



Spares

Michael Marshall Smith



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Critical Acclaim for Michael Marshall Smith and

SPARES

“No wonder Hollywood’s DreamWorks SKG has snapped up the film rights. This darkly atmospheric sci-fi thriller, long on technological wizardry and futuristic grotesqueries, makes excellent fodder for the big screen.... In his American debut novel, Smith masterfully moves the whodunnit toward the future, opening up refreshing vistas for a genre rooted in the present.”

—*People*

“*Coma* meets *Blade Runner* in this future noir thriller, a compulsively readable melding of hardboiled narrative and hardware invention.... Both a disconcerting portrait of a future that might be, and a poignant study of one man’s fight to resist it, this novel augurs a promising future of another sort for its author.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Inventive and horrifying.”

—*The Rue Morgue*

“Highly recommended.”

—*Mysterious Galaxy*

“A dark but witty futuristic thriller that combines Raymond Chandler and Robert A. Heinlein... Race down to the bookstore to grab this stunning debut.”

—*Flint Journal*

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For Paula,
who lights up the forest.

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Our kind. Us people. All of us that started the game with a crooked cue, that wanted so much and got so little, that meant so good and did so bad.

Jim Thompson
The Killer Inside Me

dead
code

PART

Wide shot.

New Richmond, Virginia. Not the *old* Richmond, the historic capital of historical Virginia, that sprawl of creaking tedium, but the New. The old Richmond was destroyed over a century ago, razed to the ground during riots which lasted two months. After decades of putting up with dreadful shopping facilities, a bewilderingly dull Old Town and no good restaurants to speak of, the residents suddenly went nonlinear and strode across the city like avenging angels, destroying everything in their wake. It was great.

Spin doctors blamed downtown decay, crack wars, the cast of the moon. Personally, I think everyone just got really bored, and either way good riddance to it. The old Richmond was a content-free mess, a waste of a good, level patch within sight of the pleasingly pointy Blue Ridge Mountains. Everyone agreed it was much better off as a landing strip, a refueling point for the MegaMalls.

The MegaMalls are aircraft—five miles square, two hundred stories high—which majestically transport passengers from one side of the continent to the other, from the bottom to the top; from wherever they've been to wherever they seem to think will be better. The biggest oblongs of all time, a fetching shade of consumer-goods black, studded with millions of points of light and so big they transcend function and become simply a shape again.

When oblongs grow up, they all want to be Mega-Malls.

Inside are thousands of stores, twenty-story atriums, food courts the size of small towns, dozens of multiplex cinemas, and a range of hotels to suit every wallet which has a Gold Card in it. All this and more arranged round wide, sweeping avenues, a thousand comfortable nooks and crannies, and so many potted plants they count as an ecosystem in their own right. Safe from the rest of the world, cocooned 20,000 feet up in the air.

Heaven on earth, or cruising just above it: all of the good, clean, *buyable* things in life crammed into a multi-story funhouse.

Eighty-three years ago, MegaMall Flight MA 156 stopped for routine refueling on the side of old Richmond, and never took off again. At first, it was merely a bureaucratic problem—the kind that the massed brains of all time could never have gotten to the bottom of, but which some poorly paid clerk could have solved instantly. If he'd had a mind to. If he hadn't been on his break.

After a few hours, the richer patrons started leaving by the roads. They didn't have time for this shit. They had to be somewhere else. Everybody else just complained a little, ordered another meal or bought some more shoes, and settled down to wait

Then, after a few more hours, it transpired there was a minor problem with the engine. This was a little more serious. When you've got a problem with a car, you open the hood and there it is. You can point at the errant part. When the engine's the size of the Empire State Building on steroids, you know you've got a long night ahead. It takes fourteen people just to hold the manual. The engineers sent repair droids scurrying off into the deep recesses, but eventually the droids came back, electronically shaking their heads and whistling through their mechanical teeth. It was only a minor problem, the engineers were sure, but they couldn't work out what it was.

More passengers started to leave at that point, but on the other hand, some people decided to stay. There were plenty of phones and meeting rooms, and the Mall had its own node on the Matrix. People could work. There were enormous quantities of food, consumer goods and clean sheets. People could live. There were, frankly, worse places to hang around.

They never got the engines going again. Maybe they were fixable, but they left it a little too late. After a couple of days, people started to make their way in from the outside; people who'd been homeless since old Richmond went up in flames; people who lived in the backwoods; people who'd heard about the food courts and just wanted a spot of lunch. They came off the plain and out of the mountains and hammered on the doors. Initially, security turned them back like they were supposed to, but there were an awful lot of them and some were pretty pissed. For them the only thing worse than having to live in Richmond had been not having it to live in anymore.

The security guards got together and came up with a plan. They would let people in, and they would charge them for it.

There was a period, maybe as long as six months, when Flight MA 156 was in flux, when no one was really sure if it was going to take off again. Then the tide turned, and people knew it was not. By then they didn't want it to. It was home. Areas inside the ship were knocked through, torn down, redeveloped. The original passengers staked out the upper floors and began to build on top of the Mall, competing to see who could get farthest from the mounting poor on the lower levels. A secondary town grew up around the Mall at ground level—the Portal into the city.

Eventually, the local utility companies just plumbed the whole lot in, and New Richmond was born. Apart from its unusual provenance and extreme oblongness, New Richmond is not just a city like anywhere else. If you didn't know, you might think it was just a rather bizarre town-planning mistake.

But it's said that in a lost room, somewhere deep in the bowels of the city, there remains a forgotten suitcase, left there accidentally by one of the first families to leave old Richmond, a mute testament to the city's birth. Nobody knows where this room is, and most people believe it's just an urban myth. Because that's what Flight MA 156 is, these days. Urban.

But I've always believed in that lost room, just like I wonder if sometimes, on some night, the city itself must raise its eyes when it hears the other MegaMalls trundling slowly overhead. I wonder if it watches the skies, and sees them pass, and knows in some way that where it should be. Up there in the heavens, not battened onto the Earth. But then which of us doesn't believe something like that, and how few of us are right.



“Two hundred dollars,” the man said, his eyes trying to look cool and watchful at the same time, and making a fearful mess of both. He wasn’t talking about what I was trying to sell. It wasn’t even in New Richmond yet. It was after eight o’clock at night and I was losing patience and running out of time.

“Bullshit,” I said. “Fifty is the rate.”

The man laughed with genuine amusement.

“You been away or something, man? Shit, I can’t barely *remember* when fifty dollars was the rate.”

“Fifty dollars,” I said again. I guess I was hoping if I said it often enough I’d end up neurologically programming him. I was standing in front of a door, a door that was hidden in the basement of a building in the Portal settlement, the high-rise nightmare of ragged buildings and shanty dwellings which surrounds New Richmond proper. I was there because this particular building had been constructed right up against the exterior wall of the city, inside which I needed to be. I’d put up with being frisked on entry by the street gang that was currently controlling the building, and had already paid twenty dollars “tax” on my gun. I didn’t have two hundred dollars, I barely had a hundred, and I was in a hurry.

The man shrugged. “So go in the main entrance.”

I stuffed my hands into my jacket pockets, fighting back anger and panic in equal measure. “And don’t be thinking about bringing out your gun,” he continued, mildly. “Cos there’s three brothers you can’t even see with rifles trained on yo’ ass.”

I couldn’t go in the main gates, as he well knew. No one came to this part of the Portal town if they could enter New Richmond through one of the legitimate entrances. Going that way meant running your ownCard through the machines, thus broadcasting your name to the cops, the city administration, and anyone else who had a tap on the line.

“Look,” I said. “I’ve been this way before. I don’t need a guide, I just need to get past you. Fifty dollars is what I have.”

The man turned away and signaled into the darkness with an upward nod of his head. I heard the sound of several sets of feet padding out of the darkness toward me.

“You still piecing your action from Howie ‘The Plan’?” I asked, casually. The footsteps behind stopped, and the man turned to look at me again, eyes watchful.

“What you know about Mr. Amos?” he asked.

“Not much,” I said, though I did. Howie was a medium-time crook operating out of the eighth floor. He ran some girls, owned a bar, and had pieces of the drugs action so far down the chain that he was tolerated by the real heavy-hitters above. He was a fat, affable man with a surprising shock of blond hair, but he was fitter than he looked and knew how to keep a secret. Late at night, when most of the customers were gone, he’d been known to sit in with his house blues band and play a hell of a lot better than you’d expect. He didn’t have the Bright Eyes, but he could have. He was a stand-up guy.

“Just enough,” I continued, “to tell the wrong people about some of the deals they don’t know he’s into. And if he thinks that information came from you guys, well...”

“Why would he get to thinking that?” the man asked, though he was losing heart. The

guys were *below* bottom-rung lowlife: hardly on the ladder. They most likely didn't even know where the ladder *was*, and had to use steps the whole time. Running this door was as close as they got to operating in New Richmond. Guys like this don't want to tangle with the jungle inside. It bites.

"I can't imagine," I said. "Look. Fifty dollars. Then on my way out I give you the other hundred fifty."

For all he knew I was never coming out, but fifty was better than no cash and a lot of potential grief. He stepped aside. I peeled the notes off, and he opened the door.

"And I'll give you an extra twenty," I added, "if you keep any mention of me off the lips you sell to the cops."

"Don't know what you're talking about," he said stonily, but there was a change in his attitude. "But I'll take your twenty."

I nodded and walked through the door. It shut behind me, and for the first time in five years I was inside New Richmond.

The door led into an old service corridor, which meandered toward the lower engine block through miles of dank and creepy corridors. There's nothing of value to be had there, and that's why nobody had cared when external construction had covered up the entrance. The one thing no one was going to be trying to do was get the engines going again. There's an old story that says one of the original repair drones still toils away down there somewhere, grown old and insane, but even I don't believe that.

For a long time the door was forgotten, and then somebody rediscovered it and realized its potential value as a covert entrance to the city. An adjunct to the service corridor leads via the exhaust ducts to a hidden and little-known staircase, which leads up to the second floor of the old Mall.

But I wasn't going to be going that way. I quickly followed the corridor for two hundred yards, past panels etched and stained with rust. It's eerily silent down there, perhaps the only truly quiet part of the city. The corridor took a sharpish right turn, and you could see the dim and intermittent lights in the ceiling disappearing toward the next turn, about half a mile ahead. Instead of following the lights I gathered myself and leapt upward, arms straight above me, hands balled into fists. They hit a panel of the roof and it popped up and over, revealing a dark space beyond. I took a quick glance back to ensure no one was watching, jumped up again, and pulled myself up through the hole.

When I replaced the ceiling panel I was left in a darkness broken only by yellow slivers of light that escaped through cracks in the floor. I straightened into the slight hunch required for New Richmond's lost ventilation system, and hurried forward into the gloom. Every now and then I heard some fragment of life floating down from the city. An aged gurgle, soft clank, grown old, the occasional ghost of speech caught accidentally in some twist of corridor above and echoed down to the graveyard below. I had always felt that walking this corridor was like creeping through New Richmond's ancient and barren womb, but then I've always been a bit of a moron.

After about half a mile I passed under one of the main entrances. You can tell because of the sound of hundreds of feet coming in, going out. I stood underneath the entrance for

moment, remembering. I used to come the covert way sometimes for kicks, but the main gates are the way you enter if you want to appreciate what you're getting into. You walk into a foyer which is twenty stories high, a taste of the opulence you can expect if you've got clearance to go above the 100th floor. There used to be glass windows on all of the levels that tower above you, but they were walled in once they'd become low-life areas. It was like standing in the biggest and gaudiest shower cubicle of all time. You walked up to the desk, ran your ownCard through the machine, and established your clearance. I used to live in the 70s, and so I'd walk over to one of the express elevators, get in, and be shot up into the sky.

Not tonight. Tonight I was threading my way like a snake through endless tunnels, and wasn't going to the 72nd floor because there was nothing left for me there. I was in New Richmond because I needed money, and had only one way of getting some. I was going to go in, get the money, get out—and then turn my back on Virginia for good.



We'd reached the Portal settlement in the early evening. It had been raining all day, and was getting colder and darker by the minute. Virginia doesn't fuck around in winter, especially not these days. Virginia says, "Here, have some winter," and then delivers. The spares had been on their last legs by then, a joke I'd made to myself knowing it to be in bad taste and not altogether caring. They'd never felt the cold before, and the scraps of my clothing I'd distributed amongst them weren't anywhere near enough.

There hadn't been many people on the streets, thankfully. You don't go to the Portal promenade, particularly not at night—it would be less trouble to stay in your apartment and mug yourself in the comfort of your own home. Howie Amos once ran a service which did just that; you called him up, said you were thinking of going out into the Portal, and he'd send someone to rough you up within half an hour or you got a dollar off. It was surprisingly popular.

I corralled the spares into a tight group and herded them down the streets in front of me, sticking close to the walls and out of the light, trusting Suej and David to help me keep the others in line. I'd explained why we had to come here, and why it could be a problem for me. They all did what they were told, and I hurried us along for about a mile until we were outside Mal's building.

I paused outside and looked back the way we'd come. The roads in the Portal are very straight, running out from New Richmond in the center like a giant spider's web. You can stand in the middle of one and see as far as the rain will let you. Yellow streetlights lined the way, throwing pools of light that were rich and sickly, like cream ten minutes before it goes sour. Beyond the limits of my vision was the edge of the Portal, and beyond that, the road which led out into the dark Virginia countryside. A long way down that road were the Blue Ridge Mountains we'd come from, matter-of-fact geology covered with a hell of a lot of trees. For the first time it struck me how much the roads in the Portal looked like tunnels, and that was when I began to accept that the last five years really had happened to me.

I shouldered the outer door open and led the spares into the hallway, which was an inch deep in chill water. Loud music was thumping from somewhere up above. I told the spares to stay still and to hide if anyone came, then I vaulted up the wooden staircase that spiraled up

into the darkness. When I got to the 3rd floor I took a deep breath, shook some of the water out of my hair, then knocked on Mal's door.

Mal did a double take which would have done a cheap comedian proud, and then he just stood there, mouth hanging open, hand still holding the door. He was wearing a pair of battered cutoffs which showed off the scars on his legs, and a ragged T-shirt that hugged his new paunch and looked like about five people had lived and died in it without showing it any water other than rain. He was backlit by a bare bulb, and from somewhere deep in the bowels of his apartment came the smell of cooking—noodles, almost certainly. In all the time I'd known Mal I don't think I'd ever seen him voluntarily eat anything else.

Finally he got it together, blinked and tried to smile.

"Jack," he croaked, eerie calm coming about level with utter stupefaction. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Social visit. Old times."

"Yeah, right. The Pope's due later too." He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, and pinched himself on the bridge of the nose. "You in trouble?"

"Yep." I grinned, trying to keep myself from hopping from foot to foot. Tension, of about seven different kinds. I nodded toward the gloom of the apartment. "What's cooking?"

"Noodles," he said, eyeing me warily. "You want some?"

"Depends how much you've got. I'm not alone."

"How many guests are we talking?"

I took a deep breath. "Including me, seven," I said. Mal's eyes opened wide and he shook his head—not in negation, just bewilderment. I tried to make it easier on him. "Well, six and a half, I guess."

"That's a lot of noodles."

"Too many?"

"Not necessarily," he said. "I buy in bulk." He turned back toward his apartment for a moment, biting his lip, considering. I noticed he wasn't wearing his shoulder holster and wondered whether that meant he was out of the Life, or just less paranoid these days. Most likely he'd been cleaning his gun when I knocked. The two things I didn't think Mal was even going to get were less paranoid or out of the Life.

Then he turned back to me, eyebrows raised in friendly resignation. In one sighing breath he asked, "Where are these guests now and just how much un-happiness am I risking by letting them into my life, however fucking briefly?"

"I left them downstairs," I said, realizing that I ought to get back to them very soon whichever way this went. Mal's building is where bad people go to have fun. That's why he's paranoid—and also why he likes it. "I just need to leave them with you for an hour, then we're out of here."

"Why didn't you call ahead?"

"When I want to ask old friends for lunatic favors I like to do it in person. Also, I didn't have any change."

“And the trouble rating?”

“What scale are you talking?” I was gabbling, strung tight. I had to let Mal see I was okay because otherwise he was likely to get freaked. Being freaked would in fact have been a reasonable reaction, but I didn’t want him to know that yet.

“One to ten.”

“I don’t know,” I said, suddenly giving in and getting panicky. “At least ten, possibly higher, certainly getting worse by the minute.”

Mal let go of the door.

“Get them up here.”

I let out a short exhalation of relief. “Mal...”

“Yeah, all that,” he said, brushing my thanks aside. “And then you’re going to go get me a jar of Japanese pickles. I forgot I’d run out.”

“I’m going into the city. On the way back I’ll get you the biggest jar of Samoy I can find.”

Mal rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Samoy pickles are from hunger. Get me Frapan or nothing.”

“For a guy who eats so much you’ve got terrible fucking taste.”

“You got that right,” he said, shaking his head again. “Look at my choice of friends.”

I grinned and walked the couple of yards to the shadowy stairwell. I thought I was going to have to shout, but I saw Suej’s face in the darkness, upturned anxiously toward me, and just gestured instead. Suej turned to David and they corralled the others up. Mal and I waited while they trooped upstairs, Mal’s face eloquent with laconic intrigue. Out in the slightly less murky light of the corridor the skin on his face looked a little ruddier than it had, and there were lines around his eyes which hadn’t been there when last I’d seen him.

We’re getting old, I thought. Suddenly we’re nearly forty and getting old.

David was the first to reach the landing. He came up with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his jeans, limping slightly from where his leg had been operated on. The jeans had originally been mine, and were inexpertly folded up at the bottoms and belted tight around his waist. David looked younger than his fifteen years, even though his face was still set with the belligerence it had assumed the moment we left the Farm. Jenny came up right behind him, huddled into her coat and still looking frightened and alone. I’d tried to patch things up with her in the last twenty-four hours, but she still thought she was to blame, and I hadn’t really had time to convince her otherwise.

Suej came up next, leading Nanune by the hand. Suej looked okay, like a normal fourteen-year-old, apart from the scar on her face. Nanune looked scared shitless, and with only one leg was having difficulty climbing the stairs. When she reached the top she caught sight of me, and appeared momentarily relieved, which was nice. It’s been a long time since anyone has looked relieved to see my face.

And then finally Mr. Two, carrying the bundle in his arms. Mal coped reasonably well with the rest of them, but when he saw a teenager who stood about six five, carrying a small brown bag with a head protruding from it, I did catch a twitch on his face. Mr. Two stood

straight-backed on the landing, glared abruptly both ways, and then let his head drop as he'd been switched off. The spare in the bag said, "Nap."

Come on, guys, I thought to myself. Let's try to act like normal people.

"Is your friend letting us rest here?" Suej asked.

I nodded. It was going to be a while before they directly addressed anyone other than me. Suej beamed, and whispered something to Nanune.

"Is it nice? Is Ratchet here?" Nanune asked, and I shook my head.

"No and no, I'm afraid," I said, winking at Mal. "But at least it's not raining."

I introduced Mal to the spares by name. Suej and David shook his hand, and I caught him noticing David's missing fingers. Then Mal stood to one side and gestured them into his apartment. They trooped in, Mr. Two ducking his head to get under the lintel.

Mal's apartment was pretty much as I remembered it. In other words, I knew what to expect. The spares didn't. Ten years ago he'd knocked down most of the internal walls, so that from anywhere in the apartment you could see the huge window he'd put in. This gave a view straight onto New Richmond. Mal had chosen to live outside New Richmond proper. He claimed he liked to get away from it every now and then, from the dark fizz and spark of the life inside—yet he'd deconstructed his apartment so he could see the building from wherever he stood. The interior decor of his apartment was about what you'd expect from a single man who spent half his time drunk and the rest painfully sober. It was a mess, to be honest, a baroque chaos overlaid with the smell of countless noodle-based meals.

Nanune actually started crying. Mal scowled at her and started kicking piles of stuff toward the walls.

"Do you still have your display up?" I asked quietly. Mal looked at me and nodded. "You couldn't, like, drape something over it?"

Mal grunted and trudged down the end, toward the window, and pulled a rope that ran down the wall. A sheet dropped from the ceiling, covering what was pinned on the walls—pictures of people who had been murdered in New Richmond. The sheet covered them only briefly, unfortunately, because it kept on falling to the ground. Mal swore softly, grabbed a chair, and set about repairing the setup.

Meantime, I led the spares into the area that served as his sitting room. I shoved huge piles of crap out of the way until there was enough space for them to sit fairly comfortably. Jenny's arms were wrapped tightly around herself, and her eyes were far away. In a nimble of light from some partially hidden lamp, she looked beautiful and frail. Nanune still looked terrified, but Suej sat close to her, murmuring something. There were no words in what she was saying, but even I could feel the comfort in it. It was tunnel talk, I guess. Mr. Two looked like he would withstand a direct hit by a tactical missile, and so I guess the spare on his lap was all right too. Considering the current circumstances.

"How long are we going to be here?" David asked me. I realized he looked tired, though like a child trying to prove it was worthy of staying up late, his eyes were still wide open.

"Not long," I said. "A couple hours. Just enough for me to go get some money. Then we're going to buy a truck and get out of here."

“To where?” This had been David’s constant refrain for the last twenty-four hours.

“I still don’t know,” I said. “Somewhere safe.” Jenny looked up at me and I winked at her. A ghost of a smile was my reward.

“Florida?” Suej asked hopefully.

“Maybe,” I said. A long time ago I’d told her about a place I knew there, and it had become fixed in her mind as a kind of nirvana. I didn’t have the heart to tell her it was very unlikely we’d make it halfway there before we were caught.

I turned to Mal. “What’s your water like these days? And don’t say ‘wet.’”

“There’ll be enough if they don’t all stay in too long.” Mal had always known what I meant, especially when I was asking favors. I nodded to Suej, who understood, and she started drawing up a washing schedule for the spares. They weren’t used to being dirty, and I knew that the one thing I could provide that would increase their short-term standard of living was a shower. It’s good that there was that one thing, because there wasn’t a lot of anything else, and wasn’t likely to be in the foreseeable future.

“We’ll get your clothes washed... later,” I said, vaguely, and wandered over to the window.

It was still raining outside. It always seemed to be raining in the Portal. In summer it’s fat drops of dirty rain, in the winter thin biting lines of sleet—but it generally seemed to be dropping at least something out of the sky. The locals believe that it’s rich people on the roof of the city, taking delight in pissing off the edge onto the lowlife below. Judging by the color of some of the rain, they could be right.

New Richmond looked the same as it always had. Eerily so. That shouldn’t have been surprising, and yet it was, I’d seen it in the distance on the way through the Portal, but this had been different. Seeing the city through Mal’s window was like seeing myself in one particular mirror again after a very long time away. I stared out at the points of light, the studs in the mindfuckingly large expanse of wall. It still looked extraordinary, still said to me as it always had, that I had to be inside it.

“Are you okay?”

Mal standing beside me, proffering a cigarette. “Yeah,” I said, lighting one and savoring the harsh scrape of carcinogen on lung. I’d run out that morning, and not wanted to risk going into a store until the spares were safely stowed. Mal let me stand for a moment, then asked what he wanted to know.

“Where have you *been*, man?”

For a moment, in the darkness of his apartment, Mal looked just as he always had. As if no time had passed, as if things were still the same and I had a home to go to after I’d finished chewing the rag with him. I shivered, realizing that I was crashing, that adrenaline was turning sour.

“Didn’t Phieta tell you? I asked her to let you know.”

“I never saw her again, Jack. No one did. After you disappeared I put the word around, in case she knew something. But she was just as gone as you.”

“I’m sorry, Mal. I thought about calling you. I just couldn’t.”

He nodded, and maybe he understood. “I’m really sorry about what happened,” he said. I nodded tightly. I wasn’t going to talk about it. “If it’s any consolation, the word is Vinaldi having problems recently.”

I was glad that Mal was still enough my friend to simply say the name out loud. “What kind of problems?”

Mal shrugged. “Rumors. He’s pretty much the man these days. Probably someone’s just trying to climb over him. The usual shit. Just thought I’d let you know.” He shook his head. “You really only staying a couple hours?”

I nodded tightly. “This shit’s too deep to swim in. We’ve got to disappear and stay the way.”

“Again.” He smiled. “Something I want to tell you about later, though, before you go. Then he clapped me on the back with his massive hand and turned toward the spares. “You guys about ready for some noodles?”

They stared at him with wide eyes. “They’ve never had noodles,” I said.

“Then they haven’t lived,” he replied, and of course he was right.

••••

I walked a long way through the bowels of New Richmond, my stomach growling, wishing I stayed to have some noodles with the spares. There hadn’t been time. We had serious people after us, and were only safe for as long as it took them to realize that I’d given them a false name and previous address when I was taken on at the Farm. As soon as that was blown, a hell was going to break loose.

It was about two miles from my entry point to the stage where I started to climb, two miles of textured darkness and muffled sounds. When I saw the familiar shaft in front of me I stopped walking. I rolled my head on my shoulders, wishing briefly and pointlessly that it didn’t smoke, then climbed up the metal ladder attached to the wall.

Ten minutes later my arms and legs were aching and I’d reached the horizontal ventilation chute on 8. The MegaMall’s original ventilation system is now completely disused, and most of it is filled with garbage, sludge and unnameable crap from a million different sources. It’s like a lost river—paved over and diverted and hidden, but still there in the gaps and interstices. All but a couple of the original inspection hatches were welded shut a long time ago. I was hoping that no more had been sealed while I’d been away, or I’d be in trouble.

I swung myself out of the shaft and crouched down in the horizontal corridor, using my pocket penlight to peer into the gloom. The way was still clear, so I walked quickly north for about eight hundred yards until I found the wall panel I was looking for. I loosened the bolts and put my dark glasses on. This wasn’t a matter of vanity. I didn’t want anyone to make me out while I was in New Richmond. It was a small chance that someone would recognize me, but I don’t like to take chances of any size unless they seem like fun. The other reason is that the hatch opens into a cubicle in the women’s rest room in a restaurant on 8.

I pulled the panel back about a millimeter, saw the cubicle was empty, and clambered through the hole as quickly and quietly as I could. It wasn’t easy. I stand over six feet tall and I am kind of broad in the shoulders. Ventilation hatches aren’t built for people like me. I could

hear the thump of music beyond the door to the John, but it didn't sound as if anyone was there.

I replaced the panel, pulled the door of the cubicle open, and stepped through. A woman was standing there. Nice one, jack, I thought. At least you haven't lost your touch or anything.

She was hunched over by the sinks at the far end. She was very slim, had thick brown hair, and was wearing a short dress in iridescent blue. Good legs in sheer stockings led to shoes with very sharp and pointy heels.

Uh-huh, I thought, making a guess at her profession. As I glanced at her she shifted slightly, and I saw the mirror over which she was bent, and the rolled-up hundred-dollar bill in her hand. I took a quiet step toward the door, assuming she was sufficiently occupied to miss me.

Wrong. She looked up vaguely but immediately.

"Wow," she said. "A big man. Intense." Her face was caught somewhere between pretty and beautiful—her nose a shade too big for everyone's pretty, but the bone structure too perfect for beautiful. Her eyes were clear and green, and looked natural.

"You've got good hearing," I said.

"Yeah. It's a feature." She sniffed, and bent to do her other nostril. Then a thought occurred to her, and she peered at me again. "What are you doing in here?"

"Pest control," I said.

"Yeah, right," she said. "Well, I got a license. I'm allowed to be a pest in here. You, I'm not so sure about."

"Is there any way," I asked, "that I could just walk out of here, right now, and you'd think nothing more about it, ever?"

She looked at me for a long moment, considering. Then she shrugged. "Yeah," she said, bending back over her mirror, and I turned and walked quickly out of the door.

A short corridor led out into the restaurant proper, and I skirted round the edge of the room toward the exit. With the time now coming up for nine o'clock, the place was in transition period. The 8th floor runs on a kind of shift system. It romps twenty-four hours a day, but in practical terms this breaks down into three evenings of eight hours each. I once went round the clock twice. I can't recommend it, except as an expensive suicide attempt. The restaurant was about half-full of people from floors in the 60s and 70s, most of them either on the edge of unconsciousness or so wired you could hear their teeth vibrating. The other looked spruce and enthusiastic, rubbing their hands together in anticipation.

No one saw me walk out of the ladies', and no one paid any attention as I walked through the restaurant. Feeling light-headed at seeing so many normal people at once, I escaped into the avenue outside.

Floor 8 is an anomaly in the lower levels of New Richmond. It's fairly civilized. Floors 1 to 7 and 9 to 49 are bad. Each varies, depending on who's got control of it at any given time, but basically they're places you don't want to go, especially the 20s and 30s. They're dead-end code, cut out of the loop of normal life and left to fester by themselves.

You probably wouldn't actually want to go to the 8th floor either, but at least it has no pretensions. Originally, it had been the lowest food court in the MegaMall, and it was still

predominantly a place where you came to eat, drink, or have a good time. Whatever the focus of your sexual inclination, you can go to the 8th floor and watch it dancing on a very small stage. You can also score recreational quantities of pretty much whatever you want without danger of being caught in a firestorm. Most of it is only one story high, and they keep the ceiling lights off, relying on orange street lamps which run along either side of the thoroughfares. If you don't check the corners too closely the floor has a kind of lopsided charm, like a run-down but cheery portion of some European capital, or the Old Quarter of New Orleans. The ceiling is covered in creepers and foliage, making the roads feel like paths in a forest. Forests usually give me The Fear, but I like 8, and always have. It's full of neo-autumn jazz, the smell of good food and, for some reason, the feeling that it has just stopped raining. It never has, of course, but it always feels that way to me.

I walked quickly down the center of the street, noticing what was new and what remained. The streets were quiet but music slunk out of most of the open doors, buoying up the desultory strippers who swayed on tabletops. A few down-and-outs sat on street corners stuck in `main()` with their `handleMouseDown()` mitts held out, but from the look of them I didn't think anyone's cursor was ever going to find them. It's an image problem, I think. Maybe they should all club together and hire a PR consultant, put out a few TV ads, find some way of making begging seem cool. I'm sure there's money to be made in it somewhere.

I had to be out of here quickly, but I wanted to make my last visit right. I stopped at one corner to catch a few minutes from a news post, just like I always used to. New Richmond has a twenty-four-hour local events feed on every corner. Flatscreen monitors hang like banners wherever you go, twisting and turning to foist information on the unwary public as they approach. It helps the upper floors think they know what's going on. They don't, of course, but they spend so much time talking about the twenty per cent the news covers that no one even guesses at all the rest.

Arlond Maxen had opened a new school on 190, I learned. Big fucking deal. The people who lived that high had so much money they had to be sedated every morning to stop them going berserk with glee. The only floors richer than 190 to 200 were the ones built on top of the MegaMall—all owned by Arlond Maxen himself, the de facto king of the heap. In the news footage, Maxen looked the same as he always had: distant, a man who was always the other side of an LCD panel or cathode tube. It was sometimes hard to believe that he was anything more than a pattern, of lights, moving across the face of New Richmond, always one remove.

The next item said that Chief of Police McAuley was lobbying to relocate people out of 100 and fill it with concrete, to finally stop the plebs from accessing the higher floors. Cunning, I thought, and never mind that the *real* lowlife have fuck-off great houses on 185. The C of P of New Richmond is one of the world's premier dickheads, and also one of the best kickback receivers in the country. Never known to fumble a play.

The new hobby for the young and stupid was wall-diving: jumping out of upper-story windows without a rope or parachute. And some woman had got psychoed and spread over twenty square yards of 92: the murderer had wrought "unspecified damage to her face," and the cops were hopeful of an early arrest. Yeah, right.

Nothing much had changed.

Passing all the food stands wasn't easy. The one thing Ratchet hadn't been able to cook properly was burgers, and after five years I'd almost turned the idea of them into a religion. I took a turn off Main and walked some side streets until I reached the place I was going. The sign outside had been made bigger and more ostentatious, but apart from that, the bar looked exactly the same. I stood outside for a moment, looking past the wooden window frame stained deep brown with polish, at the dim pools of light within. I came here a lot, at one time, when things were different. Seeing it again made me feel old, and tired, and breathlessly sad.

Just as I was reaching for the door, something odd happened. I thought I felt a hand try to wheedle itself into my palm, down where it hung by my side. It was plump and warm, like the hand of an eight-year-old girl. I felt it try to pull me away.

As soon as I noticed it properly the feeling was gone, and though I turned and looked both ways up the side street, there was no one there. I stood motionless for a moment, breathing shallowly, aware of a small tic under my left eye. So far, I'd managed to blank the things I should be feeling, but I knew I couldn't keep it up forever. For the first time in years I wanted something that came in small rolls of foil, wanted it suddenly and completely without need that defied all reason.

I forced myself to push open the door and walk into the bar. It was mainly empty, a few hopheads nodding over their drinks. I went straight through into the back area, which was smaller, cozier, and also where the owner tends to hang out.

"Jack Randall," said a voice, and I turned.

Howie was sitting at one of the tables, piles of receipts and general administrative junk strewn all around him. That kind of stuff makes me want to go back to barter economy, but Howie lives for it. An unopened bottle of Jack Daniels was at his right elbow, next to a large bucket of ice and two empty glasses. He was slightly rounder, had lost a little hair and gained an alarming scar on his forehead, but apart from that he looked pretty much the same. He grinned at me affably, a picture of relaxation.

"Guess you're not surprised to see me," I said.

"To see you, no. To see you *alive*, always, and especially today. Dath? Paulie?" Howie gave an upward nod toward the couple of steroid abusers lurking round a table near the back. They rose and split up, one going to cover the front entrance, the other the back. I'm a cautious man, but Howie sleeps with a bazooka under his pillow. Dath nodded at me as he passed. "The guys at the back door gave me a call," Howie told me, dropping a couple of cubes of ice into the glasses, and then filling both with whiskey. "Sounded like it had to be you."

"That's a big drink," I said, accepting a glass.

"By whose standards? Come on, Jack, I've seen you unconscious earlier than this. Time was you thought by nine o'clock the evening was getting old. You want any Rapt while you're here?"

I shook my head, silently cursing Howie for being able to read my mind. "I've cleaned up a little," I said.

He laughed. "You just think you have," he said, and lifted one of the glasses. "A man who

lays it on like you did never goes on vacation.”

I chinked my glass against his and drank. Howie drained his in one, leaned back, and patted his stomach comfortably with both hands.

“How’s tricks?” I asked, looking around the bar.

“Tricky,” he said. “But what about this? Couples, okay, they’re always ringing each other up, inviting each other round for dinner. Sounds like a great idea at the time—some wine, some fine conversation, a chance to peek down the other woman’s blouse. But then the day starts to approach, and everyone’s thinking, Jesus H—why did we agree to this? The hosts are dreading all the admin—restocking the drinks cabinet, cooking fiddly food, making sure all the tubes of Gonorrhoea-Be-Gone in the bathroom are hidden. The guests are thinking about getting expensive cabs and babysitters and not being able to smoke. Complete downer all round. You with me so far?”

“Yes,” I said, though I wasn’t sure I was.

“Okay. So the idea is this. A Date Canceling Service. The day before the evening’s supposed to happen, the guests ring up and cancel. They call it off, politely, just before anyone has to actually do anything. Everyone gets a nice warm glow about agreeing to see each other, but no one has to tidy up afterward or schlepp baby photos halfway across town. Everyone can just sit in their own apartments and have a perfectly good evening by themselves, and they enjoy it all the more because they thought they were going to have to go out.”

“Where do you come in?”

“I come up with an excuse for canceling—won’t even have to be a good one, because no one wants to go through with it anyway. You can say, ‘My head has exploded and Janet has turned into an egg’ and it’ll be, ‘Oh, sorry to hear that, some other time then, yeah, great good bye.’”

“Where does the money come in?”

“I take the cut of what it would have cost to buy the food and drink and cabs. In the early days it’s nickel and dime, I admit, but wait till it gets into the upper floors. I’ll make a pile. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a crock of shit,” I said, laughing. “Even worse than the mugging service.”

“You could be right,” he admitted, grinning. “But you didn’t come here for this—you can wait for my autobiography. What can I do for you, boss man?”

“Has the word gone round?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“The word has gone round and around and met itself coming back. ‘Jack’s in town. Everyone beware.’”

“Not anymore,” I said. Howie looked at me soberly.

“I know,” he said. “And I have to admit, that’s not what people are saying. You were spotted out in the Portal, that’s all.” Howie lit a cigarette and looked at me closely. “How are you doing, Jack?”

I knew what he was asking. I wasn’t ready to go into it yet, not even with him. Possibly not ever, with anyone.

"I'm okay," I said. "But I'm in very deep shit."

"That I will believe. What can I do for you?"

I reached into my pocket and brought the chip out. It was a small oblong of clear Perspex about four centimeters by two, and five millimeters deep. Along one of the short edges was a row of tiny gold contacts designed to interface the unit to the motherboard of a computer. The number "128" was printed matter-of-factly on the chip's front. I'd found it in my bag after we'd left the Farm. I hadn't put it there, which meant Ratchet must have done so. Howie took the chip from me, peered closely at it, and sniffed.

"What's this?"

"I think it's one-twenty-eight gigs of RAM," I said.

"Don't recognize the make. Where's it from?"

"A friend gave it to me."

"You're in luck," he said. "The market's volatile, and this week it's up. I can probably give you about eight for this without fucking myself up too badly."

"I'm in kind of a hurry."

He reached under the chair and brought up a large metal cashbox. He placed it on the table and opened it, revealing bundles of dirty notes. All of the money in New Richmond is dirty, figuratively at least. There can't be a dollar bill which hasn't been involved in something illegal somewhere down the line, hasn't been handed over in a suitcase at some stage in its life. Howie counted off eight hundred dollars in fifties and held it out to me between two fingers of one hand. "You want a loan too?"

I shook my head. "Thanks, but no. Don't know when I'll be this way again. Maybe never."

"So pretend I'm your friend and call it a gift."

I smiled and stood up, slipping the notes into my inside pocket. "You are and I'll be okay."

Howie pursed his lips. "You know there's a whack out on you?"

I stared at him. "*Already?* What, an old one?"

Howie shook his head. "Don't know, but I think it's new. Heard twenty minutes ago."

"How much is it for?"

"Five thou."

"That's insulting. Let me know if it goes above ten," I said. "Then I'll start seriously watching my back."

At the door, Dath stepped to one side to let me out. I paused, and looked up at his face. Dath looks like your basic worst nightmare, except he wears expensive clothes and gets a nice close shave. There'd always been a rumor that before working for Howie he'd been a mac guy in Miami: starting at the bottom, in the mail room, before deciding to specialize as a hitman. The word was he'd worked his way up the ladder in the old-fashioned way, beginning by being cutting to people: for a hundred dollars he'd march into someone's place, look them up and down, and go "Yeah, great suit," in a really ironic way, and then leave. His speciality was the "overheard conversation" hit. Wherever the target went—in a restaurant, in a bar, in the John—Dath would be somewhere just out of sight, talking loudly about postmodernism.

It eventually drove the target crazy.

He always denied it. I was never sure.

“You heard about the contract on me?” I asked Dath. He nodded. “You a player?”

“Nah,” he said slowly. “Think HI wait till it goes up to ten.”

Then he winked, and I smiled as I walked past him back out into the streets.

Good bye to all that, I thought.

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