

Dear Diary

By James A. Moore

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So, here's the deal. I got a call from Demetrius and that only means one thing. He's got work for me. I don't ask questions in advance. I go to Demetrius and we talk, because that's the way you do business with the man.

There are people you can carry an attitude with. He isn't one of them. He's the sort of man where you say yes sir and no sir and hope you don't piss him off too much.

Not that it's a problem, really. Me and Demetrius, we're on good terms. So, anyway, I get to his restaurant and sit down at the table where he normally hangs around, and sure enough, he comes my way. Demetrius isn't tall, but he carries himself like he's a fucking bruiser.

He sits down and gets right to it, which isn't his normal style. Most times we at least chat it up for a while, you know? So I can tell it's gonna be an interesting night.

"I've got something of an emergency, Buddy. I need your help." That's my name, Buddy. Actually, it's Buddy Fisk. Actually, that's a lie, but when I'm working it's the name I answer to. What I do when I'm not working is no one's business. Let's just leave it at I live in two worlds. Buddy Fisk allows me to live in my other world a little more comfortably.

"What's up?"

Demetrius leans back in the seat and stares at me for a few seconds. When he's figured out what he wants to say, he talks again. He's like that. Demetrius is always slow

about saying anything at all because he wants to make sure he has your undivided attention, like there's any doubt, right?

Finally, he tells me the score. "There are four books that were stolen from a good friend of mine. A very good friend. Luckily, he found out where they were being sold and by whom. I need them back and I need a message put out."

"Four books?" Listen, I'll be blunt here. I don't work at a library. I do the sort of shit that no one ever wants to do and somebody always has to do. Mostly, I kill people. I kill a lot of people. I don't ask questions, I don't study my targets and get to know them, I just make them dead. My point is, I don't normally get sent out to gather a few books. My rates are too high for that sort of shit.

Demetrius gives me one of those looks, the ones that say I'd be better off not asking too many questions, and I nod my understanding.

"So what's the deal then?"

"I have a name. I know who has the books. You get them, and you take them to this man at this address." He handed me a piece of paper. "When you get done, you come back to me and I give you a bonus."

I got all of the details from the man in charge and I headed out. It was going to be an ugly bit of business, and all over some books. You never know what the day will bring, right?

I needed light weapons, but just to be safe, and because I was going after something that somebody wanted in a bad way, I took my truck. I have a few cars, but the truck has special accessories. I didn't think I'd need them, but on the other hand, the

bonus that Demetrius mentioned was three times what I should be paid for a simple retrieval case, so I didn't much feel like playing around.

My target was a kid named Leonard Guthrie. He liked to be called "Trance" because that was the sort of music he kept trying to record and sell. He wasn't at the local club for pompous assholes, so I figured he'd probably be hanging out on the street near his house. How did I know so much? Simple. Demetrius had the information waiting for me. How did he get it? I don't know and I don't care. Demetrius has ways of finding shit out. That's enough for me.

I finally found the little bastard a couple of blocks from the high school closest to his house. He had about as much reason for hanging at a high school as me, but he also had a thing for younger girls. Good old Trance was twenty-four years old. He was hanging with a few kids when I saw him.

It wasn't a problem to park the truck and lock it. I had what I needed on me already. I made sure I was a few blocks further away than was really necessary, because I wanted to scout out the area and it wouldn't do to have my car close by if things went the wrong way. You have to be careful, see? Not paranoid, just careful. Especially when you do the sort of shit that I do.

I moved carefully, but not too carefully. I know that doesn't make sense, so just this once I'll explain it. If you are in a public place and moving like you want to make absolutely no sounds, you're probably going to be noticed by every single person around you. Moving quietly takes effort and you'd be amazed how many people over-exaggerate their steps when they're trying for stealth. The idea is to blend in and look like you fit. Need to sneak into a hospital room late at night? Look like you belong there. It ain't all

that hard to do. Need to sneak into a locked building and not set off alarms, then you take your time.

Still, I must have done something to give myself away, or Leo had eyes in the back of his head. I was moving along nice and casual, and I saw the four kids all hanging together. Leo was on the trunk of a BMW that probably belonged to his folks. He had a beer in his left hand and his right hand sitting high and tight on the inner thigh of a skinny little blonde with braces and a training bra. Long legs and graceful poise like a dancer. If she was a day over fifteen, I'm the ambassador for world peace. Not far away, a couple of teens who looked closer to driving age were just getting ready to go their own way.

Leo looked over his shoulder and saw me. His eyes flew wide open in surprise, and without even blinking, he was up and running in the opposite direction. I hate when the little shits catch on that something is up.

Now, I could have probably run after him and tackled his skinny ass, but that's not why I was there. I had a job to do and he was about to run away. So I pulled out one of my throwing knives and skewered the back of his leg.

Leo went down hard, skinning both of his palms as he fell to his hands and knees, the blade vibrating like a tuning fork in the muscle of his calf.

He might have liked trance music, but the sound that came out of him would have snapped a coma victim to consciousness.

Everything started happening at once, and I needed to get control of the situation. The girl still sitting on the Beamer opened her mouth to scream. The two kids standing nearby started to run. Leo let out another shriek.

I pulled out two guns. They were small caliber, because I was trying to do this quietly. The first .22 I aimed at the blonde girl's face. The second one I aimed at the couple of rabbits.

The girl took one look at the business end of my little Remington and shut her mouth. The other two teens got about as still as statues. Leo kept screaming until I put my foot on the back of his ass and kicked him forward. Then he let out a grunt and whimper and caught hold of his leg near the knife's entry point.

I leaned in close before I spoke. "Shut up, boy." Leo shut up, mostly. He was still going strong in the whimper department. "Quit being a pussy. It's only a three-inch blade. You'll live."

"What do you want from me?" He was good at the crying game. He had tears going strong and I swear kids could have taken diving lessons off that bottom lip of his.

"The books you stole."

Of course, it's not so easy talking to one person and keeping guns on three others. The happy couple off to the side started moving. I moved the barrel to follow their progress. "Move two more steps and I'll blow you away." Yeah, it's a .22 caliber. It's also a .22 caliber loaded with glaser bullets. Those are shells filled with gel and with little pellets. The idea is, the shell hits you, and the point opens up. The goo inside comes out while the shell is moving through you, see, and when that happens, well, it's like detonating a grenade inside the body. Little hole where it enters, hole big enough to park a car in on the other side. Okay, that's an exaggeration, but not much of one. The bullets are called "sure-kills" by a lot of people, because even if you just wing an arm, it's

probably gonna get blown open or even severed in the process. I wasn't really kidding, either. Teens or not, innocent or not, I had a job to do.

Good thing for the kids they listened.

“Move your asses over to your blonde friend over there. Now.” I kept my voice low and calm. No reason to ask for extra witnesses, really, and I had already gotten a chance of that thanks to Screaming Mimi at my feet.

I reached down and took my knife back from Leo. He let out another yelp, but calmed it down when I pointed one of my pistols at his face. “Didn't I tell you not to be such a pussy?” Leo nodded real quiet like. “Get up and move over to the car.”

Leo made a big show of bravely standing up and limping his way over to the car where his friends were standing. There was a little dark patch on his jeans, but other than that you could barely tell he was wounded.

The little blonde girl started to hop off the car and run to her hero. I told her to sit the fuck back down and then we all got to business.

“Okay, here's the thing. Leo here, he stole a few books from somebody who wants them back.”

“I didn't steal them! I found them!”

Yeah, of course I believed him. How could I not trust the sort of sleazy little fuck who was into girls half his age and called himself “Trance”?

“Whatever. Thing is, I want the books back. I get them, we all go our own ways and nobody has to get hurt.”

“But, I already sold the books.”

I stared at Leo nice and hard. “You already deliver them?”

“No.”

“Then you haven’t sold them yet, have you?”

“But, the money…”

“Ain’t gonna mean shit if you’re dead. Where are the books?”

“I don’t have them with me.”

“So let’s go get them.”

“Does that mean the rest of us can go?” That was the older girl, who was looking at me with wide eyes and what I guess was supposed to be a seductive look. Probably killed the boys at her high school but to me she just looked like a kid trying to be all grown up.

“What? Are you fucking high? No, no one goes anywhere. Not until this is all done.”

“So, what are you going to do with us?” The other boy. Not Leo. Leo was too busy looking at the ground and muttering to himself.

I ignored my target for a second and thought about it. “We’re gonna have to take all of you along with us, and that means you two go into the trunk.”

“Oh hell no!” That was the other boy again. He took a step in my direction and I pointed the pistol at him again. “Did I say there were choices? Go stand with your girlfriend.” He glared, but he did what he was told. Testosterone and kids, never a good combination.

The little blonde was starting to fidget, so I gave her something to do. I tossed her a roll of duct tape and had her tie up her friends. They wanted to protest, but the gun issue was still in play. I made sure she tied them up nice and tight, and then Leo got to throw

them into the trunk of his daddy's Beamer. I noticed where his hands went when he put the girl in there, and she did too, but the tape over her mouth stopped her from calling him out for feeling her up.

When they were nice and cozy, I closed the trunk and climbed into the back seat of the car, but only after Leo and the blonde both climbed in the front.

Leo was smart. He drove nice and steady, even if he did keep whining. Even his little squeeze toy was starting to throw disgusted looks in his direction.

We didn't talk and get chummy. Aside from Leo letting out his nasal whimpers, it stayed pretty quiet. That changed around the same time the truck came at us.

We were on the same street as before, but at an intersection, and out of the little access road to the back of the yuppie strip mall off to the left, comes a garbage truck. Thursday night after ten PM. Who the fuck is picking up trash that late? Answer: no one. The truck came straight for the Beamer and I saw it and so did the girl. She screamed loud enough to show the braces on her teeth all the way to the back of her mouth. I ducked down and braced myself for impact.

Dear Diary
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The BMW was a big car. The truck was bigger. We got thrown and hard. I could feel the tires trying to get a purchase, could hear the sound of the back end of the Beamer caving in, and then there was a wall in front of us and the truck's headlights were lighting up the interior well enough that I could have read one of those pocket versions of the Bible with the really tiny print.

The wall stopped us from going forward. The truck behind us pushed anyway. The rear window and the windshield both blew out around the same time, and I covered my eyes as the glass storm hit.

A few seconds later, I realized I was still alive. It was a good day, because I hadn't even pissed myself and believe me, I'd have felt perfectly justified. Adrenaline kicked into my system and I made myself stay as calm as possible, taking in slow, deep breaths and waiting for the right moment to make my move.

The windows on the side spider webbed, God bless the makers of Saf-T-Glass. I couldn't see out of the stuff, but the assholes outside, couldn't see in, either.

I had the two pistols out and in my hands in record time. I thumbed the safeties, because I wasn't much worried about shooting somebody by accident at that point. I was worried about getting out of the situation alive.

The truck pulled back a little and took something with it from the back of the car. I could hear the metal screaming as the vehicles separated. I could also hear one of the

kids in the trunk screaming, but only one. My guess, the other one was beyond screaming. I could see the back of the trunk accorded up to where the rear window should have been. It was almost enough to make me feel for the kids. Almost.

The girl in the front seat was groaning, and the airbags had punched her and Leo in their faces when they deployed. They were already deflating.

Over those sounds, I heard the voices that came from the truck. They sounded anxious. Go figure.

So, it isn't exactly like I could go anywhere at that particular moment. The impact had pushed me forward until I was wedged between the front and back seats. Instead of crying—and I was giving that idea serious thought—I slid up as best I could and got my shoulders free.

Up in front, the girl was finally losing it, crying for her mother. That part hurt, because, really, I don't dislike kids. I don't have any of my own, but I don't dislike them, even when they're getting older and want to pretend they're all grown up.

I only had one person I was supposed to take out. One contract. I don't like it when things go wrong, so I was getting a little bitchy right about then. I didn't sit up. I didn't climb back into my seat and try to kick open the door, and I sure as hell didn't make any noises. Good old Leo and his sidekick were doing enough of that for everyone.

What I did, was wait.

Somebody pulled on the driver's side door and cursed when it wouldn't open up for him. He cursed in Spanish. I guessed maybe he wasn't local talent. I don't speak much Spanish, but my Latin is still good from back when I went to church every Sunday.

I understood the word “book” when I heard it and knew then and there that they wanted what I wanted.

Have I mentioned I don’t much like having to deal with the competition?

Leo made some more noise, and started to talk. I think the dumb ass was expecting the cops or an ambulance. He said, “Help us! We’re stuck in here with—”

He stopped talking around the same time the stocky Latin kid reached through the windshield to grab at his face.

I fired once and watched the bullet take off half the head of the kid trying to get Leo. After that, I didn’t stop shooting. Left hand, and the window on the rear driver’s side blew out. It was a wasted bullet, but the best I could do at the time. Right hand, and the bullet I fired cut a hole into the second guy out there, who was just starting to reach for his gun. Two more people at least. I fired at the one who was just climbing from the truck, and caught him in the shoulder. His left arm fell away from the rest of him and he wheeled back before he hit the ground. My right hand again and I parted the hair on Leo’s head and caught the last of the Latinos in his neck.

Leo was still trying to duck and cover, and the girl was screaming again, her forehead was burned from where the airbag hit her. I didn’t have time to kick the door open, so I climbed out the window and felt the remaining glass slide across my jacket and sprinkle down across my neck and back.

The loser I pegged as he was climbing down was still alive, and I couldn’t take any chances on him calling for anyone else, or risk another member of their little gang trying to pump a few hundred bullets in me. I wasn’t prepared for a long drawn out fight.

Hell, the only reason I even had the guns at all was because now and then it helps to cover your ass.

I slipped on what was left of the second guy I shot, but I kept my balance, and aimed at the man nearest the truck. He was moaning, but barely conscious. Just to be safe, I hit him again and took out his head. Not pretty, but it definitely shut him up.

Nobody ever checked a garbage truck for extra passengers as fast as I did right then, guaranteed. The good news was the truck was empty. The better news was it was still running. Oh, the front end was mashed and shit, but fuck it; it wasn't my truck anyway.

I'd been worried about Leo and the girl trying to get away. I shouldn't have been. They were both in the same positions, and they were both crying. I walked over to Leo and slapped him across the face as soon as I'd re-holstered one of my .22s. He blinked and started to say something, but shut up when I pointed the remaining pistol.

"Get out of the fucking car and get in the truck." I didn't have time for this shit. We were at a shopping center, and it was closed, and so far I'd been luckier than I had any right to be and no one had come running to see if they could help with the accident. But even .22s make noise, and the two screamers weren't making things any better.

Leo sniffed back his tears like a real man and got out. The blonde followed along, still crying, but quietly now.

We were almost to the truck when she said "Wait! What about Hunter and Trudy?"

"Who?" Okay, I was a little dazed myself. I'd been running on instinct.

"Our friends in the trunk." She stared at me like I was a maniac.

“Oh. They stay where they are.”

“What?” Her voice was going up into the loud and shrill range. I was liking her a lot less.

“They stay here. I don’t have time for them.”

“What if they’re hurt?” Now she was screaming, looking at me like I was the worst kind of monster.

“I don’t fucking care. We have to go.”

“I’m staying here!” Her voice fucking echoed off the closest building. She was, I guarantee you, louder than the fucking car wreck had been.

So I shot her. One bullet between her eyes. Most of her face vanished in the spray that went out the back of her head.

Leo let out a wail and I slapped him hard enough to stagger him into the side of the truck. I’d had enough of him and of the fucking hunt for the books, so I grabbed his face with my free hand and pointed at his dead girlfriend with my pistol.

“You did that, Leo. That was all you. You stole some books from the wrong person and now she’s dead and so are your friends in the trunk and so are the fuckers who were driving this truck.”

He tried the crying shit again and I shook my head and slammed the pistol against his mouth and split his lip.

“You shut the fuck up. You don’t have time for that shit. We’re leaving, now. I’m driving. You’re telling me how to get to the books.”

Leo was shaking like a vibrator set on overdrive, but he nodded his head and did like he was told. I watched him climb in and push past what was left of the guy I’d shot

twice. His face cringed and his body flinched when he set his foot in the man's bloody pulp. Still, he was a real trooper and climbed in the truck. If there'd been any fight at all inside of him, it went away when I massaged his face with the hot barrel of the .22.

I used to drive a truck for a living, a long time ago. I knew the gears and how they worked. We parked the truck down the block from Leo's house, and climbed out quietly.

Leo came from money. Old money. The same sort that liked to hang around with Demetrius, because they were too fucking stupid to realize how dangerous he was. Why the fuck he stole the books and tried to put them on eBay is anyone's guess, but certainly not mine. Maybe mommy and daddy didn't want to up his allowance.

We got to the front door before I spoke again. "In and out. We go in, and you give me the books, and I leave. But if you make a false move, or fail to turn off the alarm, I'm going to kill you and your family. Your mom. Your dad. Any brothers or sisters and the family fucking dog. You get me?"

Leo nodded nice and slow and turned off the alarm. Turns out they didn't own a dog, which is just as good, because I can silence an alarm without waking up a family, but a loud dog is a guaranteed way to have more trouble.

We went up the stairs, and now we were being nice and careful, moving slow and quiet, because now Leo understood that his whole family was going to die if he fucked with me.

Half way down the hallway to his room, the smell hit us. Listen, ever hit a skunk in the road? My dad did that once when we were driving down to visit the grandparents. The smell was enough to make your eyes water and ruin any appetite you thought you

had for over a hundred miles before the road and the wind wiped most of that shit off the car.

What we smelled walking past his parents' closed door was like that skunk, only it smelled dead, too. Leo wanted to stop and look, but I didn't let him. I shook my head and brandished the gun. He got the clue and kept going, his chest heaving with every urge to puke that crept through his body.

I'm a little smarter. I breathed through my mouth. The stuff tasted as nasty as it smelled, but at least I could tolerate it. Nothing a few breath mints wouldn't fix, right?

We entered Leo's room and he dropped to his knees, sliding his hand under the bed. I knew he was going for the books, but just to be safe, I slid the pistol behind his ear and leaned in close. "Better be books, Leo. Or you're dead."

It was books. All four of them. One of them was as big as the Manhattan White Pages and bound in leather. There was some weird writing on the front. It matched the description. One looked like somebody had taken the time to bind eight pages of paper between two pieces of sterling silver. No way it was a fake. Like the first one, it matched the description. The next one was small and well worn, like an old family Bible, only I'm pretty sure the gargoyle face on the front never went with a copy of the Good Book. I reached out and touched the last one. I swear it squirmed in my fingers. That was enough for me. No way the little shit had a chance to make copies. Even if he'd had the time, he wasn't that smart.

Leo looked at me hopefully and I nodded my approval. Then he turned to pick them up and made my job easier. Two wooden dowels, no more than three inches long, and one piece of high-test fishing line between them. Cost to me was about seven dollars

if you count the whole spool of fishing line I had to throw out because no one with a brain leaves evidence behind these days. I had the wire around his neck before he could so much as blink, and my fingers almost joined behind him before I started pulling.

Ever choke a man to death? It takes a little time. Leo put up a fight, too, but he was too late to get his fingers between the wire and his throat, and I was too smart to leave him any slack. He bucked and I pulled. He kicked and I stepped out of the way. His face turned red and then purple as the wire cut deeper. The line of blood down the front of his shirt was surprisingly fast as it flowed. I didn't let go until his face was almost black and the worst of the blood flow had stopped.

I was supposed to leave a message, just in case anyone else in his family knew about the books, or any of his friends were in on the gig. I left it. It's my job.

I left the garrote where it was. I'd worn gloves when I made it and I wore gloves when I used it. Why take it with me and risk getting myself covered in blood?

I slipped the nylon rucksack out of my jacket pocket and slid the books inside it. No way in hell they were going to hide in my coat, so I ran the sack's cord into my belt and let it rest against my back and ass. I might have looked a little silly, but I knew the books weren't going anywhere without me. After what I'd been through already, I wasn't much for taking chances.

I knew the town's layout well enough. I figured it was sixteen blocks back over to my truck. Not that bad a run, so I got as ready as I could and then I headed out of the house. I was careful. I didn't want to get spotted by Leo's folks. I'd done enough killing already to earn my pay and then some. The smell that had damned near left me gagging

earlier had dissipated. It still stank, but it wasn't enough to make me want to hurl anymore.

Two minutes later, I was out of the house and gulping in the fresh air, glad to be away from whatever the hell had stunk up the oversized residence.

I started jogging, nothing too strenuous, because I wanted to conserve my strength. So far the night had been full of just a few too many surprises for my tastes, and I didn't feel like taking chances, especially because I only had a few bullets left in my weapons and the guns in question were already associated with a few too many murders.

I made it two blocks before I realized I was being followed.

Dear Diary
By James A. Moore

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It happens now and then and most times, I can chalk it up to my imagination. You work this sort of business for too long and you start getting paranoid. People die, and sometimes their relatives take it personally. So, it's best to be on the alert.

I didn't see anyone, and if I heard them, it wasn't consciously, but I felt the skin on my neck pull tight and the fine hairs lift up into hackles. First rule you always follow in my book is simply to trust your instincts. I trusted mine and started running a little faster. I also started paying attention to what was around me a little better.

Weird feeling, that whole "being followed" thing. I couldn't have said where it was coming from, but I'd have sworn there were eyes on me, and they were watching my every move. Worse, I started catching whiffs of the same nastiness that was back at Leo's house. Not strong enough to really make me feel sick again, but bad enough that I wanted to get away from it, or maybe bathe in a bottle of air freshener.

I'd gone about two blocks before I heard anything. I know a lot of people are gonna say no way, because I'd been running for two blocks, but I run every day, and I usually do around five miles, so believe me, two blocks wasn't even enough to get me breathing hard.

It wasn't that much of a sound, just some scratching noises, which, when you hear them on the sidewalk behind you, is a little weird, especially late at night. It sounded sort of like a dog's nails scraping the concrete, but maybe a little louder. That'd have been my

luck, a big damned dog that rolled around on a dead skunk to get a special kind of odor going.

I didn't want to let whatever was following me know I had caught on, so I didn't look behind me. But I did flip the safety to the off position on one pistol. Then I started moving faster.

Listen, residential areas can make it a bitch to see anything sneaking up on you. Not enough glass, and too many bushes where things can hide, so I did the only thing I could think of to make sure I could get a fair shake and detoured off my original path. I headed for the strip malls a few blocks south of my location. Closer to where I'd been when all of Leo's friends got themselves killed.

There weren't a lot of places open. Thing about your smaller towns is, when tourist season is over, the shops close earlier and the bars that stay open are the ones that nobody with a lick of common sense wants to enter unarmed. I wasn't unarmed. So I moved fast and looked for a good place to duck into.

My luck again, there were no bars. Serves me right for not really casing the area better. In my defense, hey, it was a rush job and I hadn't expected to get into the sort of trouble I was already cleaning up. I mean, seriously, I was supposed to get a few books, not get into shootouts and arguments with would-be good Samaritans.

I didn't see an open bar, but I finally got a look at what was following me. It wasn't a dog. I would have preferred that, because, noisy and vicious or not, I knew a well-placed bullet would at least kill a dog.

I only got a look in the plate glass window from a little five and dime on the corner of Westfield Avenue and Lanier Road. It was night and the only light was coming

from the street lamp behind me. So I couldn't see it clearly, but I knew right away I was in deep shit. It was just a shadow, okay? But it looked all wrong. It sort of looked human, with arms and legs, but it was running on all fours, and it was as skinny as a greyhound. I couldn't see the face, but I could see the hair on the thing, thin and scraggly, like it had the mange or something, and I could see the long fingers of the hands whenever it was bouncing forward.

It didn't run so much as it hopped, the legs pushing off the ground and the hands catching the sidewalk and moving it forward before the legs did their thing and kicked again. Made me think of the way kids played leapfrog when I was younger. The same sort of motion, but faster and a lot stronger. The thing was covering ten feet or more every time it pushed away from the ground and lunged ahead.

I felt my balls try to hide away. No way the thing behind me was human, and I don't fucking care what my eyes were trying to tell me, it couldn't have been human if it had to be. Anyone that skinny would have been dead from malnutrition, you get my point? No way in hell whatever was behind me was too tired to move.

Enough was enough. The thing behind me had to be stopped before it decided to jump on me and start cutting with the nasty claws I saw on its shadow. I pulled both of the guns and turned my body around, my heels sliding a bit as I put on the brakes. See, I'm only good at a few things, but I'm damned good at those few. One of them is hitting my targets. I almost never miss. That's not bragging; it's just a fact.

There was nothing behind me. There had been something a second earlier, but in the time it took me to draw and get ready to fire, the thing had vanished. Gotta tell you, I

was getting a bad, bad feeling about the situation. I looked around carefully, and then I decided it was time to be somewhere else.

I started jogging again, the books in my rucksack bouncing off my ass with every step I took. It was a bitch compensating, but it was also too damn late to stop and rearrange things. I had maybe fifteen blocks to run, thanks to my detour, and I needed to cover them so I could get to my truck.

I tried not to look behind me too often, and I tried to keep my ears nice and clean and working.

I should have paid attention to what was in front of me. Then I would have seen the car before it came after my stupid ass.

The sound of the engine whining in protest gave it away. It wasn't like in the movies, where the hitman is screeching tires and aiming to be seen. No, the guy driving was good and the car was almost quiet, but I was already doing the paranoia mambo, and I shifted my eyes to where the sound was coming from in time to see the little Ford Focus jump the curb and beeline straight for me.

I was already jogging and I think that saved my life. If I'd been walking or standing still, the fucking thing would have knocked me into next week, guaranteed. Instead, I managed to get out of the way and watched the Ford hit one of the trashcans they'd nailed to the ground every hundred or so feet around the whole area. The base stayed where it was. The rest of the can and its decorative cover tried for orbit, but only managed fifteen feet into the air before a wall stopped it. I didn't hang around to see where it was gonna land. I hauled ass, cursing the books banging against me with every step I took.

The car kept coming, and I heard the engine revving again. This time the tires let out a squeal of protest. I was close to squealing myself, because whoever was behind the wheel seemed to want me dead and in a hurry.

Soon as I could, I turned around and fired three rounds. One hit the car's grille and then the engine. Another bounced off the hood and from there disappeared into the night. The last one took out the windshield.

The car let out a few more rude noises as the radiator spilled hot antifreeze and water along the curb, and then shuddered and died. I looked around for some decent cover, but aside from another car that had been abandoned for the night, there wasn't much. Just to add to the fun, the asshole doing the driving kicked on the high beams, the fog lights and the damned spot light he was sporting and nailed me in the face around the same time I was looking at the front end and the next thing I knew, I had blue stars filling my eyes and blinding me as I ducked behind my temporary shield.

I heard the car door open and close. I heard footsteps, even over the sound of the radiator hissing its life fluids all over the ground.

Then I heard the voice. It was soft and calm and purely business. That scared me more than anything else, because I knew that tone of voice too well. Hell, it could have been me doing the talking, and believe me, there's a reason I stay calm in bad situations. Edgy or angry get you dead.

"I just want the books, Fisk. I get the books and you go away alive."

Yeah. Right. Like I've never lied to a mark before.

"Gonna have to pass. Man's gotta make a living."

"One time offer. Give up the books, or I'll kill you."

I didn't know the voice, see, and that was a big problem. I don't like it when people know my name and I can't recognize them. I don't like dealing with unknowns. How fast a draw was he? How good a shot? I know the answers when it comes to me and to a lot of other guys, but this one? Anyone who thinks they're the best is either very lucky or a little crazy. There's always someone out there who's better.

You just gotta hope you never meet them.

He was good. He knew I was having trouble seeing and the lights on his car made it almost impossible to find him. I finally decided to drop to the ground before I looked any further. Maybe I'd get lucky.

"Hiding won't help, Fisk." He took a few steps in my direction, nice and slow, setting his feet carefully instead of letting them scuff the concrete. Little sounds can give you away, even to a blinded opponent. Here's where he made his mistake. He really thought I was blind, and not just seeing comet trails. I was down on the ground and hiding behind another car. The lights weren't really in my face any more.

It took me a few seconds while he was walking carefully and looking for me, but I spotted his legs. After I saw them, I fired twice. One bullet for each shin.

My new worst enemy might have been a problem, but after the sure kill bullets blew the bones out of his calves, he stopped worrying about anything but living.

I got up fast, and staggered over in his direction, praying the asshole didn't have a partner in the car. He was on his back by the time I reached him, screaming bloody murder and trying to cover the bleeding stumps of his lower legs with both of his hands. Frankly, I was surprised he had the reasoning skills to even try. Most people, you shoot them like that, they pass out. That sort of pain will put you in shock in no time at all. I

know, I've done it more than once. Maybe it was the bullets. See, the last time I took someone's legs, it was with a saw.

But enough of that. I looked at the loser on the ground and fired once more. This time I went for the head. He stopped screaming immediately.

I didn't know him, even before I blew his face into hamburger, he was a complete stranger. I also didn't have time to fuck around with worrying about him. I had to move and fast, because so far there had been two other groups paying to look for the books I was carrying and I didn't want to be a target any longer than I had to.

I checked my weapons and cursed under my breath. I had seven bullets left between the two of them. Not a good way to stay in my comfort zone, which I was reminded of around the same time I smelled the nasty thing coming after me again.

Now, a few of you are wondering why I maybe didn't take the weapons off the man I'd just killed and I'll give you a simple answer. There's always a chance I'm gonna get busted by the cops. Always. It's part of the job description. I finish a job, I lose the weapons I used. Break 'em down and sink 'em in the river or just throw them in a dumpster or five along the way. I don't get attached to any of the weapons, because these days the forensics teams are almost unnatural with how good they are at finding shit out.

There are other guys who like to hold on to one weapon. That means I get busted with their tools of the trade in my possession, and I get fingered for every crime they ever committed. I know one guy who did just that. He got busted after grabbing a weapon off a capo in Brooklyn. He'll never see the outside of a jail again.

So I left the additional firepower. It was too damned risky.

I didn't jog this time. I flat out ran. Nice steady breaths and good long strides. I wanted distance from whatever was coming after me, because what I'd seen earlier had made my balls want to hide in my stomach, and I couldn't afford to get scared and stupid.

Unfortunately, no one told that to the thing following me. I didn't see it, but I could feel it, keeping pace with me and hiding at the same time, like it was no big deal.

I wanted to stay in the commercial areas, but that wasn't going to happen. I had to go back into the neighborhoods to get to my truck and that meant back to where the thing trailing me could hide behind bushes and cars, or even try to outrace me by going through back yards.

Seven bullets. Most cases, I could kill seven people with that many shells, but I had to be able to see it to kill it and this thing liked playing hide and seek.

I got back to where the shrubs and manicured lawns started and I doubled my speed. I also got off the road whenever I could and kept to the grass, because if he could play at sneaking up on me, I could at least keep my footsteps quieter, so I could hear him coming.

It was a nice idea, but I didn't factor in the dogs. I don't know if I caused them to go crazy, or if my stalker did, but they went into fits damned near everywhere I went. Not a little barking to warn people away from their homes, but full-scale frenzies. I saw the door of one house shaking as the monster inside started slamming against it.

Do you have any idea how many people wake up when their mutts start barking? I mean I was carrying two pistols, both small caliber, for a reason. I wanted quiet. Most people hear a .22, they think it's some little shit with a string of firecrackers. I liked to keep it that way.

I saw lights coming on in a few of the houses, but they were too late to spot me. I was moving in a hard run, and by the time most of the locals were ready to look out their windows, I was already two houses away. I could feel my heart starting to pick up speed, and I could hear the sound of my pulse in my ears. I was as alert as I've ever been.

I barely saw it coming.

Dear Diary
By James A. Moore

4

Off to my left and in the very edge of my peripheral vision, something dark came from behind a sedan. I snapped my head in that direction and saw the thing clearly for the first time. It was hunched down like a dog and doing its weird hopping run again, the head craned at an unnatural angle as it came closer. The face was thin and bony, the eyes sunken into deep hollows. Its nose was like something that belonged on a skull, a deep hole. The mouth was a nightmare of teeth, all of them too long for the rest of the face, with thin lips that were peeled back like a dried fruit rind.

It was dead. I knew that in my heart. The damned thing was dead and moving my way. Shredded pants and a ruined shirt partially hid the gray skin stretched over wiry bones, but bare feet and long fingers sported claws that looked like knives.

I took it all in during the second or so it took for the thing to reach me.

Did I scream when it grabbed me? Shit yes, like a scalded baby. I didn't have long to scream before it had me pinned to the ground though. The feet of the monster pinned down my legs even as I struck the lawn. The hands grabbed my jacket and pulled it into knots. That freakish face loomed over me, and the pits where its eyes hid—if it actually had eyes—pressed close enough to let me see *things* moving in the darkness.

It opened its mouth, and I saw that what I thought were teeth before weren't a part of the original face. They looked like someone had taken blades of bone and rammed them where the teeth should have been. They were yellowed with age, like granny's

dentures only worse, and behind them, I could see a dark tongue slithering like a snake in a cage.

“Give me the books.” I heard the words in my head, but those dried out lips never moved. The sounds were like fingers on a chalkboard. Not really all that high, but they made my skin crawl that way.

“Ahhhh! Ahhhhhh! Ahhhh!” It wasn’t my calmest moment. I admit it. I reached into my jacket pockets.

“Give me the books.”

I aimed the guns in my jacket and pulled both the triggers again and again. I didn’t know what it was and I didn’t fucking care. I just didn’t want it on me for another second you know what I mean?

Seven bullets blew holes in my jacket and through the thing standing in front of me. Every impact kicked that dead freak like a mule, sending it backward and upward, even as big chunks of dead flesh and bone mushroomed away from its backside.

It fell backward and I could see the house behind it through the holes I’d just put in its body. Do you understand me? Listen, I’m not a doctor, but I saw withered organs and parts of the spine blown out of that thing, along with stuff I don’t even want to think about. Moving stuff that wiggled as it hit the lawn. I’d almost cut it in half. There was barely even a stomach left on the thing.

I pushed myself across the lawn, the rucksack digging a trench in somebody’s front yard, and I let out a few more girly screams while I did it. I also pulled the triggers on both pistols again and again, just in case there was maybe a bullet somewhere that I’d missed firing at the dead fuck in front of me.

No such luck. No more bullets.

So I got up and did my best to compose myself. I don't normally lose it in the middle of a job, but now and then, you just sort of freak out, you know? Having a dead thing talking to me without words, that qualifies as a good reason, especially as it was close enough to hump my leg.

Part of me wanted to check that lump of meat out. I wanted to know how it was moving, and what it was made of. Only a small part, but it was vocal. I had a job to do, but damn, how often do you get to see a monster in person?

It sat up, and suddenly I didn't want to be anywhere around it.

“The books...”

That was all she wrote. I ran. I ran hard and fast. As I ran, I peeled off my jacket and wrapped it around my right arm, because I thought maybe a couple of empty pistols would have enough weight to hurt the fucker if it came for me again.

I didn't bother to check if it was following. I just took for granted that it was right on my ass and ready to take a bite and then I ran even faster. The smell alone told me I wasn't too far off. Was I panicked? Duh. I was close to pissing myself. I'd been in a hurry to get to my truck all along, but now I was desperate. I didn't have any more ammo, and I'd already planned to lose the guns, but the truck was different. The truck had a few surprises I could share.

I don't know how far I ran. Maybe ten blocks. I was mostly on autopilot, just doing my best to stay alive. I was winded and sweating and still worried about that thing behind me, but after going full tilt for that long, I was getting shaky and clumsy. I

couldn't afford that. I figured if I ran any further, I would stumble and that would be all she wrote.

I slowed down to a walk at the same time that I finally looked behind me.

Nothing. Not a damned thing was back there. Just lawns and shadows. I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. I'd half killed myself getting away from nothing at all.

On the bright side, I was alive.

I kept walking, but I slowed down some more to gulp in a few deep breaths and let my body recover.

The only good news was I knew where I was. I hadn't gotten lost along the way. Four, maybe five blocks and I would be back with my truck. I fished around in my jeans until I could find my throwing knife. The way the night had gone, I didn't want to take any chances. I kept the jacket around my arm, too, but I made sure my hand was free.

Four blocks, then three, then two and finally, I could see my truck, exactly where I'd parked it earlier. I could have cried I was so damned happy.

Which was when the dead, stinky thing got me the second time. It didn't ask about the books, it just tried to eat my face. It came from the manhole cover behind me and I would have never had a chance but the sound of the heavy metal lid scraping gave me enough warning. I smelled it and by the time I had a chance to gag, it was on me.

Sharp bony claws grabbed for me and I blocked with my right arm. Even then, I could feel the nails punching into my skin. If the pistols hadn't been wrapped inside my jacket, I think those claws would have sunk all the way into my arm.

The teeth came for my face and I swung my other arm around, driving the throwing knife I'd used on Leo's leg earlier deep into the roof of its mouth. Listen, I

knew it wouldn't do any good. I'd hit the thing with enough firepower to drop a fucking elephant. I was just doing what I could with what I had. The thing reared back and hissed, spitting nasty smelling stuff all over me and almost blinding me in the process.

One spinning back kick was all I could afford. Its hands let go of my arm so it could dig at the blade in the back of its mouth. While it was doing that, I hauled around and nailed it square in the jaw. Felt like I'd hit a piece of wrought iron, but I saw the jaw snap lose and hang by the tough gray meat around it. I ran for the truck again, but I didn't bother with my keys. What I was going for was in the back, inside the tool case that was mounted and welded in place. I opened the lid of the case and started pulling out the shit that was in my way. Just to make sure I kept the thing away from me, I threw a hammer at its face. It ducked and spit out the knife I'd stabbed it with. Gotta say, I wasn't expecting that anymore than I'd expected it to get up with half its chest gone.

I threw a few more tools, just to keep the fucking thing busy until I got my back up artillery from the toolbox. AK-47 assault rifle, fully loaded with a modified Thompson drum of good old fashioned lead. No fancy bullets, because, really, you don't need them when you pull the trigger on one of these.

The thing came at me again and I unloaded the clip. I started low, and it tried to jump, but dodging hammers and screwdrivers isn't the same as dodging lead moving at the speed of sound.

I saw the bones in its leg get chewed up and spit aside. Then, as it was falling, I watched the bullets cut an arc across its hip, stomach, chest and finally its head. I don't much care what you are, you get hit with enough bullets, you go down. I fired and fired, watching chunks of dead freak hop in the air and bounce off the ground like ice on a hot

skillet. I kept firing until the drum was empty. Fucker wasn't looking so ready to eat my face when I was finished.

Much as I hated the idea of losing my favorite toy, I kept with my usual policy. The AK-47 and the .22s got dropped down the sewer. I made sure to avoid getting too close to the mutilated pile of rotting meat and bones, just in case it still had any kick left in it, but it didn't seem much like it wanted to move.

My hands were shaking bad when I climbed in the truck. I didn't let that stop me from getting the hell out of the area. You think barking dogs wake up a neighborhood, you should try firing off a hundred or so rounds from an assault rifle.

I left the area as quickly and quietly as I could and I made sure not to turn on my headlights for a couple of blocks. I might get rid of weapons like they don't cost shit, but I liked the truck and I didn't want to replace it.

Half an hour later, I was pulling up at the address Demetrius had given me. Nice house, in the ritzy part of town. But, hey, it's Blackstone Bay. Every part of town is ritzy, right? The lights were on, so I knocked on the door.

The guy that opened the door smiled like he was looking at a Jehovah's Witness on a mission. He smiled a lot warmer when I told him Demetrius had sent me. He looked about as old as my grandfather, only without the Alzheimer's. Crew cut hair and a healthy body for a man in his sixties or so.

I opened the rucksack as soon as he showed me to the living room and then I put the books on his coffee table, easy as you please.

He took each book in his hands and caressed them, like most guys would caress the legs of a lover he'd only been dreaming about for years. The look he shot my way was pure joy.

"Young man, I owe you dearly." His voice was soft but the hand he used to shake mine was like steel.

"Oh, no sir. Not a problem. Demetrius asks me for a favor, I deliver."

"Just the same. If you should ever need a favor in return, say, trouble with the law or just a little assistance, I am in your debt." He gave me his business card. It said his name was Albert Miles, and it had a cell phone number listed. That was it.

I thanked him and put the card in my wallet. Most times, someone gives me a business card, it's in my pocket and then shoved in the trash at the first opportunity, but any friend of Demetrius is the sort of guy I'd like to keep on my good side.

I got back home in one piece, and I called Demetrius to let him know my uncle said hello and that the surgery had gone well. I called him from my disposable cell and I dialed the number for his disposable cell. Never take chances, and you never get caught. He thanked me, and told me he hoped my uncle liked the get well soon package. When I checked the usual drop point, the money was right where it was supposed to be. A shit load of money for one night's work and I'd earned every fucking penny.

When that was done, I took off my work clothes, took off the fake mustache and wiped away the stage makeup. It was nice seeing my own face again, even if it was pale and looked a little like I'd been through the wringer. I took a nice, hot shower and tried to wash the stink off of me. Whatever that fucking thing had been, its smell lingered like a bad break up.

After that, I drank three fingers of whiskey, settled back on my bed and had a crying jag. Killing people takes a lot more out of a person than most people will ever know. I'd killed a lot of people in the last few hours.

I don't much like killing, and I don't much like Buddy Fisk, either, but he serves his purpose.

The best news is, he only comes out when I want him to.

Next day, I was back to myself and ready to do what I like the most. I love teaching the kids and I'm good at it.

I guess that's about it. I'll print up one copy as always and then delete this file. It wouldn't do to have the wrong people see any of this shit. Yeah, I never actually mention my name, right, but there are other people I talk about and they wouldn't much appreciate me letting anyone know what they do with their spare time.

THE END