

Too Close to Call

By Tony Black

Marie had been at me for close to an hour when I flipped. Dropped beside her on the couch and cracked a knuckle on her brow. She flopped like flat sex doll.

"Well, watcha expect?" I said. "Goddamit."

Pedro rose, put a greasy paw on her cheek. "She's cold."

"No shit, Sherlock...like, tell me something I don't know, huh."

He went back to his window seat and lit a Lucky. The neighbour's Schnauzer started barking.

"Dog don' like it none," said Pedro.

I took up a football trophy, aimed at his head. "You want this...huh?"

"I's only saying, bro... No need to go all bug-eyed on me."

I slammed down the trophy, said, "Gimme a smoke."

Pedro smiled, his yellowed teeth looked like little fossils inside his old head. It was all his fault, this mess. I wanted to smack his teeth off the four walls. Bitchslap him a hundred times harder than I'd just done to Marie.

Pedro tossed the pack. I sparked a match and put the Lucky to work. Taste came like old dreams as I tipped back my head and sighed.

"So, what's next, *broder* Mitch?"

"We sit tight."

"We sit tight for an hour now, Mitch. Cops gonna be comin' by soon. Real soon."

He was riding me. In the Joint they tell you, someone starts riding, you take a breath. I took another belt on the Lucky. I wasn't ready to go back to butt-fucks and an orange jump-suit. Pedro knew this. He was clean - as clean as any wino crack-head motherfucker in Dodge. But my card was already punched. I rubbed my knuckles. They hurt like hell, sitting up in points like a row of KKK hoods.

"Well?"

"I'm thinking."

The Schnauzer barked like bad news. A car went passed the window.

"Don't take too long."

I turned to eyeball Pedro, expected to see him grinning, perhaps perched on the end of a cigarillo like Eli Wallach. That's what the three of us were - The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. My mind ran amok...heard some of Eli's lines.

There are two types of spurs, Blondie...the type that come in through doors, and the type that come in through windows.

"Get to the back of the fucking house," I roared.

"What?"

"You heard me. Get off your ass and check the back's secure and lock the door."

"Are you for real?"

"Fucking A."

"No door's gonna stop Mr Night-stick comin' in."

I lost it. Ran towards him and yanked him by the collar. On his feet, I rabbit-punched the back of the head. His shoes flew out behind him, a stumble, then out to the

back door.

As he went, Marie let out a mumble.

I bent at her side. She looked like she was coming round.

"Yo... Marie, honey, you with us?"

A groan.

"Guess not."

"Mitch..." she spoke.

"Yeah, honey. I'm here."

"What happened?"

"I hit you. I'm real sorry."

"You hit me. Why did you hit me, Mitch?"

"I've got like a bucket of adrenaline racing through me and you wiggled out. It was instinct."

"Mitch, you've never hit me before."

"Honey, I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. I promise. Are you okay?"

"I guess."

I propped Marie up on the couch. She touched her head. I could see a red stain forming on the skin. The contusion would be berry-black inside an hour. We needed to move.

"Where's Pedro?"

"I sent him out back?"

"The money?"

"Still in the trunk."

"Mitch, those cops didn't just come from nowhere."

I hoped she wasn't starting to push my buttons again, I knew the cops had been fed a line.

"They were tipped off," I said.

"Who?"

I looked to the door. "Dunno."

I heard Pedro hammering down the window frames, setting the Schnauzer off again.

"Mitch, we've got to get out of here."

I looked to the window, the sun painted an oblong block of yellow in the centre of the floor.

'Mitch...'

From where I sat I could see the car, front-fender bashed, back-window shot out. I was no wheelman, but I'd lost them. It wasn't meant to be like this. Simple job. In and out. Just stick to the rules. But they were waiting - two cops - for a bank job. Shit, these days a motorcycle courier forgets to take his helmet off and there's choppers overhead.

"Mitch, we have to move, now."

I turned back to Marie, her face was torn in misery, upper lip trembling. If I didn't act soon, she'd need hosing down again.

I wiped her brow, said, "You good to go?"

She nodded.

"Then sit tight, I've one more thing to do."

I stood up, walked through the door. In the hallway, I heard Pedro. He was

whispering, or trying to, into his cell phone.

"I didn't know he could drive like that. How is I to know? You should have chased, chased...the money's still here. Out front."

I reached round to the Glock tucked in my waistband and took off the safety. My heart pounded, I felt sweat gather on the back of my neck. This was my ticket back to the Big House. Even bent cops refuse to turn a blind eye to this kind of thing. I tasted the Joint's gruel and grits again, the smell of stale sweat, Bubba's neck-lock in the showers. I wanted to apologise to Marie again.

Fuck. Why did this shit keep happening to me?

As the Glock clicked in his ear Pedro lowered the phone and turned. He looked at me as if I'd just beamed down from Venus. His lips drained of blood and turned gray.

I wagged the Glock towards the phone. He moved his thumb to 'end call', dropped the handset on the floor.

I gave him a second for words.

None came.

My nerves shrieked, felt the blood surge in my veins as I raised the gun to his head.

"Oh sweet Jesus, please, no..." pleaded Pedro.

"He's not gonna save you now."

I blindsided him. Put my left through his eye, opening it up like a welt, the white shot through with red. He fell. I kicked him in the head. A flap of skin tore clear of his brow. More blood ran out. Lots this time. Looked like a coat-hanger abortion. He put both hands over his head.

"You made a mistake, Pedro."

I put the Glock to his head.

He crouched, prayed. I swear, he whimpered. I'd expected more of a put up.

"What else did you give them?"

"Nothing...nothing...nothing..."

"Horseshit." I slapped him with the gun.

"No, I swear... They don't know nothing."

"My name?"

"No. I would never."

Somehow, I didn't believe a word of it.

"You lose, Pedro."

"*What?*"

"The Game of Life."

He screamed like a loose fan belt. The Schnauzer kicked-off outside. I hoped it would drown out the sound of the gun's discharge.

I left him flat on his back. Dark blood covered the floor like a slaughter house.

In the hall, Marie ran to me.

"Come, on," I said.

"But?"

"Not now, get in the car."

I grabbed her arm and lead her through the front door. Sunlight burst like an explosion all over the lawn. I felt my guts begin to heave, felt for sure I'd hurl but somehow I kept it all in.

My hands trembled, I couldn't get a grip of the keys, but Marie leaned over and helped me locate the ignition. God, I didn't deserve her, did I?

I got the car started, and then suddenly, the Schnauzer came running, stopping still on the lawn. He turned his head to the side, made that dog look, one that says a million things and nothing at all.

I pulled out on to the street.

"You good?" said Marie.

"Yeah, fine."

I took one last look in the rear-view mirror, caught sight of the Schnauzer. Coulda swore the damn dog waved at me.

I gunned the engine.

Tony Black's first novel PAYING FOR IT is about to start doing the rounds of publishers after being taken on by a London literary agent. Ken Bruen kindly praised the book, saying it "blasts off the page like a triple malt ... one adrenaline pumped novel that is as moving and compassionate as it is so stylishly written". Black lives and works in the Scottish capital, Edinburgh. He can be reached at t_black_uk@yahoo.co.uk