

The Grind

By Randy Chandler

Twilight Towers. Room 12B.

Trench used his pass-key and stepped inside. Cordite and cigarette smoke burned his eyes. The shaded bedside lamp gave the room a sepia hue, and he got the feeling he'd somehow walked into a yellowed newspaper clipping of an old crime-scene photo.

The woman sat slumped in the armchair, a pistol in her lap and a small blossom of blood on the bosom of her ratty black dress. He knew she was dead. The shot to the heart said it all. It said she bought a bullet as a ticket out of the life. Death-dulled eyes under half-closed lids stared at nothing in this world.

Trench studied the scrimshawed creases her makeup couldn't conceal and figured her for an over-the-hill harlot or round-heel hophead, worn down to this sad sack of bones in a measly dress. Checked into Twilight Towers so she could check out with a smidgeon of class, rather than do the deed in some flophouse.

A lavender sheet of hotel stationery sticking out of the Gideon Bible on the bedside table caught his eye. He opened the book and read the handwritten scrawl.

*I can't take no more of this god damn grind.
God forgive me?*

"The grind's a bitch," he said to the corpse, "but there's usually a way out from under."

While the white-coats rolled the body to the elevator, a cadaverous Miami homicide detective named Duvall buttonholed Trench in 12B's doorway. "So you're the new house dick."

"Not that new," Trench said. "Been here half a year."

"Last guy was in the bag, dirty as a whore's bloomers. Got popped pimping for Iron Skillet Scarlotti. Jamoke was running girls up with room service, can you believe that?"

"I can believe most anything these days," Trench said without blinking.

The cop leaned close and lowered his voice. "You can believe *this*. If you're dirty, your dick days are over. You'll be joining that jamoke in the state pen."

Trench clenched his jaw.

"Don't tell me Scarlotti ain't tried to buy you 'cause I'll know you're lying," the cop said.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told him," Trench said. "I'm not for sale."

The cop arched his shaggy brows. His face was cratered from long-ago acne wars. "You know why they call him Iron Skillet, doncha? 'Cause that's what he bashed his daddy's head with."

Trench shrugged.

“Your dagos are big on family, see. Point being, Scarlotti’s crazy as a bedbug when he don’t get his way. Takes a man with brass balls to say no to Scarlotti.”

“That’s what his goons keep telling me...in less flattering words.”

After a beat, the cop chuckled. He said, “Watch your back, pal,” and lit a huge stogie. Then he added, “That dead broad you found was one of Scarlotti’s pro skirts before she got used up. He don’t got no use for ‘em after that. He kicks ‘em loose and brings in a fresh string.”

Trench took the elevator down, listening to the worm-gears grind.

He’s back on the beach. The landing zone on Sicily’s underbelly. Three German panzers are bearing down on him. He hoists the bazooka onto his shoulder. Zenno taps his other shoulder and he fires. Direct hit on the middle tank. The panzer’s ammo cooks off and the screams of the trapped tank crew make his skin crawl. Something big whooshes by and splits the air. The ground heaves and knocks him on his rear. Zenno’s standing there with his chest ripped open and Trench can see his beating heart. “I’m kilt, Teddy,” Zenno says, and then falls dead in the sand.

“Mister Trench?”

The voice brought him back. He’d been out on his feet, dreaming the dream again. Seven years gone and those nightmare memories were still fresh as a new wound. “Yeah, what?”

“Phone call,” said the pimply night clerk.

He held the phone to his ear. “Trench,” he said.

“Come out front. We need a word.”

He recognized the voice and clipped accent. He said, “The word is no.”

“Come out or we come in. You do not want us to come in, sweetcake.”

Trench cradled the phone.

“Trouble?” the night clerk asked.

“My first, last and middle name.” He made a face that might’ve been a grin.

Tall in a baggy burgundy suit, Tony the Toothpick looked like a skeleton on sawed-off stilts. His partner had a bulldog face and the build of a Sumo wrestler. Trench knew Bulldog was the one to eyeball. They were leaning against a black Olds 88, smoking cigs. The air was sultry. It was going on midnight and traffic on Biscayne was light.

Trench sidled up to them with both hands in his coat pockets to hide the brass knucks on his right fist. “Okay, I’m out. Now what?”

Tony dropped the butt in the gutter and came off the fender. “Mr. Scarlotti says this is your last chance to come around. Either you work for him or you don’t work nowhere cuz you’ll be stiff.”

Trench squared his stance and tightened his grip on the brass knuckles. With twelve stories of granite and steel at his back, he felt he could stand pretty tall too. He said, “No sale. Tell Skillet Head he can take a flying leap in the toilet. Head-first. Come

around here again and I'll have you boys roused for loitering. Now beat it. This is my turf and I don't like you stinking it up."

Tony and Bulldog exchanged not-so furtive glances. They came forward, crowding him. He stood his ground and came out with the brass knuckles. He cocked his arm and swung at Bulldog's jowly mug, but something stopped his arm and hooked it behind his back. He knew then he'd screwed up. He'd been flanked by a third man.

Bulldog stepped into him and punched him in the gut, then landed a vicious uppercut to his chin. Trench dropped to his knees, his head swimming the stormy sea above his shoulders. Bulldog gave him a hard taste of shoe leather and Trench went over backwards to the sidewalk. He looked up at the third man hovering over him like a mirage over hot asphalt. When his eyes came back into focus, he saw it was Joey Needles, known for his contract jobs with hypodermics loaded with cobra venom.

Trench hadn't figured Scarlotti's goon squad would shoot him here in front of the hotel, but a spike of snake venom was a different story. And not one with a happy ending.

"Hold him still," said Joey Needles, flourishing a big hypo. The cloudy liquid in the syringe caught a stray gleam of neon.

Tony said, "Last chance. Play ball with the boss or die right here."

Bulldog squatted down and pinned Trench's shoulders to the sidewalk.

Trench turned his head and spat a mouthful of blood as Joey Needles dropped to a knee and got in position to administer the fatal spike to Trench's carotid artery.

Trench bent his right knee, reached down and drew the .32 semi-automatic from his ankle holster. He jammed the muzzle under Bulldog's chin and pulled the trigger. Bulldog's head flew back and he clamped both hands under his chin as if in clumsy prayer and then fell over and made a gurgling noise.

Trench shot Joey Needles point-blank in the face, the slug punching a small blue hole in the assassin's high forehead.

Tony the Toothpick had his gun out and was doing a little skeleton-dance footwork to line up a shot when Trench fired three more times and stitched a tight pattern of red holes in the vicinity of Tony's heart.

Trench got to his feet just as the Olds 88 squealed away from the curb and sped away. He spat out a tooth and watched the taillights recede, pleased that the driver would go running back to Scarlotti to report what had happened to his hit-squad goons.

Tony the Toothpick was dead. Joey Needles was dead. Bulldog was in the hospital under armed guard. Trench's gun was in the custody of the MPD. The cops said the kills were clean, that they'd give him a medal if they could. He'd survived Scarlotti's strong-arm play and Twilight Towers was still free of pro skirts.

But he knew the war wasn't over. Scarlotti would come at him again. With mad vengeance. The smart thing to do was blow town, but he'd never been a runner. He hadn't run from Nazi tanks and he sure as hell wasn't going to run from a two-bit Miami hood like Scarlotti.

Before the squeal cops had arrived on the scene of his sidewalk showdown with Scarlotti's muscle boys, Trench had frisked Joey Needles on a hunch and found a small

leather pouch containing two extra hypos and three vials of venom – more than enough to take out Scarlotti once and for all. All he had to do was get close enough to jab the spike in the greaseball and then get away unscathed and clean.

Trench lit a smoke and sat slumped behind the wheel of his blue Ford coupé. Rain blew in sheets against the windshield like the pages of a soggy potboiler nobody would ever read. He watched the entrance to Giovanni's Restorante Italiano across the street. This was the third night of his vigil and he was beginning to wonder if Scarlotti had gone into hiding or left town till the heat cooled down. Trench was banking on him showing up at his favorite Southside haunt. He sucked gingerly on the butt because the gum hole where his missing front tooth used to be was still painfully raw.

At half past six, a black Caddy pulled up in front of Giovanni's. Scarlotti and two dapper men in dark suits - one tall, one short - got out and strode into the eatery. Trench cranked up his heap and drove around the block and parked in the alley behind Giovanni's. He put on the Lone Ranger mask he'd bought in a five-and-dime and then put on his rain hat, pulling the brim low on his brow. He left the engine running, got out and walked into the eatery's back entrance, holding the sawed-off double-barrel shotgun down by his thigh.

He stopped in the kitchen. The rich aroma of the Eye-tie cuisine made his stomach growl. At gunpoint, he chivvied the two olive-skinned cooks into the walk-in cooler and told them to stay there thirty minutes if they wanted to go on breathing.

He walked into the dining area and saw Scarlotti and his two sweet-looking gunsels sitting at a corner table. Scarlotti was the first to look up and see the masked man with the sawed-off aimed at him.

There were about a dozen other customers in the joint, no kids. Only a couple of them saw Trench butt-stroke the first gunsel to turn his way. The guy went face-down on the table. He gave the other dapper Dan the same treatment and he went over backward in his upended chair.

Scarlotti's chubby mug went rage-red. Trench moved quickly around the table, jammed both barrels under Scarlotti's double chins and said, "Get up and don't say a word."

He took Scarlotti out the back door and into the rain-drenched alley. "Get on your knees," he said.

Scarlotti knelt in a puddle of dirty water. "I know who you are," he said. "Fucking Lone Ranger..."

"I'm the guy you tried to croak." Trench stood behind him, shifted the shotgun to his left hand and pulled a loaded hypo from Joey Needles' pouch with his right. "Lift your chin."

"Wait a minute, I--"

Trench put the sawed-off's twin muzzles against the back of Scarlotti's thick head. "Do it."

Scarlotti lifted his chin and looked up into the driving rain.

Trench jabbed the needle into a pulsing neck artery and popped the load in.

Scarlotti yelped in surprise and slapped at his neck.

Trench said, "You've got less than thirty minutes of life left. You'll probably go into a coma before your lungs give out. Hi-yo Silver, cocksucker."

Trench hammered the back of Scarlotti's head with the shotgun, then jumped into his idling bucket and roared away.

The next day Detective Duvall braced him at the hotel and hit him with rapid-fire questions Trench couldn't answer honestly without implicating himself in Scarlotti's murder. So he lied: "I was laid up in bed from that beat-down they gave me. Much as I might've wanted to kill him, I was in no condition."

Duvall grinned like a skeleton. "I know you did it. I know how and why you did. Lucky for you there ain't no proof. You left a roomful of witnesses wondering, 'Who was that masked man?' while you rode off into the sunset, free and clear."

Trench shrugged. "That's a good story but you've got the wrong guy. I'm just a hotel dick trying to beat the daily grind."

Duvall growled, "Whatever you say, Kemosabe."

Trench gave him a gap-toothed smile and watched him walk away.

Randy Chandler is the author of BAD JUJU and HELLz BELLz, and is the co-author (with t. Winter-Damon) of DUET FOR THE DEVIL. Randy has also written an as yet unpublished detective novel called DIME DETECTIVE.