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**A  
STORY**

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# Thumbprint

JOE HILL



WILLIAM MORROW

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# THUMBPRINT

THE FIRST THUMBPRINT came in the mail.

Mal was eight months back from Abu Ghraib, where she had done things she regretted. She had returned to Hammett, New York, just in time to bury her father. He died ten hours before her plane touched down in the States, which was maybe all for the best. After the things she had done, she wasn't sure she could've looked him in the eye. Although a part of her had wanted to talk to him about it and to see in his face how he judged her. Without him there was no one to hear her story, no one whose judgment mattered.

The old man had served, too, in Vietnam, as a medic. Her father had saved lives, jumped from a helicopter and dragged kids out of the paddy grass, under heavy fire. He called them kids, although he had been only twenty-five himself at the time. He'd been awarded a Purple Heart and a Silver Star.

They hadn't been offering Mal any medals when they sent her on her way. At least she hadn't been identifiable in any of the photographs of Abu Ghraib—just her boots in that one shot Graner took, with the men piled naked on top of each other, a pyramid of stacked ass and hanging sac. If

Graner had just tilted the camera up a little, Mal would have been headed home a lot sooner, only it would have been in handcuffs.

She got back her old job at the Milky Way, keeping bar, and moved into her father's house. It was all he had to leave her, that and the car. The old man's ranch was set three hundred yards from Hatchet Hill Road, backed against the town woods. In the fall Mal ran in the forest, wearing a full ruck, three miles through the evergreens.

She kept the M4A1 in the downstairs bedroom, broke it down and put it together every morning, a job she could complete by the count of twelve. When she was done, she put the components back in their case with the bayonet, cradling them neatly in their foam cutouts—you didn't attach the bayonet unless you were about to be overrun. Her M4 had come back to the U.S. with a civilian contractor, who brought it with him on his company's private jet. He had been an interrogator for hire—there'd been a lot of them at Abu Ghraib in the final months before the arrests—and he said it was the least he could do, that she had earned it for services rendered, a statement that left her cold.

Come one night in November, Mal walked out of the Milky Way with John Petty, the other bartender, and they found Glen Kardon passed out in the front seat of his Saturn. The driver's-side door was open, and Glen's butt was in the air, his legs hanging from the car, feet twisted in the gravel, as if he had just been clubbed to death from behind.

Not even thinking, she told Petty to keep an eye out, and then Mal straddled Glen's hips and dug out his wallet. She

helped herself to a hundred and twenty dollars cash, dropped the wallet back on the passenger-side seat. Petty hissed at her to hurry the fuck up, while Mal wiggled the wedding ring off Glen's finger.

"His wedding ring?" Petty asked when they were in her car together. Mal gave him half the money for being her lookout but kept the ring for herself. "Jesus, you're a demented bitch."

Petty put his hand between her legs and ground his thumb hard into the crotch of her black jeans while she drove. She let him do that for a while, his other hand groping her breast. Then she elbowed him off her.

"That's enough," she said.

"No it isn't."

She reached into his jeans, ran her hand down his hard-on, then took his balls and began to apply pressure until he let out a little moan, not entirely of pleasure.

"It's plenty," she said. She pulled her hand from his pants. "You want more than that, you'll have to wake up your wife. Give her a thrill."

Mal let him out of the car in front of his home and peeled away, tires throwing gravel at him.

Back at her father's house, she sat on the kitchen counter, looking at the wedding ring in the cup of her palm. A simple gold band, scuffed and scratched, all the shine dulled out of it. She wondered why she had taken it.

Mal knew Glen Kardon, Glen and his wife, Helen, both. The three of them were the same age, had all gone to school together. Glen had a magician at his tenth-birthday party, who had escaped from handcuffs and a straitjacket as

his final trick. Years later Mal would become well acquainted with another escape artist who managed to slip out of a pair of handcuffs, a Ba'athist. Both of his thumbs had been broken, making it possible for him to squeeze out of the cuffs. It was easy if you could bend your thumb in any direction—all you had to do was ignore the pain.

And Helen had been Mal's lab partner in sixth-grade biology. Helen took notes in her delicate cursive, using different-colored inks to brighten up their reports, while Mal sliced things open. Mal liked the scalpel, the way the skin popped apart at the slightest touch of the blade to show what was hidden behind it. She had an instinct for it, always somehow knew just where to put the cut.

Mal shook the wedding ring in one hand for a while and finally dropped it down the sink. She didn't know what to do with it, wasn't sure where to fence it. Had no use for it, really.

When she went down to the mailbox the next morning, she found an oil bill, a real-estate flyer, and a plain white envelope. Inside the envelope was a crisp sheet of typing paper, neatly folded, blank except for a single thumbprint in black ink. The print was a clean impression, and among the whorls and lines was a scar, like a fishhook. There was nothing on the envelope—no stamp, no addresses, no mark of any kind. The postman had not left it.

In her first glance, she knew it was a threat and that whoever had put the envelope in her mailbox might still be watching. Mal felt her vulnerability in the sick clench of her insides and had to struggle against the conditioned impulse to get low and find cover. She looked to either side but saw



only the trees, their branches waving in the cold swirl of a light breeze. There was no traffic along the road and no sign of life anywhere.

The whole long walk back to the house, she was aware of a weakness in her legs. She didn't look at the thumbprint again but carried it inside and left it with the other mail on the kitchen counter. She let her shaky legs carry her on into her father's bedroom, her bedroom now. The M4 was in its case in the closet, but her father's .45 automatic was even closer—she slept with it under the pillow—and it didn't need to be assembled. Mal slid the action back to pump a bullet into the chamber. She got her field glasses from her ruck.

Mal climbed the carpeted stairs to the second floor and opened the door into her old bedroom under the eaves. She hadn't been in there since coming home, and the air had a musty, stale quality. A tatty poster of Alan Jackson was stuck up on the inverted slant of the roof. Her dolls—the blue corduroy bear, the pig with the queer silver-button eyes that gave him a look of blindness—were set neatly in the shelves of a bookcase without books.

Her bed was made, but when she went close, she was surprised to find the shape of a body pressed into it, the pillow dented in the outline of someone's head. The idea occurred that whoever had left the thumbprint had been inside the house while she was out, and had taken a nap up here. Mal didn't slow down but stepped straight up onto the mattress, unlocked the window over it, shoved it open, and climbed through.

In another minute she was sitting on the roof, holding the binoculars to her eyes with one hand, the gun in the other.

The asbestos shingles had been warming all day in the sun and provided a pleasant ambient heat beneath her. From where she sat on the roof, she could see in every direction.

She remained there for most of an hour, scanning the trees, following the passage of cars along Hatchet Hill Road. Finally she knew she was looking for someone who wasn't there anymore. She hung the binoculars from her neck and leaned back on the hot shingles and closed her eyes. It had been cold down in the driveway, but up on the roof, on the lee side of the house, out of the wind, she was comfortable, a lizard on a rock.

When Mal swung her body back into the bedroom, she sat for a while on the sill, holding the gun in both hands and considering the impression of a human body on her blankets and pillow. She picked up the pillow and pressed her face into it. Very faintly she could smell a trace of her father, his cheap corner-store cigars, the waxy tang of that shit he put in his hair, same stuff Reagan had used. The thought that he had sometimes been up here, dozing in her bed, gave her a little chill. She wished she were still the kind of person who could hug a pillow and weep over what she had lost. But in truth maybe she had never been that kind of person.

When she was back in the kitchen, Mal looked once more at the thumbprint on the plain white sheet of paper. Against all logic or sense, it seemed somehow familiar to her. She didn't like that.

HE HAD BEEN brought in with a broken tibia, the Iraqi everyone called the Professor, but a few hours after they put him in a cast, he was judged well enough to sit for an

interrogation. In the early morning, before sunrise, Corporal Plough came to get him.

Mal was working in Block 1A then and went with Anshaw to collect the Professor. He was in a cell with eight other men: sinewy, unshaved Arabs, most of them dressed in Fruit of the Loom jockey shorts and nothing else. Some others, who had been uncooperative with CI, had been given pink-flowered panties to wear. The panties fit more snugly than the jockeys, which were all extra large and baggy. The prisoners skulked in the gloom of their stone chamber, giving Mal looks so feverish and sunken-eyed they appeared deranged. Glancing in at them, Mal didn't know whether to laugh or flinch.

"Walk away from the bars, women," she said in her clumsy Arabic. "Walk away." She crooked her finger at the Professor. "You. Come to here."

He hopped forward, one hand on the wall to steady himself. He wore a hospital johnny, and his left leg was in a cast from ankle to knee. Anshaw had brought a pair of aluminum crutches for him. Mal and Anshaw were coming to the end of a twelve-hour shift, in a week of twelve-hour shifts. Escorting the prisoner to CI with Corporal Plough would be their last job of the night. Mal was twitchy from all the Vivarin in her system, so much she could hardly stand still. When she looked at lamps, she saw rays of hard-edged, rainbow-shot light emanating from them, as if she were peering through crystal.

The night before, a patrol had surprised some men planting an IED in the red, hollowed-out carcass of a German shepherd, on the side of the road back to Baghdad.

The bombers scattered, yelling, from the spotlights on the Hummers, and a contingent of men went after them.

An engineer named Leeds stayed behind to have a look at the bomb inside the dog. He was three steps from the animal when a cell phone went off inside the dog's bowels, three bars of "Oops! . . . I Did It Again." The dog ruptured in a belch of flame and with a heavy thud that people standing thirty feet away could feel in the marrow of their bones. Leeds dropped to his knees, holding his face, smoke coming out from under his gloves. The first soldier to get to him said his face peeled off like a cheap black rubber mask that had been stuck to the sinew beneath with rubber cement.

Not long after, the patrol grabbed the Professor—so named because of his horn-rimmed glasses and because he insisted he was a teacher—two blocks from the site of the explosion. He broke his leg jumping off a high berm, running away after the soldiers fired over his head and ordered him to halt.

Now the Professor lurched along on the crutches, Mal and Anshaw flanking him and Plough walking behind. They made their way out of 1A and into the predawn morning. The Professor paused, beyond the doors, to take a breath. That was when Plough kicked the left crutch out from under his arm.

The Professor went straight down and forward with a cry, his johnny flapping open to show the soft paleness of his ass. Anshaw reached to help him back up. Plough said to leave him.

"Sir?" Anshaw asked. Anshaw was just nineteen. He had been over as long as Mal, but his skin was oily and white, as

if he had never been out of his chemical suit.

“Did you see him swing that crutch at me?” Plough asked Mal.

Mal did not reply but watched to see what would happen next. She had spent the last two hours bouncing on her heels, chewing her fingernails down to the skin, too wired to stop moving. Now, though, she felt stillness spreading through her, like a drop of ink in water, calming her restless hands, her nervous legs.

Plough bent over and pulled the string at the back of the johnny, unknotting it so it fell off the Professor’s shoulders and down to his wrists. His ass was spotted with dark moles and relatively hairless. His sac was drawn tight to his perineum. The Professor glanced up over his shoulder, his eyes too large in his face, and spoke rapidly in Arabic.

“What’s he saying?” Plough asked. “I don’t speak Sand Nigger.”

“He said don’t,” Mal answered, translating automatically. “He says he hasn’t done anything. He was picked up by accident.”

Plough kicked away the other crutch. “Get those.”

Anshaw picked up the crutches.

Plough put his boot in the Professor’s fleshy ass and shoved.

“Get going. Tell him get going.”

A pair of MPs walked past, turned their heads to look at the Professor as they went by. He was trying to cover his crotch with one hand, but Plough kicked him in the ass again, and he had to start crawling. His crawl was awkward stuff, what with his left leg sticking out straight in its cast

and the bare foot dragging in the dirt. One of the MPs laughed, and then they moved away into the night.

The Professor struggled to pull his johnny up onto his shoulders as he crawled, but Plough stepped on it and it tore away.

“Leave it. Tell him leave it and hurry up.”

Mal told him. The prisoner couldn't look at her. He looked at Anshaw instead and began pleading with him, asking for something to wear and saying his leg hurt while Anshaw stared down at him, eyes bulging, as if he were choking on something. Mal wasn't surprised that the Professor was addressing Anshaw instead of her. Part of it was a cultural thing. The Arabs couldn't cope with being humiliated in front of a woman. But also Anshaw had something about him that signified to others, even the enemy, that he was approachable. In spite of the nine-millimeter strapped to his outer thigh, he gave an impression of stumbling, unthreatening cluelessness. In the barracks he blushed when other guys were ogling centerfolds; he often could be seen praying during heavy mortar attacks.

The prisoner had stopped crawling once more. Mal poked the barrel of her M4 in the Professor's ass to get him going again, and the Iraqi jerked, gave a shrill sort of sob. Mal didn't mean to laugh, but there was something funny about the convulsive clench of his butt cheeks, something that sent a rush of blood to her head. Her blood was racy and strange with Vivarin, and watching the prisoner's ass bunch up like that was the most hilarious thing she had seen in weeks.

The Professor crawled past wire fence, along the edge of the road. Plough told Mal to ask him where his friends were now, his friends who blew up the American GI. He said if the Professor would tell about his friends, he could have his crutches and his johnny back.

The prisoner said he didn't know anything about the IED. He said he ran because other men were running and soldiers were shooting. He said he was a teacher of literature, that he had a little girl. He said he had taken his twelve-year-old to Disneyland Paris once.

"He's fucking with us," Plough said. "What's a professor of literature doing out at two A.M. in the worst part of town? Your queer-fuck bin Laden friends blew the face right off an American GI, a good man, a man with a pregnant wife back home. Where do your friends— Mal, make him understand he's going to tell us where his friends are hiding. Let him know it would be better to tell us now, before we get where we're going. Let him know this is the easy part of his day. CI wants this motherfucker good and soft before we get him there."

Mal nodded, her ears buzzing. She told the Professor he didn't have a daughter, because he was a known homosexual. She asked him if he liked the barrel of her gun in his ass, if it excited him. She said, "Where is the house of your partners who make the dogs into bombs? Where is your homosexual friends go after murdering Americans with their trick dogs? Tell me if you don't want the gun in the hole of your ass."

"I swear by the life of my little girl I don't know who those other men were. Please. My child is named Alaya. She is ten

years old. There was a picture of her in my pants. Where are my pants? I will show you.”

She stepped on his hand and felt the bones compress unnaturally under her heel. He shrieked.

“Tell,” she said. “Tell.”

“I can’t.”

A steely clashing sound caught Mal’s attention. Anshaw had dropped the crutches. He looked green, and his hands were hooked into claws, raised almost but not quite to cover his ears.

“You okay?” she asked.

“He’s lying,” Anshaw said. Anshaw’s Arabic was not as good as hers, but not bad. “He said his daughter was twelve the first time.”

She stared at Anshaw, and he stared back, and while they were looking at each other, there came a high, keening whistle, like air being let out of some giant balloon . . . a sound that made Mal’s racy blood feel as if it were fizzing with oxygen, made her feel carbonated inside. She flipped her M4 around to hold it by the barrel in both hands, and when the mortar struck—out beyond the perimeter but still hitting hard enough to cause the earth to shake underfoot—she drove the butt of the gun straight down into the Professor’s broken leg, clubbing at it as if she were trying to drive a stake into the ground. Over the shattering thunder of the exploding mortar, not even Mal could hear him screaming.

MAL PUSHED HERSELF hard on her Friday-morning run, out in the woods, driving herself up Hatchet Hill, reaching ground



so steep she was really climbing, not running. She kept going until she was short of breath and the sky seemed to spin, as if it were the roof of a carousel.

When she finally paused, she felt faint. The wind breathed in her face, chilling her sweat, a curiously pleasant sensation. Even the feeling of light-headedness, of being close to exhaustion and collapse, was somehow satisfying to her.

The army had her for four years before Mal left to become a part of the reserves. On her second day of basic training, she had done push-ups until she was sick, then was so weak she collapsed in it. She wept in front of others, something she could now hardly bear to remember.

Eventually she learned to like the feeling that came right before collapse: the way the sky got big, and sounds grew far away and tinny, and all the colors seemed to sharpen to a hallucinatory brightness. There was an intensity of sensation when you were on the edge of what you could handle, when you were physically tested and made to fight for each breath, that was somehow exhilarating.

At the top of the hill, Mal slipped the stainless-steel canteen out of her ruck, her father's old camping canteen, and filled her mouth with ice water. The canteen flashed, a silver mirror in the late-morning sun. She poured water onto her face, wiped her eyes with the hem of her T-shirt, put the canteen away, and ran on, ran for home.

She let herself in through the front door, didn't notice the envelope until she stepped on it and heard the crunch of paper underfoot. She stared down at it, her mind blank for one dangerous moment, trying to think who would've come

up to the house to slide a bill under the door when it would've been easier to just leave it in the mailbox. But it wasn't a bill, and she knew it.

Mal was framed in the door, the outline of a soldier painted into a neat rectangle, like the human-silhouette targets they shot at on the range. She made no sudden moves, however. If someone meant to shoot her, he would have done it—there had been plenty of time—and if she was being watched, she wanted to show she wasn't afraid.

She crouched, picked up the envelope. The flap was not sealed. She tapped out the sheet of paper inside and unfolded it. Another thumbprint, this one a fat black oval, like a flattened spoon. There was no fishhook-shaped scar on this thumb. This was a different thumb entirely. In some ways that was more unsettling to her than anything.

No—the most unsettling thing was that this time he had slipped his message under her door, while last time he had left it a hundred yards down the road, in the mailbox. It was maybe his way of saying he could get as close to her as he wanted.

Mal thought police but discarded the idea. She had been a cop herself, in the army, knew how cops thought. Leaving a couple thumbprints on unsigned sheets of paper wasn't a crime. It was probably a prank, they would say, and you couldn't waste manpower investigating a prank. She felt now, as she had when she saw the first thumbprint, that these messages were not the perverse joke of some local snotnose but a malicious promise, a warning to be on guard. Yet it was an irrational feeling, unsupported by any evidence. It was soldier knowledge, not cop knowledge.

Besides, when you called the cops, you never knew what you were going to get. There were cops like her out there. People you didn't want getting too interested in you.

She balled up the thumbprint, took it onto the porch. Mal cast her gaze around, scanning the bare trees, the straw-colored weeds at the edge of the woods. She stood there for close to a minute. Even the trees were perfectly still, no wind to tease their branches into motion, as if the whole world were in a state of suspension, waiting to see what would happen next—only nothing happened next.

She left the balled-up paper on the porch railing, went back inside, and got the M4 from the closet. Mal sat on the bedroom floor, assembling and disassembling it, three times, twelve seconds each time. Then she set the parts back in the case with the bayonet and slid it under her father's bed.

TWO HOURS LATER Mal ducked down behind the bar at the Milky Way to rack clean glasses. They were fresh from the dishwasher and so hot they burned her fingertips. When she stood up with the empty tray, Glen Kardon was on the other side of the counter, staring at her with red-rimmed, watering eyes. He looked in a kind of stupor, his face puffy, his comb-over disheveled, as if he had just stumbled out of bed.

"I need to talk to you about something," he said. "I was trying to think if there was some way I could get my wedding ring back. Any way at all."

All the blood seemed to rush from Mal's brain, as if she had stood up too quickly. She lost some of the feeling in her

hands, too, and for a moment her palms were overcome with a cool, almost painful tingling.

She wondered why he hadn't arrived with cops, whether he meant to give her some kind of chance to settle the matter without the involvement of the police. She wanted to say something to him, but there were no words for this. She could not remember the last time she had felt so helpless, had been caught so exposed, in such indefensible terrain.

Glen went on. "My wife spent the morning crying about it. I heard her in the bedroom, but when I tried to go in and talk to her, the door was locked. She wouldn't let me in. She tried to play it off like she was all right, talking to me through the door. She told me to go to work, don't worry. It was her father's wedding ring, you know. He died three months before we got married. I guess that sounds a little—what do you call it? Oedipal. Like in marrying me she was marrying Daddy. Oedipal isn't right, but you know what I'm saying. She loved that old man."

Mal nodded.

"If they only took the money, I'm not sure I even would've told Helen. Not after I got so drunk. I drink too much. Helen wrote me a note a few months ago, about how much I've been drinking. She wanted to know if it was because I was unhappy with her. It would be easier if she was the kind of woman who'd just scream at me. But I got drunk like that, and the wedding ring she gave me that used to belong to her daddy is gone, and all she did was hug me and say thank God they didn't hurt me."

Mal said, "I'm sorry." She was about to say she would give it all back, ring and money both, and go with him to the

police if he wanted—then caught herself. He had said “they”: “If *they* only took the money” and “*they* didn’t hurt me.” Not “you.”

Glen reached inside his coat and took out a white business envelope, stuffed fat. “I been sick to my stomach all day at work, thinking about it. Then I thought I could put up a note here in the bar. You know, like one of these flyers you see for a lost dog. Only for my lost ring. The guys who robbed me must be customers here. What else would they have been doing down in that lot, that hour of the night? So next time they’re in, they’ll see my note.”

She stared. It took a few moments for what he’d said to register. When it did—when she understood he had no idea she was guilty of anything—she was surprised to feel an odd twinge of something like disappointment.

“Electra,” she said.

“Huh?”

“A love thing between father and daughter,” Mal said. “Is an Electra complex. What’s in the envelope?”

He blinked. Now he was the one who needed some processing time. Hardly anyone knew or remembered that Mal had been to college, on Uncle Sam’s dime. She had learned Arabic there and psychology too, although in the end she had wound up back here behind the bar of the Milky Way without a degree. The plan had been to collect her last few credits after she got back from Iraq, but sometime during her tour she had ceased to give a fuck about the plan.

At last Glen came mentally unstuck and replied, “Money. Five hundred dollars. I want you to hold on to it for me.”

“Explain.”

“I was thinking what to say in my note. I figure I should offer a cash reward for the ring. But whoever stole the ring isn’t ever going to come up to me and admit it. Even if I promise not to prosecute, they wouldn’t believe me. So I figured out what I need is a middleman. This is where you come in. So the note would say to bring Mallory Grennan the ring and she’ll give you the reward money, no questions asked. It’ll say they can trust you not to tell me or the police who they are. People know you. I think most folks around here will believe that.” He pushed the envelope at her.

“Forget it, Glen. No one is bringing that ring back.”

“Let’s see. Maybe they were drunk, too, when they took it. Maybe they feel remorse.”

She laughed.

He grinned, awkwardly. His ears were pink. “It’s possible.”

She looked at him a moment longer, then put the envelope under the counter. “Okay. Let’s write your note. I can copy it on the fax machine. We’ll stick it up around the bar, and after a week, when no one brings you your ring, I’ll give you your money back and a beer on the house.”

“Maybe just a ginger ale,” Glen said.

GLEN HAD TO go, but Mal promised she’d hang a few flyers in the parking lot. She had just finished taping them up to the streetlamps when she spotted a sheet of paper, folded into thirds and stuck under the windshield wiper of her father’s car.

The thumbprint on this one was delicate and slender, an almost perfect oval, feminine in some way, while the first

two had been squarish and blunt. Three thumbs, each of them different from the others.

She pitched it at a wire garbage can attached to a telephone pole, hit the three-pointer, got out of there.

THE EIGHTY-SECOND HAD finally arrived at Abu Ghraib, to provide force protection and try to nail the fuckers who were mortaring the prison every night. Early in the fall, they began conducting raids in the town around the prison. The first week of operations, they had so many patrols out and so many raids going that they needed backup, so General Karpinski assigned squads of MPs to accompany them. Corporal Plough put in for the job and, when he was accepted, told Mal and Anshaw they were coming with him.

Mal was glad. She wanted away from the prison, the dark corridors of 1A and 1B, with their smell of old wet rock, urine, flop sweat. She wanted away from the tent cities that held the general prison population, the crowds pressed against the chain-links who pleaded with her as she walked along the perimeter, black flies crawling on their faces. She wanted to be in a Hummer with open sides, night air rushing in over her. Destination: any-fucking-where else on the planet.

In the hour before dawn, the platoon they had been tacked onto hit a private home, set within a grove of palms, a white stucco wall around the yard and a wrought-iron gate across the drive. The house was stucco, too, and had a swimming pool out back, a patio and grill, wouldn't have looked out of place in SoCal. Delta Team drove their Hummer right through the gate, which went down with a

hard metallic bang, hinges shearing out of the wall with a spray of plaster.

That was all Mal saw of the raid. She was behind the wheel of a two-and-a-half-ton troop transport for carrying prisoners. No Hummer for her, and no action either. Anshaw had another truck. She listened for gunfire, but there was none, the residents giving up without a struggle.

When the house was secure, Corporal Plough left them, said he wanted to size up the situation. What he wanted to do was get his picture taken chewing on a stogie and holding his gun, with his boot on the neck of a hog-tied insurgent. She heard over the walkie-talkie that they had grabbed one of the Fedayeen Saddam, a Ba'athist lieutenant, and had found weapons, files, personnel information. There was a lot of cornpone whoop-ass on the radio. Everyone in the Eighty-second looked like Eminem—blue eyes, pale blond hair in a crew cut—and talked like one of the Duke boys.

Just after sunup, when the shadows were leaning long away from the buildings on the east side of the street, they brought the Fedayeen out and left him on the narrow sidewalk with Plough. The insurgent's wife was still inside the building, soldiers watching her while she packed a bag.

The Fedayeen was a big Arab with hooded eyes and a three-day shadow on his chin, and he wasn't saying anything except "Fuck you" in American. In the basement, Delta Team had found racked AK-47s and a table covered in maps, marked all over with symbols, numbers, Arabic letters. They discovered a folder of photographs, featuring U.S. soldiers in the act of establishing checkpoints, rolling



barbed wire across different roads. There was also a picture in the folder of George Bush Sr., smiling a little foggily, posing with Steven Seagal.

Plough was worried that the pictures showed places and people the insurgents planned to strike. He had already been on the radio a couple times, back to base, talking with CI about it in a strained, excited voice. He was especially upset about Steven Seagal. Everyone in Plough's unit had been made to watch *Above the Law* at least once, and Plough claimed to have seen it more than a hundred times. After they brought the prisoner out, Plough stood over the Fedayeen, yelling at him and sometimes swatting him upside the head with Seagal's rolled-up picture. The Fedayeen said, "More fuck you."

Mal leaned against the driver's-side door of her truck for a while, wondering when Plough would quit hollering and swatting the prisoner. She had a Vivarin hangover, and her head hurt. Eventually she decided he wouldn't be done yelling until it was time to load up and go, and that might not be for another hour.

She left Plough yelling, walked over the flattened gate and up to the house. She let herself into the cool of the kitchen. Red tile floor, high ceilings, lots of windows so the place was filled with sunlight. Fresh bananas in a glass bowl. Where did they get fresh bananas? She helped herself to one and ate it on the toilet, the cleanest toilet she had sat on in a year.

She came back out of the house and started down to the road again. On the way there, she put her fingers in her

mouth and sucked on them. She hadn't brushed her teeth in a week, and her breath had a human stink on it.

When she returned to the street, Plough had stopped swatting the prisoner long enough to catch his breath. The Ba'athist looked up at him from under his heavy-lidded eyes. He snorted and said, "Is talk. Is boring. You are no one. I say fuck you still no one."

Mal sank to one knee in front of him, put her fingers under his nose, and said in Arabic, "Smell that? That is the cunt of your wife. I fucked her myself like a lesbian, and she said it was better than your cock."

The Ba'athist tried to lunge at her from his knees, making a sound down in his chest, a strangled growl of rage, but Plough caught him across the chin with the stock of his M4. The sound of the Ba'athist's jaw snapping was as loud as a gunshot.

He lay on his side, twisted into a fetal ball. Mal remained crouched beside him.

"Your jaw is broken," Mal said. "Tell me about the photographs of the U.S. soldiers and I will bring a no-more-hurt pill."

It was half an hour before she went to get him the painkillers, and by then he'd told her when the pictures had been taken, coughed up the name of the photographer.

Mal was leaning into the back of her truck, digging in the first-aid kit, when Anshaw's shadow joined hers at the rear bumper.

"Did you really do it?" Anshaw asked her. The sweat on him glowed with an ill sheen in the noonday light. "The wife?"

“What? Fuck no. Obviously.”

“Oh,” Anshaw said, and swallowed convulsively. “Someone said . . .” he began, and then his voice trailed off.

“What did someone say?”

He glanced across the road, at two soldiers from the Eighty-second, standing by their Hummer. “One of the guys who was in the building said you marched right in and bent her over. Facedown on the bed.”

She looked over at Vaughan and Henrichon, holding their M16s and struggling to contain their laughter. She flipped them the bird.

“Jesus, Anshaw. Don’t you know when you’re being fucked with?”

His head was down. He stared at his own scarecrow shadow, tilting into the back of the truck.

“No,” he said.

Two weeks later Anshaw and Mal were in the back of a different truck, with that same Arab, the Ba’athist, who was being transferred from Abu Ghraib to a smaller prison facility in Baghdad. The prisoner had his head in a steel contraption, to clamp his jaw in place, but he was still able to open his mouth wide enough to hawk a mouthful of spit into Mal’s face.

Mal was wiping it away when Anshaw got up and grabbed the Fedayeen by the front of his shirt and heaved him out the back of the truck, into the dirt road. The truck was doing thirty miles an hour at the time and was part of a convoy that included two reporters from MSNBC.

The prisoner survived, although most of his face was flayed off on the gravel, his jaw rebroken, his hands

smashed. Anshaw said he leaped out on his own, trying to escape, but no one believed him, and three weeks later Anshaw was sent home.

The funny thing was that the insurgent really did escape, a week after that, during another transfer. He was in handcuffs, but with his thumbs broken he was able to slip his hands right out of them. When the MPs stepped from their Hummer at a checkpoint, to talk porno with some friends, the prisoner dropped out of the back of the transport. It was night. He simply walked into the desert and, as the stories go, was never seen again.

THE BAND TOOK the stage Friday evening and didn't come offstage until Saturday morning. Twenty minutes after one, Mal bolted the door behind the last customer. She started helping Candice wipe down tables, but she had been on since before lunch and Bill Rodier said to go home already.

Mal had her jacket on and was headed out when John Petty poked her in the shoulder with something.

"Mal," he said. "This is yours, right? Your name on it."

She turned. Petty was at the cash register, holding a fat envelope toward her. She took it.

"That the money Glen gave you, to swap for his wedding ring?" Petty turned away from her, shifting his attention back to the register. He pulled out stacks of bills, rubber-banded them, and lined them up on the bar. "That's something. Taking his money and fucking him all over again. You think I plop down five hundred bucks you'd fuck me just as nice?"

As he spoke, he put his hand back in the register. Mal reached under his elbow and slammed the drawer on his fingers. He squealed. The drawer began to slide open again on its own, but before he could get his mashed fingers out, Mal slammed it once more. He lifted one foot off the floor and did a comic little jig.

"Ohfuckgoddamnyouuglydyke," he said.

"Hey," said Bill Rodier, coming toward the bar carrying a trash barrel. "Hey."

She let Petty get his hand out of the drawer. He stumbled clumsily away from her, struck the bar with his hip, and wheeled to face her, clutching the mauled hand to his chest.

"You crazy bitch! I think you broke my fingers!"

"Jesus, Mal," Bill said, looking over the bar at Petty's hand. His fat fingers had a purple line of bruise across them. Bill turned his questioning gaze back in her direction. "I don't know what the hell John said, but you can't do that to people."

"You'd be surprised what you can do to people," she told him.

OUTSIDE, IT WAS drizzling and cold. She was all the way to her car before she felt a weight in one hand and realized she was still clutching the envelope full of cash.

Mal kept on holding it, against the inside of her thigh, the whole drive back. She didn't put on the radio, just drove and listened to the rain tapping on the glass. She had been in the desert for two years, and she had seen it rain just twice during that time, although there was often a moist fog in the morning, a mist that smelled of eggs, of brimstone.

When she enlisted, she had hoped for war. She did not see the point of joining if you weren't going to get to fight. The risk to her life did not trouble her. It was an incentive. You received a two-hundred-dollar-a-month bonus for every month you spent in the combat zone, and a part of her had relished the fact that her own life was valued so cheap. Mal would not have expected more.

But it didn't occur to her, when she first learned she was going to Iraq, that they paid you that money for more than just the risk to your own life. It wasn't just a question of what could happen to you, but also a matter of what you might be asked to do to others. For her two-hundred-dollar bonus, she had left naked and bound men in stress positions for hours and told a nineteen-year-old girl that she would be gang-raped if she did not supply information about her boyfriend. Two hundred dollars a month was what it cost to make a torturer out of her. She felt now that she had been crazy there, that the Vivarin, the ephedra, the lack of sleep, the constant scream-and-thump of the mortars, had made her into someone who was mentally ill, a bad-dream version of herself. Then Mal felt the weight of the envelope against her thigh, Glen Kardon's payoff, and remembered taking his ring, and it came to her that she was having herself on, pretending she had been someone different in Iraq. Who she'd been then and who she was now were the same person. She had taken the prison home with her. She lived in it still.

Mal let herself into the house, soaked and cold, holding the envelope. She found herself standing in front of the kitchen counter with Glen's money. She could sell him back

his own ring for five hundred dollars if she wanted, and it was more than she would get from any pawnshop. She had done worse, for less cash. She stuck her hand down the drain, felt along the wet smoothness of the trap, until her fingertips found the ring.

Mal hooked her ring finger through it, pulled her hand back out. She turned her wrist this way and that, considering how the ring looked on her crooked, blunt finger. *With this I do thee wed.* She didn't know what she'd do with Glen Kardon's five hundred dollars if she swapped it for his ring. It wasn't money she needed. She didn't need his ring either. She couldn't say what it was she needed, but the idea of it was close, a word on the tip of her tongue, maddeningly out of reach.

She made her way to the bathroom, turned on the shower, and let the steam gather while she undressed. Slipping off her black blouse, she noticed she still had the envelope in one hand, Glen's ring on the third finger of the other. She tossed the money next to the bathroom sink, left the ring on.

She glanced at the ring sometimes while she was in the shower. She tried to imagine being married to Glen Kardon, pictured him stretched out on her father's bed in boxers and a T-shirt, waiting for her to come out of the bathroom, his stomach aflutter with the anticipation of some late-night, connubial action. She snorted at the thought. It was as absurd as trying to imagine what her life would've been like if she had become an astronaut.

The washer and dryer were in the bathroom with her. She dug through the Maytag until she found her Curt Schilling T-

shirt and a fresh pair of Hanes. She slipped back into the darkened bedroom, toweling her hair, and glanced at herself in the dresser mirror, only she couldn't see her face, because a white sheet of paper had been stuck into the top of the frame and it covered the place where her face belonged. A black thumbprint had been inked in the center. Around the edges of the sheet of paper, she could see reflected in the mirror a man stretched out on the bed, just as she had pictured Glen Kardon stretched out and waiting for her, only in her head Glen hadn't been wearing gray-and-black fatigues.

She lunged to her side, going for the kitchen door. But Anshaw was already moving, launching himself at her, driving his boot into her right knee. The leg twisted in a way it wasn't meant to go, and she felt her ACL pop behind her knee. Anshaw was right behind her by then, and he got a handful of her hair. As she went down, he drove her forward and smashed her head into the side of the dresser.

A black spoke of pain lanced down into her skull, a nail gun fired straight into the brain. She was down and flailing, and he kicked her in the head. That kick didn't hurt so much, but it took the life out of her, as if she were no more than an appliance and he had jerked the power cord out of the wall.

When he rolled her onto her stomach and twisted her arms behind her back, she had no strength in her to resist. He had the heavy-duty plastic ties, the flex cuffs they used on the prisoners in Iraq sometimes. He sat on her ass and squeezed her ankles together and put the flex cuffs on them, too, tightening until it hurt, and then some. Black



flashes were still firing behind her eyes, but the fireworks were smaller and exploding less frequently now. She was coming back to herself, slowly. Breathe. Wait.

When her vision cleared, she found Anshaw sitting above her, on the edge of her father's bed. He had lost weight, and he hadn't any to lose. His eyes peeked out, too bright at the bottoms of deep hollows, moonlight reflected in the water at the bottom of a long well. In his lap was a bag, like an old-fashioned doctor's case, the leather pebbled and handsome.

"I observed you while you were running this morning," he began, without preamble. Using the word "observed," like he would in a report on enemy troop movements. "Who were you signaling when you were up on the hill?"

"Anshaw," Mal said. "What are you talking about, Anshaw? What is this?"

"You're staying in shape. You're still a soldier. I tried to follow you, but you outran me on the hill this morning. When you were on the crest, I saw you flashing a light. Two long flashes, one short, two long. You signaled someone. Tell me who."

At first she didn't know what he was talking about; then she did. Her canteen. Her canteen had flashed in the sunlight when she tipped it up to drink. She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, he lowered himself to one knee beside her. Anshaw unbuckled his bag and dumped the contents onto the floor. He had a collection of tools: a pair of heavy-duty shears, a Taser, a hammer, a hacksaw, a portable vise. Mixed in with the tools were five or six human thumbs.

Some of the thumbs were thick and blunt and male, and some were white and slender and female, and some were too shriveled and darkened with rot to provide much of any clue about the person they had belonged to. Each thumb ended in a lump of bone and sinew. The inside of the bag had a smell, a sickly-sweet, almost floral stink of corruption.

Anshaw selected the heavy-duty shears.

"You went up the hill and signaled someone this morning. And tonight you came back with a lot of money. I looked in the envelope while you were in the shower. So you signaled for a meeting, and at the meeting you were paid for intel. Who did you meet? CIA?"

"I went to work. At the bar. You know where I work. You followed me there."

"Five hundred dollars. Is that supposed to be tips?"

She didn't have a reply. She couldn't think. She was looking at the thumbs mixed in with his mess of tools.

He followed her gaze, prodded a blackened and shriveled thumb with the blade of the shears. The only identifiable feature remaining on the thumb was a twisted, silvery fishhook scar.

"Plough," Anshaw said. "He had helicopters doing flyovers of my house. They'd fly over once or twice a day. They used different kinds of helicopters on different days to try and keep me from putting two and two together. But I knew what they were up to. I started watching them from the kitchen with my field glasses, and one day I saw Plough at the controls of a radio-station traffic copter. I didn't even know he knew how to pilot a bird until then. He was wearing a black helmet and sunglasses, but I still recognized him."

As Anshaw spoke, Mal remembered Corporal Plough trying to open a bottle of Red Stripe with the blade of his bayonet and the knife slipping, catching him across the thumb, Plough sucking on it and saying around his thumb, *Motherfuck, someone open this for me.*

“No, Anshaw. It wasn’t him. It was just someone who looked like him. If he could fly a helicopter, they would’ve had him piloting Apaches over there.”

“Plough admitted it. Not at first. At first he lied. But eventually he told me everything, that he was in the helicopter, that they’d been keeping me under surveillance ever since I came home.” Anshaw moved the tip of the shears to point at another thumb, shriveled and brown, with the texture and appearance of a dried mushroom. “This was his wife. She admitted it, too. They were putting dope in my water to make me sluggish and stupid. Sometimes I’d be driving home and I’d forget what my own house looked like. I’d spend twenty minutes cruising around my development before I realized I’d gone by my place twice.”

He paused, moved the tip of the shears to a fresher thumb, a woman’s, the nail painted red. “She followed me into a supermarket in Poughkeepsie. This was while I was on my way north, to see you. To see if you had been compromised. This woman in the supermarket, she followed me aisle to aisle, always whispering on her cell phone. Pretending not to look at me. Then, later, I went into a Chinese place and noticed her parked across the street, still on the phone. She was the toughest to get solid information out of. I almost thought I was wrong about her. She told me she was a first-grade teacher. She told me she didn’t even

know my name and that she wasn't following me. I almost believed her. She had a photo in her purse, of her sitting on the grass with a bunch of little kids. But it was tricked up. They used Photoshop to stick her in that picture. I even got her to admit it in the end."

"Plough told you he could fly helicopters so you wouldn't keep hurting him. The first-grade teacher told you the photo was faked to make you stop. People will tell you anything if you hurt them badly enough. You're having some kind of break with reality, Anshaw. You don't know what's true anymore."

"You *would* say that. You're part of it. Part of the plan to make me crazy, make me kill myself. I thought the thumbprints would startle you into getting in contact with your handler, and they did. You went straight to the hills to send him a signal. To let him know I was close. But where's your backup now?"

"I don't have backup. I don't have a handler."

"We were friends, Mal. You got me through the worst parts of being over there, when I thought I was going crazy. I hate that I have to do this to you. But I need to know who you were signaling. And you're going to tell. Who did you signal, Mal?"

"No one," she said, trying to squirm away from him on her belly.

He grabbed her hair and wrapped it around his fist, to keep her from going anywhere. She felt a tearing along her scalp. He pinned her with a knee in her back. She went still, head turned, right cheek mashed against the nubby rug on the floor.

"I didn't know you were married. I didn't notice the ring until just tonight. Is he coming home? Is he part of it? Tell me." Tapping the ring on her finger with the blade of the shears.

Mal's face was turned so she was staring under the bed at the case with her M4 and bayonet in it. She had left the clasps undone.

Anshaw clubbed her in the back of the head, at the base of the skull, with the handles of the shears. The world snapped out of focus, went to a soft blur, and then slowly her vision cleared and details regained their sharpness, until at last she was seeing the case under the bed again, not a foot away from her, the silver clasps hanging loose.

"Tell me, Mal. Tell me the truth now."

In Iraq the Fedayeen had escaped the handcuffs after his thumbs were broken. Cuffs wouldn't hold a person whose thumb could move in any direction . . . or someone who didn't have a thumb at all.

Mal felt herself growing calm. Her panic was like static on a radio, and she had just found the volume, was slowly dialing it down. He would not begin with the shears, of course, but would work his way up to them. He meant to beat her first. At least. She drew a long, surprisingly steady breath. Mal felt almost as if she were back on Hatchet Hill, climbing with all the will and strength she had in her, for the cold, open blue of the sky.

"I'm not married," she said. "I stole this wedding ring off a drunk. I was just wearing it because I like it."

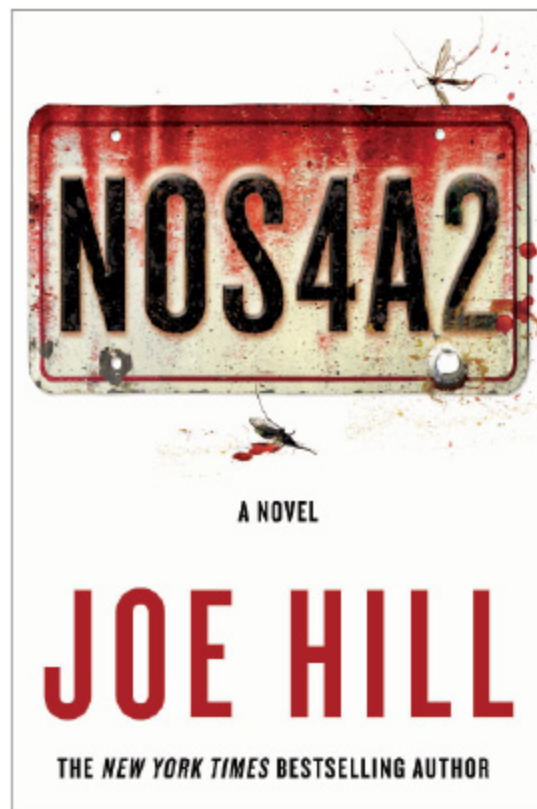
He laughed: a bitter, ugly sound. "That isn't even a good lie."

And another breath, filling her chest with air, expanding her lungs to their limit. He was about to start hurting her. He would force her to talk, to give him information, to tell him what he wanted to hear. She was ready. She was not afraid of being pushed to the edge of what could be endured. She had a high tolerance for pain, and her bayonet was in arm's reach, if only she had an arm to reach.

"It's the truth," she said, and with that, PFC Mallory Grennan began her confession.

**Read on for an excerpt from Joe Hill's  
new novel,**

## ***NOS4A2***



**on sale April 30, 2013**

## **Presbyterian Hospital, Denver**

*Spring 2013*

WHEN SOMEONE INTERESTING was dead, Hicks always took a picture with them.

There had been a local news anchor, a pretty thirty-two-year-old with splendid white-blond hair and pale blue eyes, who got wasted and choked to death on her own puke. Hicks had slipped into the morgue at 1:00 A.M., pulled her out of her drawer, and sat her up. He got an arm around her and bent down to lap at her nipple, while holding out his cell phone to take a shot. He didn't actually lick her, though. That would've been gross.

There was a rock star, too—a minor rock star anyway. He was the one in that band that had the hit from the Stallone movie. The rock star wasted out from cancer and in death looked like a withered old woman, with his feathery brown hair and long eyelashes and wide, somehow feminine lips. Hicks got him out of the drawer and bent his hand into devil's horns, then leaned in and threw the horns himself, snapped a shot of them hanging out together. The rock star's eyelids sagged, so he looked sleepy and cool.



Hicks's girlfriend, Sasha, was the one who told him there was a famous serial killer down in the morgue. Sasha was a nurse in pediatrics, eight floors up. She loved his photos with famous dead people; she was always the first person he e-mailed them to. Sasha thought Hicks was hilarious. She said he ought to be on *The Daily Show*. Hicks was fond of Sasha, too. She had a key to the pharmacy locker, and Saturday nights she'd filch them something good, a little oxy or some medical-grade coke, and on breaks they'd find an empty delivery room and she'd shimmy out of the bottoms of her loose nurse jammies and climb up into the stirrups.

Hicks had never heard of the guy, so Sasha used the computer in the nurses' station to pull up a news story about him. The mug shot was bad enough, a bald guy with a narrow face and a mouthful of sharp, crooked teeth. His eyes were bright and round and stupid in their hollow sockets. The caption identified him as Charles Talent Manx, sent to the federal pen more than a decade before for burning some sorry motherfucker to death in front of a dozen witnesses.

"He's not any big deal," Hicks said. "He just killed one dude."

"Un-uh. He's worse than John Wayne Stacy. He killed, like, all kinds of kids. *All* kinds. He had a house where he did it. He hung little angels in the trees, one for every one he cut up. It's awesome. It's like creepy symbolism. Little Christmas angels. They called the place the Sleigh House. Get it? Do you get it, Hicks?"

"No."

“Like he slayed ‘em there? But also like Santa’s sleigh? Do you get it now?” she said.

“No.” He didn’t see what Santa had to do with a guy like Manx.

“The house got burnt down, but the ornaments are still there, hanging in the trees, like a memorial.” She tugged at the drawstring of her scrubs. “Serial killers get me hot. All I can think about is all the nasty shit I’d do to keep ‘em from killing me. You go take a pic with him and e-mail it to me. And, like, tell me what you’re going to do if I don’t get naked for you.”

He didn’t see any reason to argue with that kind of reasoning, and he had to make his rounds anyway. Besides, if the guy had killed lots of people, it might be worth taking a pic, to add to his collection. Hicks had already done several funny photographs, but he felt it would be good to have a snap with a serial killer, to demonstrate his darker, more serious side.

In the elevator, alone, Hicks drew his gun on his own reflection and said, “Either this is going in your mouth or my *big* cock is.” Practicing his lines for Sasha.

It was all good till his walkie-talkie went off and his uncle said, “Hey, dumb-ass, keep playing with that gun, maybe you’ll shoot yourself and we can hire someone who can actually do this fuckin’ job.”

He had forgotten there was a camera in the elevator. Fortunately, there was no hidden microphone. Hicks pushed his .38 back into the holster and lowered his head, hoping the brim of his hat hid his face. He took ten seconds, fighting with his anger and embarrassment, then pressed

the TALK button on his walkie, meaning to snap off something *really fucking harsh*, shut the old turd up for once. But instead all he managed was “Copy that,” in a pinched little squeak that he hated.

His uncle Jim had gotten him the security job, glossing over Hicks’s early departure from high school and the arrest for public drunkenness. Hicks had been at the hospital for only two months and had been cited twice already, once for tardiness, once for not responding to his walkie (at the time it had been his turn in the stirrups). His uncle Jim had already said if there was a third citation, before he had a full year under his belt, they’d have to let him go.

His uncle Jim had a spotless record, probably because all he had to do was sit in the security office for six hours a day and watch the monitors with one eye while perusing Skinamax with the other. Thirty years of watching TV, for fourteen dollars an hour and full benefits. That was what Hicks was angling for, but if he lost the security job—if he got cited again—he might have to go back to McDonald’s. That would be bad. When he signed on at the hospital, he had given up the glamour job at the drive-thru window, and he loathed the idea of starting from the bottom rung again. Even worse, it would probably be the end of Sasha, and Sasha’s key to the pharmacy locker, and all the fun they had taking turns in the stirrups. Sasha liked Hicks’s uniform; he didn’t think she’d feel the same way about a McDonald’s getup.

Hicks reached basement level one and slouched out. When the elevator doors were closed, he turned back, grabbed his crotch, and blew a wet kiss at them.

“Suck my balls, you homosexual *fat-ass*,” he said. “I bet you’d *like* that!”

There wasn’t a lot of action in the basement at eleven-thirty at night. Most of the lights were off, just one bank of overhead fluorescents every fifty feet, one of the hospital’s new austerity measures. The only foot traffic was the occasional person wandering in from the parking lot across the street by way of an underground tunnel.

Hicks’s prize possession was parked over there, a black Trans Am with zebra upholstery and blue neon lights set in the undercarriage, so when it roared down the road, it looked like a UFO right out of *E.T.* Something else he’d have to give up if he lost this job. No way could he make the payments flipping burgers. Sasha loved to fuck him in the Trans Am. She was crazy for animals, and the faux zebra seat covers brought out her wild side.

Hicks thought the serial killer would be in the morgue, but it turned out he was already in the autopsy theater. One of the docs had started in on him, then abandoned him there to finish tomorrow. Hicks flipped on the lights over the tables but left the rest of the room in darkness. He pulled the curtain across the window in the door. There was no bolt, but he pushed the chock in under the door as far as it would go, to make it impossible for anyone to wander in casually.

Whoever had been working on Charlie Manx had covered him with a sheet before going. He was the only body in the theater tonight, his gurney parked under a plaque that said HIC LOCUS EST UBI MORS GAUDET SUCCURRERE VITAE. Someday

Hicks was going to Google that one, find out what the hell it meant.

He snapped the sheet down to Manx's ankles, had himself a look. The chest had been sawed open, then stitched back together with coarse black thread. It was a Y-shaped cut and extended all the way down to the pelvic bone. Charlie Manx's wang was as long and skinny as a Hebrew National. He had a ghastly overbite, so his crooked brown teeth stuck out into his lower lip. His eyes were open, and he seemed to be staring at Hicks with a kind of blank fascination.

Hicks didn't like that much. He had seen his share of deaders, but they usually had their eyes closed. And if their eyes weren't closed, there was a kind of milky look to them, as if something in them had curdled—life itself, perhaps. But these eyes seemed bright and alert, the eyes of the living, not the dead. They had in them an avid, birdlike curiosity. No, Hicks didn't care for that at all.

For the most part, however, he had no anxieties about the dead. He wasn't scared of the dark either. He was a little scared of his uncle Jim, he worried about Sasha poking a finger up his ass (something she insisted he would like), and he had recurring nightmares about finding himself at work with no pants on, wandering the halls with his cock slapping between his thighs, people turning to stare. That was about it for fears and phobias.

He wasn't sure why they hadn't put Manx back in his drawer, because it looked like they were done with the chest cavity. But when Hicks got him sat up—he propped him against the wall, with his long, skinny hands in his lap—he

saw a dotted line curving around the back of his skull, drawn in Sharpie. Right. Hicks had seen in Sasha's newspaper article that Manx had been in and out of a coma for going on six years, so naturally the docs would want to poke around in his head. Besides, who didn't want to peek at a serial killer's brain? There was probably a medical paper in that.

The autopsy tools—the saw, the forceps, the rib cutters, the bone mallet—were on a wheeled steel tray by the corpse. At first Hicks thought he'd give Manx the scalpel, which looked pretty serial-killerish. But it was too small. He could tell just by looking at it that it wouldn't show up good in the picture he snapped with his shitty camera phone.

The bone mallet was a different story. It was a big silver hammer, with a head shaped like a brick but pointed at one end, the back edge as sharp as a meat cleaver. At the other end of the handle was a hook, what they used to dig under the edge of the skull and pull it off, like a cap from a bottle. The bone mallet was *hard-core*.

Hicks took a minute to fit it into Manx's hand. He pulled a face at the sight of Manx's nasty-long fingernails, split at the ends and as yellow as the guy's fuckin' teeth. He looked like that actor from the *Aliens* movie, Lance Henriksen, if someone had shaved Henriksen's head, then smashed him a couple times with the ugly stick. Manx also had thin, pinkish white, saggy tits that reminded Hicks, horribly, of what his own mother had under her bra.

Hicks picked out the bone saw for himself and stuck an arm around Manx's shoulders. Manx sagged, his big bald head resting against Hicks's chest. That was all right. Now

they looked like drinking buddies who'd had a few. Hicks dug his cell phone out of its holster and held it out from his body. He narrowed his eyes, struck a menacing grimace, and took the shot.

He lowered the corpse and glanced at the phone. It wasn't a great picture. Hicks had wanted to look dangerous, but the pained expression on his face suggested that Sasha had finally wiggled her pinkie up his ass after all. He was thinking about reshooting when he heard loud voices, right outside the autopsy room's door. For one terrible moment, he thought the first voice belonged to his uncle Jim:

"Oh, that little bastard is in for it. He has no idea—"

Hicks flung a sheet over the body, his heart going off like a Glock being speed-fired. Those voices had hitched up right beyond the door, and he was sure they were about to start pushing to come in. He walked halfway to the door to pull out the chock when he realized he was still holding the bone saw. He set it on the tool cart with a shaking hand.

He was already recovering by the time he paced back to the door. A second man was laughing, and the first was speaking again:

"—have all four molars yanked. They'll gas him out with the sevoflurane, and when they smash the teeth, he won't feel a thing. But when he wakes up, he's gonna feel like he got fucked in the mouth with a shovel—"

Hicks didn't know who was having his teeth removed, but once he heard a little more of the voice, he could tell it wasn't his uncle Jim, just some old bastard with a creaky old-bastard voice. He waited until he heard the two men walk away before he bent to pull the chock free. He counted

to five, then slipped out. Hicks needed a drink of water and to wash his hands. He still felt a little trembly.

He took a long, soothing stroll, breathing deeply. When he finally reached the men's room, he didn't just need a drink, he needed to unload his bowels. Hicks took the handicapped stall for the extra leg room. While he was parked there dropping bombs, he e-mailed Sasha the photo of him and Manx together and wrote, BEND OVER & DROP YOURE PANS DADDEE IS CUMMING W/TEH SAW IF U DONT DO WHAT I SAY U CRAZEE BITCH. WAIT 4 ME IN THE ROOM OF PUNISHMINT.

But by the time he was leaning over the sink, slurping noisily at the water, Hicks had begun to have worrisome thoughts. He had been so rattled by the sound of voices in the hallway he could not remember if he had left the body the way he'd found it. Worse: He had a terrible idea he had left the bone mallet in Charlie Manx's hand. If it was found there in the morning, some smart-ass doc would probably want to know why, and it was a safe bet that Uncle Jim would grill the entire staff. Hicks didn't know if he could handle that kind of pressure.

He decided to wander back to the autopsy theater and make sure he had cleaned up properly.

He paused outside the door to peek through the window, only to discover he had left the curtains drawn. That was one thing to fix right there. Hicks eased the door in and frowned. In his haste to get out of the autopsy theater, he had switched off all the lights—not just the lights over the gurneys but also the safety lights that were always on, in the corners of the room and over the desk. The room



smelled of iodine and benzaldehyde. Hicks let the door sigh shut behind him and stood isolate in the darkness.

He was running his hand across the tiled wall, feeling for the light switches, when he heard the squeak of a wheel in the dark and the gentle clink of metal on metal.

Hicks caught himself and listened and in the next moment felt someone rushing across the room at him. It was not a sound or anything he could see. It was something he felt on his skin and a sense in his eardrums, like a change in pressure. His stomach went watery and sick. He had reached out with his right hand for the light switch. Now he dropped the hand, feeling for the .38. He had it partway out when he heard something whistling at him in the darkness, and he was struck in the stomach with what felt like an aluminum baseball bat. He doubled over with a woofing sound. The gun sank back into the holster.

The club went away and came back. It caught Hicks in the left side of the head, above his ear, spun him on his heel, and dropped him. He fell straight back, out a plane and down through frozen night sky, falling and falling, and try as hard as he could to scream, he made not a sound, all the air in his lungs pounded right out of him.

WHEN ERNEST HICKS opened his eyes, there was a man bent over him, smiling shyly. Hicks opened his mouth to ask what happened, and then the pain flooded into his head, and he turned his face and puked all over the guy's black loafers. His stomach pumped up his dinner—General Gau's chicken—in a pungent gush.

"I am so sorry, man," Hicks said when he was done heaving.

"It's okay, son," the doc said. "Don't try to stand. We're going to take you up to the ER. You've suffered a concussion. I want to make sure you don't have a skull fracture."

But it was coming back to Hicks, what had happened, the man in the dark hitting him with a metal bludgeon.

"What the fuck?" he cried. "What the *fuck*? Is my gun . . . ? Anyone see my gun?"

The doc—his tag said SOPHER—put a hand on Hicks's chest to prevent him from sitting up.

"I think that one's gone, son," said Sopher.

"Don't try and get up, Ernie," said Sasha, standing three feet away and staring at him with an expression approximating horror on her face. There were a couple of other nurses standing with her, all of them looking pale and strained.

"Oh, God. Oh, my God. They stole my .38. Did they grab anything else?"

"Just your pants," said Sopher.

"Just my— What? Fucking *what*?"

Hicks twisted his head to look at himself and saw he was bare naked from the waist down, his cock out for the doc and Sasha and the other nurses to look at. Hicks thought he might vomit again. It was like the bad dream he got sometimes, the one about showing up at work with no pants on, everyone staring at him. He had the sudden, wrenching idea that the sick fuck who had ripped his pants off had

maybe poked a finger up his asshole, like Sasha was always threatening to do.

“Did he touch me? Did he fucking touch me?” Hicks cried.

“We don’t know,” the doctor said. “Probably not. He probably just didn’t want you to get up and chase him and figured you wouldn’t run after him if you were naked. It’s very possible he only took your gun because it was in your holster, on your belt.”

Although the guy hadn’t taken his shirt. He had grabbed Hicks’s Windbreaker but not his shirt.

Hicks began to cry. He farted: a wet, whistling *blat*. He had never felt so miserable.

“Oh, my God. *Oh, my God!* What the fuck is *wrong* with people?” Hicks cried.

Dr. Sopher shook his head. “Who knows what the guy was thinking? Maybe he was hopped up on something. Maybe he’s just some sick creep who wanted a one-of-a-kind trophy. Let the cops worry about that. I just want to focus on you.”

“Trophy?” Hicks cried, imagining his pants hung up on a wall in a picture frame.

“Yeah, I guess,” Doc Sopher said, glancing over his shoulder, across the room. “Only reason I can think why someone would come in here and steal the body of a famous serial killer.”

Hicks turned his head—a gong went off in his brain and filled his skull with dark reverberations—and saw that the gurney had been rolled halfway across the room and someone had yanked the dead body right off it. He moaned again and shut his eyes.

He heard the rapid *clip-clop* of boot heels coming down the hallway and thought he recognized the goose-stepping gait of his uncle Jim on the march, out from behind his desk and not happy about it. There was no logical reason to fear the man. Hicks was the victim here; he had been *assaulted*, for chrissake. But alone and miserable in his only refuge—the dark behind his eyelids—he felt that logic didn't enter into it. His uncle Jim was coming, and a third citation was coming with him, was about to fall like a silver hammer. He had literally been caught with his pants down, and he saw already that at least in one sense he was never going to be stepping into those security pants again.

It was all lost, had been taken away in a moment, in the shadows of the autopsy room: the good job, the good days of Sasha and stirrups and treats from the pharmacy locker and funny photos with dead bodies. Even his Trans Am with the zebra upholstery was gone, although no one would know it for hours; the sick fuck who clubbed him senseless had helped himself to the keys and driven away in it.

Gone. Everything. All of it.

Gone off with dead old Charlie Manx and never coming back.

## ***About the Author***

Joe Hill is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels *Horns* and *Heart-Shaped Box*, and the prizewinning story collection *20th Century Ghosts*. He is also the Eisner Award-winning writer of an ongoing comic book series, *Locke & Key*. His new novel, *NOS4A2*, will be published in May 2013. You can learn more at [www.joehillfiction.com](http://www.joehillfiction.com), or follow Joe on Twitter, where he goes by the inspired handle of @joe\_hill.

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