

SPEED METAL BLUES

A DAN RENO NOVEL

DAVE STANTON

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When I finally tracked down Billy Morrison, he was in the middle of the mosh pit at Zeke's Bar off Highway 50. There must have been thirty sweat-drenched men in there with him, stomping and flailing to the music, their violent energy like a rebellion against humanity. I assumed they considered this dancing, but it looked more like a gang brawl. The death metal band on the stage pounded out a relentless assault on the ears, the singer's guttural growls imploring the wild-eyed participants to maim and kill the weak. My initial instinct told me to retreat to my truck and wait for Morrison to leave. Instead, I waded into the churning melee of knees and fists. That was my first mistake.

I caught Morrison from behind and jerked his arm into a police lock. "You're under arrest," I shouted in his ear, and started pushing him toward the exit. When he resisted, I cranked his wrist hard into his back, while he yelled something I couldn't hear over the deafening wall of sound blasting from the stage. I'd almost steered him out of the ruckus when some dude jumped on my back. The man wasn't heavy, and I probably could have carried him and still walked Morrison outside, but he got his arm tight around my neck. "I'm gonna kill you, fuck face," he screamed, his breath reeking of rotting meat and liquor. I drove an elbow into his ribs, but his grip only grew tighter. Cursing, I let Morrison go and peeled the man's arm from my throat. Then I turned and busted his nose with a straight right. That was my second mistake.

Within a second I was on the ground, trying to defend against a storm of boots and fists. I rolled into a ball and covered up the best I could, but Morrison was intent on kicking me in the face. He finally connected, his heel knocking a chunk of skin from my forehead. "Fuck this," I said, and yanked my Beretta .40 caliber pistol from the holster beneath my coat. When Morrison tried to kick me again I shot him in the ankle. The Beretta's report was barely audible over the band.

I scrambled to my feet and waved the gun, but the musicians wouldn't quit playing until I shot the guitar player's amp.

"That was uncool, asshole," the lead singer said.

"Go fuck yourself," I said, and put a bullet in the mixing board behind him. A loud buzz came from the speakers, then the board sparked and went dead, a wisp of smoke rising from the expired circuitry. The place became quiet, except for Morrison's cries of pain.

"This man is coming with me," I said, grabbing Morrison's good ankle and dragging him towards the door.

"Bullshit, he is," another man said. He was a good six feet and two-hundred pounds, nearly my size. A loose-fitting white T-shirt hung off his torso, and the black shorts he wore went well past his knees. His arms were a blur of tattoos, as were all the men's surrounding me.

I ignored him and continued lugging Morrison toward the exit. The man followed, trying to get in my face, but I raised my gun and he slowed. A different man tried to rush me from the side, but stopped in his tracks when he found himself staring into the large bore of the Beretta.

"Next man that comes at me is gonna get shot," I said.

"HCU, motherfucker," the first man said, displaying an assortment of misshapen and crooked teeth.

I backed out the saloon-style doors and pulled Morrison down the four wooden stairs to the parking lot, holding the moshers at bay with the automatic. They followed as I dragged Morrison toward my truck, and I thought it likely I'd have to shoot at least one in the leg to discourage the rest. Then I saw flashing lights, and Sheriff Marcus Grier's squad car bounced into the lot. The gangbangers slowly retreated.

"What the hell is going on here?" Grier said, stepping from his car with his hand on his holstered revolver.

"Good timing, Sheriff," I said. "This here is Billy Morrison. He's got warrants in New Jersey for rape, robbery and assault."

"You got paper on him?"

"Yes, sir. He skipped two month ago."

"What happened to his leg?" Grier said, his black skin shining in the moonlight.

"He fuckin shot me," Morrison sobbed. His white sock was soaked through and dripping with blood.

“Mr. Reno?” Grier said.

“His buddies jumped me,” I said, gesturing to a group of about ten men standing in front of Zeke’s. They glared back at me, arms crossed, feet planted wide. One shot his arm straight out, middle finger extended.

“Did you have to shoot him?”

“I could have just curled up and let them kick the shit out of me, I suppose.”

Grier let the remark slide. “That gash over your eye is bleeding pretty bad,” he said. “It probably needs a couple stitches.” He reached in his car and handed me a wad of paper towels.

“Do you know any of them?” I asked.

“The blond guy with the bad teeth is Joe Norton. He’s their ringleader.”

“Ringleader?”

“That’s right. They call themselves HCU. It stands for Hard Core United.”

Grier went to his cruiser and began talking on the radio. Joe Norton walked to where Billy Morrison lay. He whispered in his ear and they clasped hands. Then Norton locked his eyes on me.

“You fucked over my friend pretty good. You know that, right?”

“Your friend raped a woman. He’s got to pay for it.”

“You don’t know shit, understand? Billy was framed. Try that on for size. What’s your name?”

“My name?” I looked over at the sheriff, who was still occupied with his radio. “Chuck U. Farley.”

“Hey, I get it. You’re a funny guy. You live around here?”

“Do you?” I said. Despite his oversize T-shirt, I could see that Norton had spent some serious hours in a weight room. His biceps stretched his cotton sleeves tight when he bent his arms, and his forearms rippled with veins underneath his tats.

“As a matter of fact, I do. I’m what you would call a permanent resident. Me and all my friends there,” he said.

“You must be new in town.”

“That’s right. I love it up here, man. The mountains, Lake Tahoe – fuckin beautiful, man. The only problem I see is a lack of poontang.”

“Try the whorehouses in Nevada.”

He narrowed his eyes and spat. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Take it anyway you want," I said.

One of his group walked behind my pickup truck and began writing my license plate number on a matchbook. I started towards him, then stopped.

"You don't like it that we got your license plate?" Norton said, suddenly behind me. I spun around and he cupped a match and lit the cigarette he'd shoved into his mouth. His eyes were a pale brown, and each was shaped differently, as if they belonged to separate faces. He smirked and patted me on the shoulder. When he spoke his breath was rife with beer and testosterone.

"Your life is about to get real interesting, pal," he said. Then he blew a stream of smoke in my face.

I could feel the cords in my arms straining against the skin as the beginnings of an old, familiar argument began playing in my head. Walk away, I told myself, don't empower your adversary by playing into his threat. But my hands squeezed into fists, and in my mind I saw myself pivot from the hips as if swinging a baseball bat, and hit Joe Norton so hard that he left his feet and rotated in the air.

At that moment an ambulance bounced up the curb, and Sheriff Grier walked to where I stood face to face with Norton. Grier told Norton to back away from the scene so the paramedics could attend to Morrison.

"Making new friends, I see," Grier said, smiling, his sheriff's cap too small for his jumbo-sized head.

"Have these guys caused you much trouble yet?" I said.

"Nothing major, so far. Why, what did Norton say to you?"

"Not much. But I don't think we'll ever be best buddies."

"I'm sure you'll get over it."

By the time Grier took my statement and determined my actions were in self defense, it was nearly midnight. I drove the two miles to my house, keeping an eye on the rear view mirror. The last of the season's snowpack lining the streets had melted away, leaving the neighborhood

darker than I was used to. It was late April, and though the ski resorts surrounding Lake Tahoe had closed, the evenings still felt like winter. I parked in my garage, went inside and threw a log on the embers in the stove. The black coat I favored while working was ripped and streaked with dirt. I threw it in my laundry basket, but it would probably need to be replaced.

I drenched the scrapes on my face with alcohol, and applied a butterfly bandage to the wound over my eye. Then I made a whiskey-seven and drank it while I sat on the couch icing a bruise on my elbow. After twenty minutes passed I moved to the desk below the large window in my living room, and wrote an e-mail to the bail bondsman in New Jersey who hired me to bring in Billy Morrison and a known associate of Morrison's, a man of mixed Asian and white blood named Jason Loohan. It was the first job I'd gotten after renewing my bounty hunting license a couple months back, and posting my name on an internet site frequented by bondsmen.

While Billy Morrison had clearly surfaced in South Lake Tahoe, this was not the case with Jason Loohan. There was no evidence he'd ever left New Jersey. The only rational for Loohan being in the area was his history with Morrison. The two were childhood friends, and had been arrested together on three separate occasions, the most recent being the New York home invasion in which Morrison was accused of rape. For his role, Loohan was charged with rape and sodomy, as well as armed robbery.

I still had no clue as to the whereabouts of Loohan. As for Morrison, he'd been an easy man to find, but a difficult one to catch. First, he gave me the slip in a crowded casino in Stateline, Nevada. I caught up with him the next day after following his car into a residential area, only to lose him when he pulled over and sprinted into the woods. His trail went cold for a week, and when I found him again he out ran me in a 1970 Chevy Chevelle I thought was probably supercharged. I was beginning to think I'd lost my touch, which might have been part of the reason for my recklessness at Zekes. Pulling Morrison out of the mosh pit was plain stupid, and my injuries were probably well-deserved. Regardless, Morrison would soon be on a plane back to the east coast, likely to face twenty years at Sing Sing.

I eased out of my chair and mixed another highball, promising myself it would be my last of the night. When I came back to my PC, I logged onto a site requiring multiple passwords. As a licensed private investigator and bounty hunter, I subscribed to a site providing access to information typically available only to law enforcement agencies. I typed in Jason Loohan's

name, hoping there might be an update, something to suggest he'd come out west with Morrison. I came up empty, then ran a search for Joe Norton.

Soon I was staring at his weirdly disconnected eyes, choppy blond hair, and a set of teeth that grew from his gums at every angle.

Norton had spent most of his twenty-eight years in New Jersey. He was a high-school drop out whose record began with a shoplifting arrest at age fourteen. His activities escalated from there – burglary at sixteen, a pot dealing bust at seventeen, drunk driving and assault at eighteen, and then he did three years in Trenton State Prison for a purse snatching that left an elderly woman seriously injured. After that he stayed clean for a few years, until he was arrested and charged with manslaughter for his role in a gang brawl that left a man dead. He was acquitted due to lack of evidence.

Before I retired for the night, I sprinkled a bag full of nails on the street in front of my home. Then I tied a length of fishing line to the pine tree next to my driveway, stretched it ten feet into the street, and I nailed it to the asphalt. After checking the locks on my doors and windows, I set the Beretta under my nightstand and went to sleep.

I woke later than usual the next morning. I started a pot of coffee and fried three strips of bacon, then grabbed a granola bar and went out to my back deck for breakfast. The sun was already bright in the blue sky, warming the redwood table where I often sat to eat or read. I looked out over the meadow beyond the low fence separating my lot from miles of federally protected forest land. A family of beavers were building a dam in the creek that ran a hundred feet from my property. I kept an eye on their progress, hoping no flooding would result. The stream was high with snow melt, and sections easily crossed by foot in the summer were now four feet deep and running hard and fast.

When I finished eating I took my coffee cup and walked out to the street. The fishing line I'd strung was broken, and the nails lay scattered. I looked up and down the avenue. My neighbor's homes were quiet and still. A large black dog came trotting down the street. I called him over and scratched his head for a minute. Then I backed my truck out from my garage and drove toward Highway 50.

It only took ten minutes to find what I was looking for. Behind a gas station, a few miles from where I lived, sat a car with two flat tires folded under its rims. I can't say I was surprised at the car's make and model – it was a 1970 Chevy Chevelle. And I also wasn't surprised when I went home, ran the car's plates, and discovered it belonged to Joe Norton.