their minds that I might have killed some of those people for my own reasons.

At least the Feds were honest enough to tell me that they were determined to fill the basket, and they had a whole shopping list. But my name wasn't on it. Never been on it, they swore.

I did believe that last part.

When I say "Feds," I'm using that blanket to cover a whole slew of them. It seemed as if a new agency hatched every day. FBI, DEA, IRS, ATF ... the only one they always called by its full name was Homeland Security.

Way too many of them to accomplish anything. All they did was get in each other's way. They kept telling me how they were all on the same side, but they kept going at each other like they were blood enemies ... even right in front of me.

I started seeing them all the same way I do preachers: real good at telling other people how to act—but they had some special, private deal with God, so they were exempt from those same rules.

You want to buy yourself a real chance at salvation, well, you make sure you thro

something in the collection plate. And chip in to buy the preacher his new car every year too.

I guess it sounds like I hate men of the cloth. I don't, not really—I generally liked those I met personally. Except for the fat old swine who had hinted that what had happened to me and Tory-boy was God's punishment for some sin.

If any of the people I'd done work for had wanted that one killed, I would have given it to them cut-rate.

The more I thought about that man, the more hate came into me, like lungs gasping for air when you'd been underwater too long. Whatever sin had been committed didn't belong to me or Tory-boy. Anyone who couldn't see that was too dirty in his own mind to be allowed to call himself a man of God.

The way it ended with all those different Feds was when one of them told me that the task force was being disbanded because of "cooperation issues." That was pretty funny.

What happened was what always happens: the strongest bear drove the rest of them off.

You'd think that would be Homeland Security, but it was the FBI team who came out on top. Didn't even break a sweat doing it, either. It wasn't a blood-drawing fight; hardly a tussle, in fact. You could see who had the real muscle just by listening to them say "good morning" to each other.

ATF was the toughest to push out. They only left after telling the FBI team that they "expected a complete report." But the way they said it, it was the same way some guys mumble threats under their breath as they're walking away after backing out of a fight.

Step Three was revealed to me as soon as they trimmed down to one agency. The FBI couldn't stop saying "RICO." They soft-spoke it, like it was sacred.

They told me I would be serving the people. Protecting thousands, all over the country. Doing the right thing.

One of the older agents even told me that giving them what they wanted was my only path to forgiveness.

I knew I was past any forgiveness. And if forgiveness was going to come from them, I didn't even want it. Had this same government that now was trying to make me talk done the right thing when it had the chance, none of this would have happened at all.

For that, I could never forgive *them*.

One of them was a black guy. He said if I told them everything I'd be a kind of savior. The

people they wanted me to inform on were killing my community. Sucking the life out of parasites feeding on decent people. You could tell he hadn't done any more research about this place than looking it up on a map.

At first, nobody paid any real attention to me. They all had some routine they believed in so that's what each one went with. None of them even waited to see if I was buying it, just kept talking. Talking and nodding to themselves ... like senile old men do in nursing homes.

Finally, they stopped. All of them. Like they'd heard the same alarm clock go off.

The next morning, they all sat around in this horseshoe, forming a wall around me to the front and sides. My back was already against the wall, so I was surrounded.

They just sat there, waiting.

I moved my head around the horseshoe, so each and every one of them would know I was including him in my deliberate silence.

It was graveyard-quiet. I couldn't hear them breathe. I guess they misunderstood my message—if I was ready to open the floodgates, they wouldn't want to miss a drop.

So I went around the horseshoe with my eyes again. Even slower this time. I had even a molecule of their attention.

"You know what's lower than a maggot?" I said. "That would be a man who informs on his own partners. Everyone on a job takes some kind of risk. But if you're caught, a man's meant to play his own hand."

"How do you think we found *you*, Mr. Till?" one of the agents said.

"I wouldn't know about that," I said, surprised it took them so long to try that sorry trick.

"You want it spelled out, we can do that," another one spoke up. "Would that do it? If we gave you the name of the man who gave us yours, would you be ready to—?"

I stomped on the hand he'd been using to deal the marked cards from the bottom of the deck. I'd known enough men who'd been through this same game before to know exactly what to say to them.

"If somebody gave you my name, why don't you just ask *him* what you want to know?"

They went quiet again. I let their silence settle before I said: "Sure. So you're either bluffing, or the guy you got was some little messenger boy. Like a FedEx driver who knows where he dropped off a package, but couldn't tell you what was in it, never mind who had sent."

They just kept looking at me.

"Anybody you got to talk to you, he doesn't know anything," I said. "A guy like that, he wouldn't do any heavy lifting. All he's good for is sticking up gas stations, running errands, getting drunk, and beating his wife. Probably has a long enough sheet so another felon would put him under the jail."

Watching their eyes was like reading a newspaper.

"Sure ... that's probably it. You got this guy—the one you say gave you my name—but you got him for something else, didn't you? Nothing to do with this other thing you keep asking me about.

"Maybe he had warrants out. Maybe he was already on parole. But whatever it was—you're even telling me the truth—that would have been for his own crimes, not anyone else's. So he can't give you a thing. You could drill as deep as you wanted, you'd never hit a vein."

They still kept quiet. I guess it was some kind of technique: let me talk enough, maybe I

drop something they could use.

That wasn't going to happen. But all that silence had already told me I was right, so there was no harm in telling them some more of what they already knew.

"A man like that, he'd tell you everything," I went on. "Spill his guts ... if he had any to spill. Enough for a search warrant? Sure. But you already found enough stuff in my place to connect me to all kinds of things, didn't you? Your problem is, there's too much space between what you found and what you want. Especially what you want the most—names.

"So you used your computers. Probably, by now, you can tell each other you know who hired me. At least you think so. Only problem is, you can tell each other all you want, but you can't ever tell a jury."

An older guy with a short haircut—not like it was "styled" or anything, more like he didn't want to be bothered with going for haircuts too often, so he told them to take off as much as they could—he had one of those ripsaw voices. He didn't have to speak loud, because whenever he opened his mouth everybody else shut up.

"You have to admire a man who won't inform on his friends," he said. A jab, just to watch my response.

About ten seconds passed. When I still didn't say anything, he threw the sucker punch he'd been storing up all along.

"But the people we want aren't your friends," he said. "They aren't your 'partners,' like you called them. You're a hired hand. A day laborer. They don't think any more of you than someone they'd hire to cut their lawns. Or scrub out their toilets."

I looked in his eyes—twin flecks of the ground we have around here, dark brown and rock-hard.

"I know that," I told him.

That wasn't the answer he was expecting. His face didn't move a muscle, but I could feel the words hit him just the same.

But this guy was too much of a professional to be taken out with one punch.

"Then just tell me something, Esau," he said. "Tell me why a man with your intelligence wouldn't take this incredible opportunity. The opportunity we're offering you, right now here, today. Can you tell me that much? Just for my own understanding."

My hands rested on the wheels of my chair. Rested lightly. "That's not how I roll," I told him.

And I smiled real friendly, so he'd know there was no hard feelings.

Later that night, alone in my cell, I thought about what I'd said. There's probably a lot of different ways to look at those parting words of mine.

Maybe the Feds had meetings about that; I don't know. As far as they were concerned, I guess those were my last words, in all respects.

But just because I'd turned down their best offer didn't mean they were going away. They couldn't do that: there was a fire to feed, a legend to maintain.

Kill a Fed and you die. You *all* die.

But lurking shadows don't scare me—I grew up under them.

So, when Step Four came out a shade of gray, I plucked it out right away.

Every bomb-builder has his own style, but there are certain rules for all: handle the ingredients with respectful delicacy, and never close it up until everything needed is inside.

That's why I never stopped talking with the Feds. They had one of the ingredients I needed before I could wrap the package.

Ever since I came to understand that money can buy more than just things—like cars or houses or big TVs—I'd gone after it. I committed all kinds of wrong acts for all kinds of wrong people, all purely for the money. The money to buy safety for me and Tory-boy.

I was all done with that kind of work, but I still needed money.

It wasn't just money I needed, it had to be *clean* money. I didn't care what they called it, whose name was on whatever paper they signed to get it, but the money would have to come from a source the Feds couldn't ever trace back to those wrong people I had done all that wrong work for.

I knew the Feds would be watching any money coming in to me. And even if I managed my way around that, I'd have to get the money back out.

There's ways of informing without actually saying a word. There's ways you can draw a bright-red arrow pointing wherever you want it to. The people I'd worked for, they'd expect me to be aware of this.

So I had to make sure they knew I was keeping faith with them. Because now the river was flowing in the opposite direction. A certain kind of work still had to be done. But instead of getting paid, I was fixing to make some payments.

Maybe I should have said to myself, "Well, I was always loyal to them, why shouldn't they do this one last thing for me?"

But you don't ask favors of your employers. That's not the relationship. Nothing I had done for them had been an act of friendship. You might be friendly with a doctor, but you don't walk into his office without expecting a bill when you leave.

I never even considered the possibility. Even if they wouldn't think of it as blackmail—and I wouldn't blame them if they did—that's just not how it's done. I'd been paid fair and square for what I did, every time I did it. That's where the old saying comes from: "If you don't like the job, just put the bucket down." My kind of work means that you put it down *gently*, not drop it and splash water all over everyone else.

I'd had a goodly amount put away, in different places. But once they had locked me up, I'd been forced to spend a big chunk of that money.

Most of that went toward keeping things in place while I waited them all out. That wasn't so hard. I was used to doing business over the phone, and I could use the jailhouse pay phone anytime I wanted. After all, I hadn't been actually convicted of anything yet, so I was what they call a "pre-trial detainee," and that gives you certain rights.

And moving money you already had stashed away wasn't difficult at all—if the Feds couldn't watch it come in, they couldn't watch it leave. Which meant they couldn't see where

it landed.

All I had to do was call certain people and tell them I was concerned about a project of mine: an ancient Ford I had found buried under a ton of garbage in this old barn that was once some property I'd purchased. That car was a pretty rare thing, especially because it still had the flathead V-8 it came with. I'd ask if they'd managed to find a certain part—like a fender or a headlight. For the people I called, those words were as easy to follow as a map.

Paying our way to keep everything in place, that had always been costly. But there had never been a shortage of work, so it hadn't been a real problem. In fact, even as expensive as certain things I'd needed had been, I'd still been able to put quite a bit aside.

But now that I couldn't work, there'd be no fresh money coming in, and no way to restock. I had to get my hands on one big chunk. No more installment plans for me; this one time, I had to buy what I wanted outright.

I knew one way I could transfer money so the Feds couldn't trace it in a thousand years, but that was something I could pull off only once.

The people I was never going to name knew the position I was in, but they still trusted me. The way they proved that was by staying away. If they hadn't trusted me, the first thing they would've done would've been to send in a lawyer. Only he wouldn't be my lawyer; he'd be theirs. A spy.

Had they done that, it would have hurt me deep. Might have insulted me enough to push me over to whatever side made me the best offer.

By keeping their distance, they freed me from that choice. Maybe that was a show of respect, or maybe it was nothing more than them knowing I'd never trust any lawyer they sent. No more than I'd ever trusted them.

But what it probably came down to was simple, brutal math: I might be holding some high cards, but they held the trump.

My little brother.

Step Five was kind of forced on me. Considering my income—all the government knew about was what I got from Disability—the judge said I couldn't afford a private lawyer. That meant the State had to give me one. In fact, they gave me two.

I didn't want any special treatment from some judge that I'd never met—that was pretty typical of the way strangers had looked at me all my life. Strangers from around here, mean. A lot of people I'd never met still seemed to know who I was when we got introduced.

"Poor Esau," that's how I was looked upon. Not by way of money, but ... the way I was born. What I was born with. The burdens I had to struggle with. I could feel them thinking how terrible that must be for me.

And how glad they were it wasn't *them* in that wheelchair.

But after I finished researching it, I realized that judge wasn't treating me special after all. I found out that the State always gives two lawyers to any indigent defendant in a capital case.

I only met with those State-paid lawyers one time. "The first thing you need to understand is that we can't do our job unless you're totally honest with us," I remember one saying.

before promising to come back in a few days.

Before that happened, another bunch of lawyers showed up. They were a private group, they told me. Like missionaries, traveling around the country. Only their mission wasn't to save souls from hellfire; it was to save bodies from the death penalty.

They left me a bunch of stuff to read, the way a vacuum-cleaner salesman leaves his "literature" with everyone who's not buying that day.

That was because I told them I wasn't going to take any prosecution deal. I was going to trial, no matter how heavy the prosecutor sweetened the pot. They really perked up at that and worked hard at trying not to let me see it.

I knew what was in their minds. It wasn't that any of them expected me to be acquitted. But if I was going to trial, they had a good excuse to stick around. It was a capital case, after all. So even after—they said "if," but I knew they must say it that way to every client they ever had—I was found guilty, there would still be what they called the "penalty phase." And that was where they could outdo any court-appointed lawyers in the country, they told me.

That was where they were going to step in and save me. In the penalty phase, whatever they had done wouldn't be as important as why I did it. "That's the most critical factor, Esau," the girl they always brought with them told me. "We have to make the judge and the jury see you as an individual. They have to know who you are, from the inside out. Because the more they know you as a person, the less they'll be willing to ... hand down the ultimate sentence."

She just went on and on. They were going to show the jury how I really didn't have any choice, the kind of life I'd had, blah-blah-blah.

They didn't know one single thing about any of that. All they knew was what anyone could see for themselves: I was born bad—the spine thing. They just assumed I was raised even worse, me being poor white trash, living on Disability, no education, no job, no prospects. "No hope," she said, like that was a knockout punch.

I'd rather take a bullet than pity, but how could these people know that? They didn't know me.

They didn't even know how dumb they sounded. How could they be such great lawyers in capital cases if they had so much experience with the penalty phase?

When I told them I *wanted* the death penalty, I thought they'd just pack up and go back wherever they came from. Not a chance. They said that would be State-assisted suicide, and they weren't about to let that happen.

So I made it even clearer—they didn't have any choice about what *they'd* let happen or not. That was up to me, not them. I reminded them that they weren't my lawyers. I didn't hire them, so I couldn't fire them, but the court hadn't appointed them, either. And wasn't about to.

What I didn't tell them was that they reminded me of doctors standing around the bedside of a dying man, already counting up which of his organs they could salvage. I just told them to get lost.

They kind of smirked when I said that. Especially the girl. She was way younger than me, dressed a little flashier than people around here consider seemly. Smelled good, too. She came over to where I was and sat real close.

"The lawyers the State appointed for you have tried exactly three capital cases between the

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