

PAINT IT NOIR

By Steve Bunk

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1

Worry clouded the cab of my pickup. I tried to dispel it with the fantasy of a happy dog, gums flapping out the window. Maybe a real pet would have been better if I'd ever been willing to take responsibility for one, but the daydream worked briefly. And then the ominous cloud returned.

McCall's log hotels and red-meat restaurants stuck out their chests as the truck growled by in the morning sparkle. *The Aviator* travel mug in my cup holder was full of organic Sumatran, and from the speakers, Steve Earle issued his confident bobcat snarl. Even so, I couldn't shake the conviction that perilously low cash reserves shouldn't have swayed me to accept a delivery job that would start with a phone call I'd receive any minute now. It was a mistake to get tied up with a character like Cassim Geyer. The gloom of that decision wouldn't go away.

The truck creaked into a sharp left and rambled along the southern shore of Payette Lake. I tugged at the brim of my Phillies baseball cap, which I never would have worn in Philthy, and set a wrist on the wheel to putter between cabins and condos. At the little bridge over the river outlet, patches

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of blue bled through the lake's ice below the piney mountains, still hooded in snow.

I pulled off the main drag, drove down a paved lane past one of the community's umpteen churches, and crackled to a halt in the gravel space before Myotis Books. Tucked away on this side street, the little building was practically invisible to the crowds from Boise and beyond who would arrive in the warm weeks. Everyone in town assumed the business survived only through the subsidy of its owner, Ellie Crossfield, who had come up winners in the inheritance stakes. It was like an expensive hobby, but my woman Tirea and I appreciated the effort and did our part to keep the enterprise going. She'd hinted, if you could call it that, about a book for her birthday, which I'd ordered.

When I entered, Ellie looked up from a shelf she was stocking and said hello.

"My book's here?" I asked.

"You mean Tirea's book?"

She slung her trademark laugh, a piercing tonal assault that twisted up at the end—the high rising tone gone rogue. She held a copy of Vardis Fisher's *Mountain Man*, which she slotted into place before moving to the register. Shelves ran along three walls and in the center were a half-dozen rows divided into westerns, romance, cooking, war history, fishing. The books were mostly secondhand paperbacks. Passing a section on guns and hunting, I noticed a volume on Glocks and pulled it.

"For a non-hunter, you sure love gun books, Reese."

It was true, the lethal ingenuity of weapons fascinated me. Yet I hadn't owned a gun in years, since the death of a friend at the trigger finger of a punk. In these parts, the hunting-oriented culture was a relief from big cities like Philthy, where

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guns too often were aimed at other humans. Not that it didn't happen here, especially in the remote communities, like the ones I flew smokejumpers and supplies to during the wildfire season, places where everyone seemed to regard every stranger as a dangerous crackpot. But shootings were rare. People were, too. You could go back and forth on stats like that.

Ellie handed me Tirea's hardback, fearsomely titled, *The Adjacent Possible: General Laws for Biospheres in a Nonergodic Universe*. We exchanged glances, and she ran me through with her whinnying laugh, which seemed to suggest: "This book is beyond you, buster. Kidding! Not really, though."

I said so long to Ellie, took my purchases to the truck, and put them in the toolbox in the tray. The engine gave a split-second refusal to respond when I turned the key, and then rolled over partway like an old man in bed before twisting into action.

"Don't do that," I warned the banger.

My phone rang.

"You need to come over as soon as possible," my friend Fabienne said. "I have a package you're supposed to pick up."

"What do you mean? What is it?"

"He told me you'd bring the money for it."

"Who's he?"

"Just come and get it, will you?"

She hung up. What the hell? Was Fabienne mixed up in this?

She lived a few miles south of town in Long Valley, but I had gone only two blocks to the stoplight at the intersection with Lake Street when the Dodge stalled. I turned the key again. A couple of clicks and then nothing. The battery was fairly new, and the lights worked. Probably the starter. Shit. I got out and put the hood up.

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One car went by, two, and then—thanks be to the rural ethic—the third pulled over. The driver gave me a push start and within twenty minutes of the stall, I was back in action. I called Fabienne to say what had happened but was sent to her voicemail.

On the way out of town, I passed my mechanic's place, a two-story clapboard house with an apron of parking in front of a three-car garage. It was tempting, but I had no time for repairs. The rest of the way, I took small breaths and willed the pickup to stay alive.

It was midday, and sunlight showered the tamaracks. In the embrace of these mountain woods, you'd just about expect to encounter talking creatures and gnomes in funny hats. The landscape's allure seemed self-aware. My thoughts floated back to the previous day at Cassim Geyer's place outside Sun Valley, when I did what Tireia had cautioned me not to do.

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2

Soft footsteps signaled the arrival of Cassim Geyer. Trim and compact, he sported a smoking jacket, slacks, and barefoot shoes with toe pockets, which made me grin. He introduced himself and put out his hand like his mother was making him do it. I took it briefly and said, "Reese Mencari." We sat, and he dangled a gloved foot.

"Let's get right down to business, Mr. Mencari, shall we? No doubt you know about the crowds that flocked to see the centerpiece of the film noir exhibition in Boise recently."

"The little statue from *The Maltese Falcon*? Yeah, I read it's worth more than four million."

"Some say the auction price for the prop was a bargain, considering the fame of the film. When the exhibition ended, the falcon was delivered to me for safekeeping. The owner, Mrs. Pascoe-Leyland, lives in Sun Valley, but we often conduct business of this sort for her when she's overseas."

A lovely young woman appeared in a white blouse over a black skirt. She placed a silver tray on a serving table and poured two cups of tea. As she retreated, Geyer glanced to see whether I appreciated our server. He sipped his tea. I was a little disappointed he didn't hold out his pinkie.

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"The problem is—and I'm chagrined to tell you this—someone broke into my safe and made off with it."

"You don't say? I didn't hear it was stolen."

"We kept it out of the news. Nor was the theft reported to the authorities." He twisted his teacup on its saucer but didn't pick it up. "Not long after its disappearance, I was contacted by the culprit, who offered to return it for a price. Mrs. Pascoe-Leyland agreed to the proposal."

"Let me guess. You want me to be the bagman."

"An intermediary, I should say. A skilled interlocutor."

The tea was thin and lemony. The cake was tiny. I grimaced.

"I can understand why you look skeptical," he said. "You'd be exchanging a large sum of money for an extremely valuable object, and you'd be dealing with a criminal. I wouldn't engage anyone for this job who wasn't concerned about that."

My gaze wandered to the wall and alighted on a couple of large paintings. One was a Gainsborough-like portrait of a woman in a pleated gown that covered her feet. It was better than the other one. Right out of the 1940s, a high-breasted brunette in a print blouse sat in a thin chair and stared. She looked familiar, and not being able to place her bothered me.

"You're a film noir fan?" he asked.

"Are you talking about the pictures? The young woman on the left reminds me of someone."

"It's Joan Bennett, playing Katherine March from Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street*," he said. "The other one is Lady Caroline de Winter from Hitchcock's *Rebecca*."

The names went by and folded into the shadows of other things half-heard somewhere or indolently seen, except for Hitchcock, everybody's dark uncle.

"How did you set your sights on me?" I asked.

"When I was entrusted with this task, I realized it would be

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essential to contract a person of your special talents."

"Special talents? I fly a plane. Plenty of people do that."

"But your reputation precedes you."

"You're talking about the theft of Fred McNery's airplane."

"Its recovery was an impressive piece of deduction. You made the authorities look hapless."

"My partner, Tíreia D'Silva, was the brains. Anyway, we did that because Fred is our friend. We aren't detectives. You need a P.I. to handle this payoff."

"I don't need an investigator. I need a lateral thinker who can function under pressure."

"So you're expecting trouble."

"Not at all. The exchange should be quite straightforward. Yet given the stakes, I'd be foolish not to send a man of the highest caliber."

I was getting buttered up like French toast.

"Why doesn't Mrs. Pascoe-Leyland call in the cops?"

Geyer practically jumped out of his chair.

"No, no, she's adamant the police not be involved. She's had enough experience with the incompetence of law enforcement to be convinced she'd never see the statue again."

This wasn't good. And it was way out of my wheelhouse. Tíreia had done some checking on Cassim Geyer and was leery of him. We knew he flapped around the edges of the Sun Valley glitterati, attracted by the light. Yet the exact services he provided were shadowy. Still, I'd spent a long winter on the ground and was cash-strapped. Tíreia advised me to steer clear of him but as much as I valued my wise lover's counsel, I decided to hear him out. And what I heard was the fee would be handsome. I wondered how he spelled that in numbers.

"I don't believe in carrying a gun," I told him. "If the thief

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were to just grab the money and keep the prop, I'd let him."

"That's a risk we're willing to take."

"I'm comforted."

He shot the cuffs of his smoking jacket, which bore his initials in gold embroidery.

"Mr. Mencari, you're a smokejumper pilot, are you not?"

"That's right."

"I'm sure the payment for such work is good, but it is seasonal. I should think a substantial fee for a simple transaction in early spring would amount to a windfall for you. Am I incorrect?"

He wasn't the least bit incorrect. Tireia was loaded, she could tide me over until the summer wildfires began—but the old guard dog of pride coiled somewhere in my limbic system wouldn't allow me to take it.

He reached into a pocket of his smoking jacket and extracted a folded paper and fountain pen.

"I trust this amount will suffice. If you'll sign, please."

He wasn't joking about the dough. Tireia was right, of course: the smartest move would be to walk away. I didn't touch the pen.

"It's a wonder Mrs. Pascoe-Leyland wanted you to handle this, considering the falcon was lifted from your own safe."

He flicked a bit of nothing from his slacks and then regarded me, his eyes as gray as his impeccable coiffure.

"She understood, just as her people did when they examined the scene. They said it was a highly professional operation."

"It'd have to be. I noticed the burglar alarm keypad and the CCTV cameras, and you've got guards. Yet everything was neutralized or avoided."

My host rotated his cup again and considered it askance.

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He didn't seem to like the tea either.

"I suppose pilots are trained to be observant," he remarked.

"True." The little cake seemed to want me to eat it. "Strange thing to steal, though."

"Do you think so? An extremely valuable talisman at the center of the Hollywood dream holds no allure for you?"

"I mean it would be hard to sell, because everyone would know it's hot. That suggests the plan from the start was to ransom it back to the owner. But what if she didn't bite?"

He looked away. "Let's not forget the point: the statue was stolen. I'm afraid your analysis of the thief's strategy is too theoretical for me." He gathered a disarming expression around the eyes and said, "If I were a scientist, I'd probably be running the experiments rather than concocting the hypotheses."

"A regular technician, huh?"

Cassim's mouth formed a straight line and he hardened his gaze, which again made me grin. A tough guy in toe shoes.

"Looks to me like there are a lot of prizes people could remove from this place. For example, why wouldn't they grab those two paintings on the wall as well?"

He folded his arms, paused, and then leaned forward.

"I'll let you in on a secret. But it won't go beyond us, if you don't mind."

"OK."

"I did own both original paintings until a while back, but certain financial considerations induced me to divest. And you're right, I received a tidy sum for them. Happily, I have an acquaintance whose skills as a copyist are nonpareil."

"All right, but if they're such good fakes, why wouldn't they fool a burglar?"

"Perhaps, like you, he had no idea what they were."

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"He sure knew what and where the bird was. Even though the safe was hidden, I assume."

Geyer dropped his head and exhaled.

"I suppose we could conclude that any thief who knew the Maltese Falcon's whereabouts might well have known the paintings were forgeries. Or at least that they were worth much less than the principal prop in arguably the greatest detective film of all time. Not that any of it matters anymore."

"It might if you plan to put the statue back in the same safe it was taken from. Come on, this had to be an inside job."

"We're very aware of that possibility, Mr. Mencari."

I grabbed the baked treat and chewed. It tasted like cardboard. What was the matter with this guy? All his taste seemed to be outside his mouth.

I picked up the pen, winced at the mental image of Tirea's glare, and signed.

Geyer rose and unlocked a drawer in a table that looked laser-hewn from petrified wood. He took out a fat envelope and put it in front of me.

"This is the payment you'll make in exchange for the falcon. Have a safe flight, Mr. Mencari."

"Oh, I will, Cassim."