

The Burn Out

By Joe Clifford

This was supposed to happen to older cops, not guys my age - and especially not to wunderkinds who'd made history as the youngest to detective. Maybe that was the problem. I'd been so focused for so long, climbing through ranks, distinguishing myself from the competition, that I'd squeezed an entire career into a handful of years, and with it drained the life from the very thing I loved. Maybe I was over-thinking it. Either way, there I stood, barely thirty-five and suffering the big burn out. So I'd handed in my resignation and had only one week left on the job.

Then I met her.

Moving up that ladder, I stepped over a lot of folks and hurt a lot of feelings. Which is why I got the call to investigate a two-bit heist on Sixth Street, home to the city's most undesirable: pimps, whores, junkies, your basic riff-raff, all corralled in a degenerate square called South of Market.

I spotted Soyka, an older dick, standing by the door. I poked my head inside to see an old Jewish man bleeding from his.

"What happened?" I asked, digging a cigarette from my pocket.

"Botched smash and grab. Couple crackheads. They didn't get anything."

I gave Soyka the once-over, the disinterested expression, sagging middle-aged paunch, and bad posture so indicative of the seasoned veteran. There's nothing worse than that cop who's stopped believing in what he's fighting for.

"Hit him over the head? With what?"

"An iron," he grumbled.

"An iron?"

"That's what the man says. An iron."

Goddamn crackheads. Attempt a hold-up and the best weapon they can find is an iron.

Then it struck Soyka that this job hardly required my presence. "What the hell they send you for?"

"Guess they don't want this last week made easy."

"That's right, you're leaving us."

Us? Like we worked at a Sears-Roebuck store together, unloading tractor trailers, sharing a beer after our shift before heading to suburban homes to surf internet porn.

"The old man talking?"

"Couple skinny black kids, all he says."

I gazed toward Market Street and the tourists just a couple blocks away, heading to Union Square or to take a goddamn trolley ride, swinging bags of designer merchandise, capturing staged joy and paying no heed to the wretchedness just a few feet south. I could only shake my head.

"Anybody see anything?" I asked, already knowing the answer. These types protect their own.

Soyka gestured a lazy backhand. "Maybe a girl they got up there. Caught her doing business in a parked car, may've gotten a look." A wry smile crept over his face. "Actually, you should take a look at this one."

"That bad?"

“Just the opposite. Tell you what, if they made them like that, maybe I wouldn’t mind this job so fucking much.” He spat a gob of yellow, which affixed to the sidewalk like rubber cement, jiggling.

She sat on the hood of a cruiser. She couldn’t have been more than nineteen, but Soyka wasn’t lying. Sixth Street whores don’t normally come built like that. Wavy chestnut hair and Palestinian complexion. What a doll.

I squashed my cigarette.

“Got an extra one of those, honey?”

Most girls can’t pull off a ‘honey’ in those situations. She could. I passed her the pack.

I tried to remain professional, extracting the small notepad from my inner pocket, flipping pages with a quick thumb-lick, eyes peeled to the ground. “I hear you got a look at the boys who did this.”

“I know them,” she said.

“You know them?”

“Not *know-know*, but *y’know*.” She paused, examining her tiny hands.

I got it. “But you’re not talking, that it? Or maybe you want to wait until the next time you’re picked up...”

She giggled. “One of them goes by Ricky Two Flats. The other they just call T. I think they run for the Vietnamese owner around the corner.”

I didn’t write a word. It was those eyes. She had the most beautiful set - bright blue - and in the lamplight, irises illumined, they sucked at your soul.

Like a cheerleader leaving a pep rally, she hopped off the hood, confident and unabashed. She grazed my arm, gazing up at me with those bright blue peepers, mouth twisting muckle. “Can I go now?”

I checked to make sure we had her statement. Lord knows, I hadn’t gotten anything down except a bad case of the want-its.

The name she gave was Becky Marshall, which even sounded like a cheerleader’s. Next night, I found myself trolling Sixth Street. The crackheads had been picked up and charged. I wasn’t looking for them.

It felt strange, my heart thumping madly in my chest, because I soon realized what it was: I’d developed a crush. A crush on a whore.

I pulled in front of a liquor store to grab some smokes. It had been a long time since I’d had a romantic relationship. Being a detective doesn’t leave much time for that sort of thing. But a man needs to have an object of affection every once in a while; he needs to send flowers and say tender things. He needs that as much as he needs the other stuff.

I paid for the pack, a goofy grin on my face, pleased that I’d deduced the silly reason behind irrational feelings.

“Looks like somebody’s having a good time.”

I turned and there she stood, a Midwestern farmer’s daughter just off the hayride. I stammered a greeting of sorts, but tongue-tied. I must’ve sounded like an idiot. I hurried out the door.

She followed me out. “What’s the rush?”

“I have a job--” I said, spinning around, and that’s when I saw her left eye, which had been shielded inside the store, and was badly bruised, the color of pummeled beef on a stormy midnight.

“My God, what happened?” I asked, taking her by the shoulders.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Eddie. Eddie Cage.”

“Detective Eddie Cage,” she repeated sadly.

“That’s what they call me.”

Becky looked around nervously. “Where’s your car?”

I drove the sweltering backstreets, over California trolley tracks, past the behemoth five-star hotels and into the mansion neighborhoods overlooking the sea of Pacific Heights, all the million dollar homes where I’d never live.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” I asked.

“You know how the game works.”

Yeah, I knew how the game worked. Two sides of the same coin that game, each needing the other to go on.

I fired up a cigarette and offered her one, which she took.

“Surely, a girl your age must have other options.”

“I’m not as young as you think. And you know a girl like me can’t just walk away. There’s other people involved.”

“Who? Your pimp? No sale, darling; you just walk away. What can he do?”

She turned slowly. “This,” she said, pointing up at her eye.

I reached for the CB.

“What are you doing?”

“Sending someone to pick his ass up.”

“And he’d be out in a couple hours.”

She was right, of course. I’d made similar collars a hundred times. Ink’s not even dry before they hit the streets running.

I paused atop the Heights, overlooking the whole city spread below, every tooth and nail, ravenous inch. I watched the steam rise from the grates, listened to the tenement window screams filter in with the din of faraway sirens and ambulance horns and hopelessness.

I laid my gun on the dash.

Like she was reading my mind. “He isn’t worth it, Eddie,” she said. “I’m not worth it.”

“He might not be. But *you* are.”

She twisted her small body and grabbed my face and kissed it hard. It was as perfect and pure a kiss as I’d ever felt.

I took her home with me that night, and we stayed up talking through dawn. She told me her story, how she’d come to this cold and alien place, leaving Lawrence, Kansas at fifteen to escape the fumbling hands of her father, her mother long since deposited in the local sanitarium. She left behind a sister who wasn’t so fortunate. I’d heard a lot of stories during my time on the force, but none that so tugged at my unflappable sense of honor and decency, the very fabric of right and wrong. How she wound up in the

clutches of this D. White Love character, which was the name of the man who owned her body and soul, was no less a twisted, perverted, and evil tale.

Over the next few days, I saw Becky as often as I could. As the week came to an end, I'd gotten her to agree to come away with me. We'd hit 101 and never look back.

But Thursday evening threw a wrench in those plans.

Sitting at the precinct, wrapping up paperwork, I got the call.

I raced in my car to the corner of Sixth.

Mascara ran down those pretty cheeks, splattered blotches over a cold-cocked chin.

Back at my place, I had her lie down on the couch, while I went to the kitchen for an ice pack.

"I had to tell him. He went crazy!"

I told her not to talk and to ice her swollen jaw.

"We're gonna leave this awful place, aren't we, Eddie?"

"Soon as I can arrange for the furniture and things, yes."

"How long will that take?!" Becky screamed. She started rocking, the way troubled girls do.

"Calm down."

"He said he'll *kill me*! He will! You don't know him. I've seen him do it before."

"Hold on, Becky. You've actually seen this D. White murder? That's a serious accusation."

She bolted upright, pointing wildly at her pretty, smashed-up mouth. "And this isn't!" She threw the ice pack in disgust. "Maybe you're not what I thought you were, Eddie."

She made for the door. I grabbed her arm.

She tore away. "You're still a cop, Eddie. Even if your shift ends tomorrow, you're still a cop. You see my battered face, and it's, 'Sit down, relax,' but, oh, there might be a murder investigation, and Eddie's off to save the day."

"That's not fair."

"Nothing's fair! Is it fair the way fat, old men have fucked me, violated me, humiliated me?"

"I told you the other night that I'd have him arrested."

"*Arrested?* What kind of *a man* are you, Eddie? A guy beats up the woman who loves you, and you want to do it by the book?"

"What did you say?" I asked softly.

"A guy beats up the woman who loves you."

Her eyes retreated from smoldering to kitten. She looked up at me like I was the strongest man in the world. "I do, Eddie. I do. With all my heart."

During my time on the force, I'd performed my services honorably, respecting my fellow cops and treating every prisoner courteously. And what did it get me? My fellow cops despised me, and those same criminals I'd treated with such respect? Most were back on the streets, slipping through various liberal loopholes. The real question was, What had I done for the overall welfare of the city? The answer? Not a goddamn thing.

Leaving Becky, I realized my unique position. Finally, I could bypass protocol and use my authority towards a good end. For once I could be judge, jury, and executioner.

And the money she told me about? Hell, I knew what they did with money seized in such cases. It'd get locked in an evidence room, left to be picked clean by a different breed of vulture. No, this money was Becky's severance pay, and the poor girl deserved that much.

I had my story. I'd heard a ruckus and walked in through an unlocked door to investigate. The man shot, and I shot back. A detective with my credentials, no one would question a thing.

I parked down Crack Central's alley and quickly located his shabby digs. Creeping up the stairs, over scattered shoes, beer cans, and sandwich wrappers, I pulled my gun.

D. White was alone, like Becky had said he would be, dozed off in front of a soundless television, which slapped dark waves off scarred walls, empties and pizza boxes on the filthy floor.

He was in his late forties, maybe early fifties, the toll of a lifestyle exacting its pointed revenge. He slouched in his La-Z-Boy, face covered with the day's growth. A bottle of booze camped between his legs, he looked defeated. For a man who wreaked so much havoc, he didn't look like much to me.

I wasn't relishing shooting a sleeping man. Fortunately, I didn't have to. Mr. Love opened his eyes, which were planted deep within his skull. But instead of fear, they conveyed a silent resignation. The guilty always know they've got it coming.

D. White Love rubbed his chin. "Can I help you, friend?" he said, his voice thick with sleep and alcohol.

"I'm a friend of Becky's."

He chortled.

"You find this funny?"

"Sure, I do. I catch the little tart in the act, kick her out, and she sends one of her boyfriends to collect her blood money. That's funny stuff, brother."

"You got some nerve talking about her like that."

He leaned forward, catching my eye. "I see the little whore has gotten to you, too," he said, sadly.

It was the last thing he'd ever say.

I shot him between the eyes.

The money was right where Becky said it would be. And it was quite the pile.

Bag in hand, I loomed over D. White Love's corpse and extracted the .38 I'd dug from my closet, numbers filed. Placing the piece in his limp hand, I fired two shots into the wall.

Outside on Tahoma, the foot patrol finishing up the busywork inside, I lighted a pill, inhaling the stiff scent of satisfaction.

My last day on the job, I'd done something I hadn't in over ten years: be sure I'd done the right thing. And it felt goddamn good.

My mind drifted to what would happen next, the hero's welcome and reward, the two of us together forever, in a little house in the north valley. Maybe we could use the bread to open a bed and breakfast. Nice, well-mannered guests dropping coin to enjoy a

civilized weekend away from the hectic grind of the metropolis. I grew tickled thinking what my life would be like from this point until my dying days.

Soon Soyka exited the place and dragged his slug-like body down the alley, coming to a halt next to me.

“Helluva last night, Cage.”

Halfway up the block, the coroner’s boys hauled the black-cloaked gurney and loaded it into a van.

“You know these Sixth Street types,” I said, “always quick with the trigger.”

“It’ll be interesting to see what drugs they find in his system.”

“I don’t know about drugs,” I said. “But he was definitely drunk.”

“Booze? You kidding me? Must be PCP. Crack isn’t even enough. Ketomene, maybe. What else could cause a man like that to take a pot shot at a police officer?”

I flicked my butt to the ground. “Who knows why these pimps do anything they do?”

A peculiar expression came over his doughy face. “Pimp? What makes you think the guy was a pimp?”

I replayed everything I knew, but all I knew was what Becky had told me. I couldn’t think straight, words swallowed by the garble of swirling city sounds.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “Players. Pimps. Whatever they’re calling themselves these days.”

Soyka relaxed. “Sure. But I’m not sure ol’ Dwight Lovitz ran with that sort of crowd. Really, what would make a second shift foreman at a print shop get so jumpy? Mutherfucker didn’t have so much as a speeding ticket on file. Anyway, I’m sending a prowl car to pick up his girlfriend.”

“His girlfriend?”

“Yeah. Actually, it’s that girl from the other night? Remember, at the Jew’s shop, the cute hooker giving head for ten bucks?”

“You just said Lovitz worked at a print shop.”

Soyka crinkled his nose. “Pimp? Oh, now I get it. You filed the fucking report. Christ, I can be thick. No, the girl’s not a whore. Well, actually, I guess she is, if she’s trading sex for money. But not *that kind* of whore. From what I hear she’s just got a bad case of the hotpants. You know, the itch? More a slut with an entrepreneurial side. No real money in it like that. I mean, can you imagine how many cocks a girl would have to suck to stockpile anything significant? Makes you feel almost sorry for the poor bastard you shot, don’t it? Poor fucker’s off, busting his tail while she’s selling hers. Well, I suppose a piece of ass like that can make a sucker out of a lot of men.”

And he laughed, his fat pie hole stretching wide, showcasing his rotting yellow teeth and quivering blubber tongue.

His laugh echoed down the alley.

I watched the steam rise from the grates, listened to the tenement window screams filter in with the din of faraway sirens and ambulance horns and hopelessness, and I knew then that I’d never leave this place. I was tied to her forever.

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