

Another sequel, though this time it's to the Lovecraftian Mask of the Other. But it's quite disconnected from the novel and has no paranormal horror elements. Perhaps I was just in a gritty-crime mood when I started wondering about the fate of a barely-there minor character...

Whatever Happened to Lala?

The man in the house on the hill narrowed his eyes as the car rumbled up the gravel. It was tan-metal colored and rounded, unfamiliar. He couldn't see the license plate at this distance, not through the dust on it, but he'd bet it was out of state. Or a rental.

The dog by his side, a brown-gray waist-height mongrel, lunged to its feet and started emitting deep, booming barks.

"Get in your place," he shouted over his shoulder as he forced himself to his feet, knees cracking, back protesting. He slipped one broad hand into his pocket, the pants-fabric pulled tight by his girth, and struggled out his keys. The hound scrambled down the steps, toenails clicking, and stood vigil, still barking. The car wasn't moving fast, so the homeowner had time to get to the cabinet, unlock it, and get his shotgun before the interloper was in range. The gun was double-barreled and he broke it open, instinctively checking the load as he went back out. Double-ought. Should do.

"No trespassin'!" he bellowed as the car's brakelights went off. Whoever was in it had parked right in front of the house, pulled around so the car was parallel to the stoop. The steering wheel was on the far side. Once the car stopped, the dog circled around it and started jumping, its spittle flecking the glass. The driver cracked the window a bit and shouted out of it.

"Hey, sir, hey! Can you call off your dog?"

"Did you hear me?" the gunman shouted. He noticed that the car was still running and narrowed his eyes.

"I'm not trespassing! I'm a lawyer!"

The man from the house drew back the hammers.

"You've inherited money! Or, or Loretta has! This is where Loretta Wyatt lives?"

The man on the porch didn't withdraw his finger from the trigger guard, but his posture relaxed just a little. "Spotty! Getcher ass back here!"

It complied, and the driver emerged, hands in the air. He was short and lean, clean-shaven with greying sandy hair and a wary expression.

"Are you Mr. Wyatt?" the stranger asked.

"Mebbe," the man said, his tone making it an unstated 'yes.'

"I'm Rick Nolan. Could you...? I'm just going to get my briefcase and turn off the engine."

Wyatt reached a decision and pointed his gun to the sky. “C’mon in. I’ll put on a coffee. Spotty, stay.” But he didn’t take his eyes off his guest as the latter gingerly pulled out a leather attaché case and preceded him into the house.

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Far away, in the tall grass, a third man watched it all. When they went inside, he very slowly, very carefully shifted his position.

#

Ten minutes later, Spotty suspiciously sniffed the newcomer as he sat at the kitchen table. Mr. Wyatt had gradually made the shotgun safer—putting his fingers outside the trigger guard, and then breaking it open—as he put on a blue-enamel coffee pot and lit a cigarette off the flame. He did not offer one to Rick.

“Just give him a shove if he goes for the crotch,” Wyatt offered. “He’s a big fairy.”

The visitor sat on the very edge of the wooden chair, his briefcase in his lap, looking out of place in his tiny, pointed, glossy brown shoes with matching belt. His left hand straightened an elaborately-flowered tie with a Psi Chi bar as he split his attention between his host and the dog teeth slobbering inches away from his hip. At no point did Wyatt turn his back or put down his weapon.

“I guess you’re used to a... different reception,” Wyatt said.

“When I’m bringing inheritance news, um, yeah. Usually.”

“Kept the motor running though.”

“Heh. Well, I did some process serving for a while up in Pennsylvania.” He shrugged, glancing from man to dog. “People get squirrely.”

Wyatt picked up a coffee cup left-handed and put it on the table by the briefcase. “I’ll let you sugar it yourself,” he said, backing up for his own mug. “No cream, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t take cream anyhow.”

The older man carefully placed the firearm on the table between them, closest to himself, and sat.

“You mind?” Rick gestured to his attaché case.

“Go ‘head.” Wyatt rested one hand on his gun, almost as if he was idly caressing a pet. Seeing his master sit, Spotty went over by the left side and settled, panting, staring up until Wyatt’s left hand came to his ears.

“Right... um, I really hate to ask this, but can I see some ID? I’m sure you’re Andrew Wyatt, but... you know, if I disclosed confidential information to the wrong person...”

Wyatt narrowed his eyes. Rick spread his hands.

“It’s a formality. A driver’s license is fine.”

With a grunt, Wyatt slouched forward and reached his left hand into a back pocket. His right hand was still on the shotgun, but it wasn’t a tight grip.

“Who’s leaving my Lala money, anyhow?”

The other man didn’t respond until he’d taken the license from Wyatt’s wallet and squinted at it. “A man named Jonathan Gebbler,” he said, pushing the billfold across the table with the plastic card on top. His fine-boned hands had perfect nails. Wyatt left it there.

“Gebbler.” There was an hour’s worth of heavy feeling in that one word, and none of it was pleasant.

“Yes.”

“I knew that pervy little fuck would end up dead,” Wyatt said.

Rick blinked. “Um... he did,” he said at last.

“Runnin’ around playin’ at soldiers. ‘Security consulting.’ What is that?” Andrew asked, rhetorically and full of contempt.

“I’m sure I couldn’t say,” the other man said, burrowing in his case. “But he left your daughter... um, after taxes and currency conversion... about seventy-seven thousand dollars.”

“Jeziz Christ! Greasy little fuck knew where the money was, I guess!” Andrew laughed out loud, accompanied by a rhythmic thud as Spotty started to wag his tail.

“So, when do you expect Ms. Wyatt to return?”

The laughter stopped. “I speak for her,” Andrew said.

“...my instructions were, or are, to have Ms. Wyatt sign and acknowledge,” Rick said, glancing at the dog.

“I got that what-you-call,” Andrew said. “Power of attorney.”

“Your daughter signed a durable power-of-attorney?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

Rick had a question in his eyes, but instead he said, “I’m not sure that’s legally binding under Australian commonwealth law.”

“What?”

“Mr. Gebbler was residing in Australia, did his banking there and filed his will in...”

“Be damned if he ain’t crossing me from beyond the grave,” Andrew said. “Australia? That where he died?”

“Um,” Rick said. “I believe he was... declared legally dead after an absence of some years...”

“Legally dead. What a pile of bullshit. It’s like their ‘common law marriage,’” Andrew said, lip curling. “He talks Lala into shacking up for a couple years and it’s as good as vows in the house of God? I ask you.”

“I can’t speak to that,” Rick said, “But if Loretta is still alive and able to sign the papers, I think the quickest thing...”

“How would the money be transferred?” Andrew asked.

“I have a check in her name.”

For a moment, the two men locked eyes and neither spoke. The hound wasn’t wagging his tail any more.

“Right,” Andrew said, standing. “You wait here. Spotty! Stay!”

He heaved himself to his feet and backed out of the room, gun in hand.

Rick sat for a moment, fiddled with his briefcase, then reached out a hand to let Spotty get his scent.

“Whoosa good dog?” he asked.

Spotty sniffed his hand and growled, and Rick slowly pulled it back. They sat, and Rick swore to himself, once, in a low voice. Then the door through which Andrew had exited opened, framing a skinny blonde woman. She was hugely pregnant, with a black eye and an uneasy expression.

When she entered the kitchen, her father behind her with his shotgun at port arms, Rick gave her a very brief, very subtle head-shake. She ignored it though.

“What’re *yew* doing here?” she asked.

“You know this man?” Andrew demanded, gun starting to fall into firing position. Spotty, hearing his master’s tone, rose and started barking.

Then everything was noise and movement.

Rick, small and quick, ducked under the table, his chair crashing back. Spotty lunged forward and then howled, as an acrid pepper scent cut through the kitchen’s coffee aroma. The dog tried to spin and flee, flopping on its side in its haste. The table rose as Rick pushed it up and forward, aiming at Andrew. Lala screamed and staggered to the side. Andrew tried to fire, but the barrel was too long to point at the suddenly-close wooden surface. He reeled back into the wall, squashed for a moment before he resisted. The table shifted and Andrew tried to bring the gun barrel around, over it, but the younger man was right there, only wooden planks separating them. Those tiny hands moved with a smooth certainty, reaching over, one grabbing a fistful of Andrew’s neck-fat, squeezing and shoving while the other probed for the gun.

“STOP IT STOP IT STOP!” Lala screamed.

Andrew had both hands on the gun and tried to bring it to bear, but Rick was leaning on it, pressing the barrel away while his left hand clenched and twisted in the older man’s flesh. Andrew dropped his chin to protect his throat, only to have Rick’s thumb climb up into his eye.

The little man’s hands were strong and calloused, for all their neat appearance.

Andrew Wyatt was bigger, and despite his age he had the strength of a life of farm-work. Moreover, he was was pissed. He felt his back and knees scream in protest

as he shoved with all his might... just as his enemy stopped leaning on him and yanked back at the gun.

The wooden table between them was belly height and Andrew heard something in his lower back pop as he dropped unexpectedly forward. Wyatt hadn't touched his toes in years, but trying to hold on to the shotgun as Rick pulled, he folded over the table and just barely stayed on his feet.

Both barrels discharged, deafening in the enclosed space. But each of the men had been trying to aim it away from himself, more than towards the other. Neither got hit, it just starred the glass of the gun cabinet and shattered a kitchen window, twitching in Rick's hands but not escaping them.

The younger man lurched back with the gun and accidentally kicked the blindly-stumbling dog, then staggered himself, treading on the hound's back leg with a sickening bone-crunch.

"SPOTTY!" the girl screamed.

"Uggh!" Wyatt winced and shoved the table out of his way, took two steps forward with no real thought but to catch the other man.

The door opened hard and Wyatt glanced over at it just in time for Rick to step in and slam the shotgun butt into Wyatt's cheek.

The last thing Wyatt saw as he sagged, vision blurring, was his pregnant daughter rushing to hold his crippled dog.

#

Pain.

Andrew Wyatt woke up to so much pain in his head that he tried to pass back out, but there was cold water running down his scalp, into his nose and he tried to twist, tried to get upright but his hands and feet wouldn't separate, his wrists were pressed together behind his back and stuck somehow...

The water stopped, and in the absence of the chill, the deep agonizing ache in his head returned. He swore.

"You're awake."

He struggled, feeling bad twinges in his lower back as he did, but he got himself face-up and realized he was in his bathroom, in his tub, and the man who'd jumped him was watching from a seat on the toilet.

Andrew glared, then took a breath.

"You ain't really a lawyer, are you?"

"No."

"I'm guessin' you're one of Gebbler's ol' army buddies."

Surprise flickered across the other man's face.

"He said you weren't dumb."

“He talked about me?” Andrew pressed. He noticed the man was wearing rubber gloves, or plastic or something. The kind of gloves people wear to not leave fingerprints. The shotgun was nowhere to be seen.

“Only in the context of Lala.”

“You gonna tell me your real name? I’m pretty sure you ain’t Hamid or Pandit.”

“We can stick with Rick,” the other man said.

“So where we at, ‘Rick’? You gonna, whatsit, waterboard me?”

Rick’s mouth thinned. “You have your wars confused. Ours was run by grown-ups.”

“The grown-ups who let Saddam stay in charge?”

Instead of answering, Rick leaned in and flashed a penlight in Andrew’s eyes. The older man shied his head away.

“No concussion, probably,” Rick said.

“Where’s my dog? You kill it?”

“No.”

They were silent, Andrew glaring. Finally, Rick said, “I pepper-sprayed it.”

“What kinda man does that to a dumb animal?”

“The kind of man who doesn’t want his nuts bitten off.” He looked away and sighed. “Yeah, I also stepped on its leg, but that was an accident.”

“Poor Spotty,” Andrew said.

“Cut it out.”

“I ain’t permitted to feel bad for my crippled dog? Fuck you.”

“Fuck *you*,” Rick replied. “The *dog’s* gonna be fine.”

“Hmph.” Andrew struggled a little more, then said, “What’cha got me tied up with?”

“Saran wrap and duct tape, if it matters.”

“Can I ask how come?”

“Because I want to restrict your movements,” Rick said, leaning in with a mean little glare.

“Where’s Lala?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Rick said. He stood and started going through the medicine cabinet. Andrew looked away, resigned.

“Percoset?” Rick said, pulling out the bottle with glove-squeaky fingers. “That’s high-test. You want one?”

“Why?”

“Because I hit you in the face with a fucking gun-butt and I expect it hurts a lot. I’m not a monster, you know. You want a pill?”

Andrew was silent. He was sure Rick wouldn’t give it to him.

“Yes please,” he mumbled.

“Right,” Rick said, then turned and left the room.

“Sumbitch,” Andrew muttered, working up a heavy dose of indignation when Rick returned with a jar of generic peanut butter. He carefully shook a tablet out onto the counter and picked it up with a brown blob on a spoon.

“Open,” he said, bringing it to the tub.

“What the hell?”

“I don’t *think* you’d bite my fingers,” Rick said, getting a glass of water, “But we’re both better off without you being tempted.”

#

While Andrew was coming to, Lala was miles away, eating take-out chicken in her dad’s truck with the other man, whose name was Doug. They’d driven into town, she’d dropped him off a half-mile from the veterinarian’s office, then taken Spotty in. She’d told the vet her dad did it, and then she’d burst into tears. Normally, she didn’t mind lying, but this one felt worse somehow.

Spotty was staying overnight. She’d fended off the doctor’s questions about her eye, fled, and picked up Doug. Now they were parked in a grocery store parking lot, talking.

“What’s going to happen?” she asked.

“When was the last time you saw a doctor?” he replied.

She didn’t look at him, just in the bag for more fritters.

“Have you been to a, what, an obstetrician?” he asked.

“Nuh uh.”

He sighed and wrapped up a bone in a napkin. “You got to do that, Lala.”

She didn’t say anything.

“What’s going to happen?” she repeated.

“You can’t be seen with me,” Doug said. “You’re going to get a hotel room here tonight. You’re going to look straight up into every security camera you walk by, everywhere.”

“How’m I going to pay for that?”

“Credit card.”

“I ain’t got one.”

Doug stared. “You’re how old and you don’t...?” He shook his head. “Right, we have cash for you. Credit would’ve been better. Cripes.”

She giggled. “Cripes?”

“It’s something people say,” Doug replied. “Tomorrow morning, you take this truck and drive to the nearest big city you know. Go bright and early, have ‘em give you a wake-up as soon as you can stand it and drive, then check in at a hotel there. Smile at everyone you meet, give ‘em your name, lots of security cameras, understand? Then you *go get a doctor.*”

“Yew want me to drop you back at the farm tonight?”

“Nah, I’ll walk. You’re not going back there.”

“It’s close on fifteen miles,” she said.

“I’ll jog then,” he said, with a shy little smile. “Don’t worry about me. Listen though. You don’t tell anyone about me and Rick. Right?”

“Of course not.”

“Just... be really careful.”

She offered him the last container of cole slaw and, when he shook his head, tore into it. “Why yew being so nice to me?” she asked.

“For John,” he said.

They were quiet for a moment. Nearby, people shopped, unconcerned.

“So listen,” he said. “Here’s the story. Your dad... went off his lid, punched you, hurt the dog, and you took off. Do you understand? You ran away when he hurt you?”

“Me and Spotty,” she said dutifully.

“You just run far and make sure people know where you are and when, and we’ll get your money to you when things calm down. You go to a city and get yourself set, go to a women’s shelter or something, you got relatives? No. Well, a city. Get a job, get seen...”

“How’d Johnny die?” she asked.

Doug sighed. “It was...” He looked down at his hands and frowned. “It wasn’t anyone’s fault.” He was quiet a bit longer and his lip started to tremble. “He was saving our lives,” he said, voice low.

Lala reached over and wiped a tear, but Doug flinched back.

“Don’t... don’t touch me. Thanks. But don’t.” He grabbed a napkin and blew his nose, hard and gross. Lala wasn’t bothered. He rubbed his eyes and said, “He went out like... like a champ, Lala. He died like he would’ve wanted.”

“He always said he wanted to die banging me and a black girl,” Lala said, plain as day.

Doug gave a sad chuckle. “Right, this might have been his second choice.” He wadded up the garbage and reached for the door. Then, hesitant, he turned back.

“Um... who’s baby is it?”

She looked back at him with the blank gaze of a porcelain doll. “What’s going to happen?” she asked, for the third time.

He looked away first and opened the truck door. “Fifteen miles,” he said. “I best get going. When you get to the city, call your dad’s home number.”

###

“Yer gonna kill me, is that it?” Andrew asked.

“What makes you say that?” Rick replied. He’d switched Andrew over to Nuprin and whiskey, and had spoon-fed him a TV dinner when the older man complained of hunger.

“The cling-wrap. You don’t want my hands to have rope marks.”

“They’re kind of swelling up and getting raisiny though,” Rick said.

“You and Johnny-boy,” Andrew sneered, slurring a little. “Bet you killed lots of people, huh?”

“Does that change things for you?”

“Shit. Soldiers. Fuckin’ Army. Now you’re gonna blow ‘way a US citizen.”

“You were in the Navy, right?”

“How...?”

“Saw your picture on the mantelpiece,” Rick said. He was perched on the closed toilet lid, feet up on the edge of the tub. His shoes were encased in plastic grocery bags, held in place with rubber bands. “You put on some pounds since then, of course.”

“Served off the coast of ‘Nam,” Andrew mumbled. “Yer gonna murder a fellow vet’ran.”

“Yeah, but just a swabby. You barely count.” Rick’s stomach rumbled, but his face didn’t change.

“Thing is, I don’t think you have the guts.”

Rick laughed. “Buddy, I have seen and done shit you cannot imagine or comprehend. Shit *I* can’t comprehend.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Andrew mumbled. “If you were gonna do it, you’d do it instead of hanging around for a, a *chat*.”

Rick leaned in. Not close enough that Andrew could head-butt him, even if he’d been in any condition to keep struggling, which he wasn’t. “I could fade your fat ass and then go through the leftovers in your icebox.”

“I seen killin’ men,” Andrew insisted. “You ain’t one. You, you’re a thinker.”

“Maybe I’ve been thinking about killing,” Rick said, voice light. “Those Percoset are from two months back, most of the bottle’s gone... I bet your tolerance is pretty good, huh? See I was considering offering you the pills and your three-quarters-full Black Velvet bottle, unstrapping you and putting you to bed when it was kicking in. But if your tolerance is up there, you might just make it. So now I’m thinking, I’ll dope you up until you’re feeling no pain—least I can do for a fellow *veteran*—strip you buck naked and run a warm tub, then slit your wrists. Get the shop vac out of my trunk and suck up everywhere in every room I entered in your little rural shit-shack, then drive off and buy four new steel-belted radials.”

“Uh huh. And the bigass bruise on my face?”

Rick shrugged. "Have you seen your kitchen? It looks like you trashed it. They find you with a flammable blood alcohol content, it starts to sound reasonable that you fell and hit your face like a senile old ass. Right?"

"Nice. If I was gonna take the coward's way out, though, I'd do it with the shotgun."

"Hm. I'll take that under consideration," Rick said.

"You think anyone'll care enough to investigate my death?"

"Not if Lala keeps her mouth shut."

Andrew burst into loud, unrestrained laughter.

"Your criminal mastermind plan relies on Lala being sensible? Christ, I love the girl but she's no space scientist..."

"*Love her?*" Suddenly, Rick's face was inches from Andrew and his fingers were locked on either side of the older man's trachea. The pain and fear were instant and intense as he pinched around the cartilage like he was kinking shut a garden hose. "Wanna know why I haven't searched your house? Because I'm betting I find some little room with no windows, locks from the outside, and that's the only one with women's clothes in it. I bet I find that room and I'm *saving it*. Because when she's far away with her alibi set, I'll find that and then I'll be able to kill you without breaking a sweat."

Then she shoved Andrew's head away and stalked out of the room.

#

Later, after the sun set, Andrew heard men's voices coming from the kitchen, Rick and someone else. He strained.

"...do it, that's..." the strange voice said.

"No, he's seen me." Rick must have been facing the door, his voice was clearer. "I'm fine with it."

The stranger said something, low and soft.

"Comes to that, I'll just torch the house. I got two jerry cans outside his bathroom door. I've only walked between here and there. Every time he passes out, I scrub down the site. I'll give it a final cleaning before we drive off. It'll be fine. It's stable."

"...trust the girl? I mean..." More mumbling. "...Dirty John said?"

"I don't doubt it for a minute," Rick said, and Andrew got unaccountably cold.

#

The next morning, as Rick was spoon-feeding him Wheaties, Andrew said "I gotta crap."

"I'm not stopping you," Rick said.

"You aren't helping me, either."

“Sorry Wyatt. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather clean the crap off your corpse.”

“You cruel son of a bitch!” Andrew yelled, and he was humiliated to feel tears burning his eyes. “It’s not enough? Not enough that you steal my little girl, that you’re going to *kill* me and you cripple my dog, you have to make me shit myself like a little baby?”

Rick’s hands clenched on the cereal bowl and spoon and he very deliberately set them on the sink. When he let go, his hands were trembling and his face was clenched with anger.

“Listen, you miserable old... *creep*... after how you treated your daughter, I do not owe you the consideration I’d give a rabid... *raccoon*! You’re dirt to me and already dead, I’m just waiting so I can shut you up for good!”

“You don’t know the first thing about me and my girl! She came back to me after your no-good friend took off on her! Left her with nothing but a lease and a stack of dirty movies! He came here and she waltzed off without a look back, just like her momma, I wasn’t never even sure she was *mine* but when she needed me, *I was there*. Your friend vanished into thin fucking air as soon as *you* assholes needed him, but where was he for Lala, huh? She came back to me and I forgave her, I took her back in even though it couldn’t be like before, not after what she’d said, after what he’d *made* her say to me, right to my face! Best he can do is write her into his goddamn Australian will? Fuck him! Fuck John Gebbler! And fuck you, Yankee piece of shit!”

The phone rang and Rick sat bolt upright. His face paled. Without a word, he stood and took a step, listening.

“Oh God,” Andrew mumbled.

“Sh!”

“Oh God it’s her, it’s time...”

On the answering machine, they heard Lala, sounding as natural as could be.

“...real sorry Daddy but I don’t feel safe there no more. But I’m OK, I found me a place at a women’s shelter and I’m stayin’ here until the baby’s born at the very least. I... I want to see you again some day, but I’m not ready yet. I’m not even ‘sposta call yew! But Spotty’s fine, they won’t let him in the shelter but I found someone to look after him, his leg’s healing up, they got him in one of those lampshade collars, poor thing, but he’ll be right as rain by the time the baby comes. I... I love you Daddy and I’m not mad about anything. If it’s a boy, I’m gonna name him Andrew Junior. I’m sorry if I ever did anything wrong. I love you. I’m not mad. Bye bye!”

Slowly, Rick turned to Andrew.

“So,” he said, his voice hoarse and low. He coughed, licked his lips and said, “So,” again. “Pills?”

“Don’t do this, you’re not a killer, you’re not...”

“But I am,” Rick said. “Let’s make this easy.”

“Don’t do it, for the love of God! For the love of God Rick! I won’t say nothing! You heard her, she forgives me! Why can’t you? You can’t do this, you won’t, you can’t!”

Rick stared into Andrew’s eyes, no longer crafty or angry or anything but frightened, and he realized the older man was right.

#

Two hours later, he slammed down the trunk, got into the car and stripped off his nitrile gloves.

“Shit,” he said, staring at his hands. They were still shaking.

“It’s OK.” Doug turned the ignition and drove, eyes on the road, hands at ten and two.

“I wish you hadn’t had to do that,” Rick mumbled, staring out the window as the fields rolled past.

“It doesn’t affect me like it does you,” Doug said. “It’s just that way.”

“It should have been my responsibility.”

“You gave the order,” Doug said. “It is your responsibility.”

Rick turned to look at him. “And you?”

“I’ll sleep fine. From that, anyhow.”

“Just following orders?”

“It’s your responsibility that you gave the order and mine that I followed it.” He looked over at his friend. “Are you going to be all right, sarge?”

“I’ll sleep as well as I ever do,” Rick replied.

#

It took eighteen months before anyone called him on it. Rick was in London, getting the final alterations to a new suit, when his cell phone rang. He didn’t recognize the number, but when he answered, he knew the voice.

“Rick,” the woman on the other end said, “Tell me you don’t know anything about Andrew Wyatt.”

“Doris,” Rick said. “It’s been a while. Who, now?”

“Andrew Wyatt died in his bathtub of a single shotgun blast, apparently self-inflicted. No inquest.”

“And what about that,” Rick said, switching the phone to his other ear and keeping his voice carefully steady as he shrugged out of the vest, “Prompts you to call me after so long?”

“His daughter inherited a pile of money from your old friend John Gebbler not long after that.”

“Oh yeah, Loretta Wyatt? John talked about her some times.”

“I checked up on her.”

“Did you now?” Rick’s heart was speeding up. He was talking to a military investigator who’d pursued him for over a decade, but to her the real prize criminal had been the late Dirty John. “Old habits die hard?”

“Her story is, her dad beat her up and hurt the dog, and she grabbed money and ran.”

“Poor thing. She OK?”

“She’s fine. Son’s in daycare, she’s got a job.”

“Where at?”

“I’m not going to tell you. I think she’s had quite enough of you in her life.”

“That’s kind of harsh, don’t you think?” Rick licked his dry lips.

“Her story doesn’t hold together, Rick. What there is of it. She sings like a little bird about her life, her son, her man problems, her history with John... but I mention her dad or leaving him, and it’s like a door slams shut. You know the other names that shut her up like that? Yours. You and Doug.”

“Huh.” It was the best response he could manage.

“Are you going to tell me what you did, Rick?”

He said nothing.

“Looks like you’re in England? London, nice. Out of my jurisdiction, not that I could get much traction against you anyhow. After my little Cyprus vacation, I have zero credibility on the subject of you, Doug or anyone else from your squad. So why not unburden yourself, hm?”

“John told me about them,” Rick whispered.

Something in his tone made his listener quiet. The tailor, coming near, saw his expression, and quickly found something to do at the extreme other end of the shop.

“John,” she prompted.

“So do this,” Rick said. “If you... need to know, do this. Get a blood sample from that girl. And get a blood sample from that kid. And you find out if they have the same father.”

There was a pause, broken only by trans-atlantic static.

“Rick,” she said.

“You find that out, if you must, and you tell me what you find. Ask me after that,” he said.

Then he clicked ‘off.’