



“The Family Business”

By Byron Bales.

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PROLOGUE

Manila

“I think that sucker’s dead,” the pony-tailed backpacker shouted across to his buddy. He thumbed towards the lone figure at the far end of the communal table, face down in spilt beer. “He ain’t moved since we sat down.”

Buffalo Joe’s was packed, the volume deafening. Glassy-eyed hookers followed his thumb, looked over indifferently. Alcoholic blackouts featured nightly at Buffalo Joe’s. But the guy at the end of the table wasn’t breathing.

“Yeah, you’re right, man.” His buddy drew on a reefer, zombie-like, exhaled, and added hoarsely, “Look at that crap comin’ outta his nose. Dude’s history.”

“Where did she go?” one of the bargirls asked, looking around for the girl with the oversized purse who’d been sitting with the dead man. Then her eyes fell on his gold wristwatch, and she forgot about the other girl.

The manager came over to investigate. He looked at the body from several angles, afraid to touch it, then called a waitress over. She felt for a pulse and announced that there wasn’t one. She asked if anyone knew CPR, but no one volunteered—not with all that slop on the guy’s face. She called for someone to phone the police, and at this, johns and whores, drunks and hopheads scattered to other tables with extraordinary haste for people in their condition.

No sooner had the call been made when a police officer kicked open the screen doors. He was a large, chesty, dark brute in a tight-fitting blue uniform. He ordered the staff into the kitchen, pointed to the manager, and ran his finger across his throat. A chorus of bitching rippled across the saloon as the music died and blinding overhead lights came on.

“All right, everybody. Hit the bricks. Outside,” Officer Reno Marcellus shouted. He scanned the saloon, spotted the dead man’s co-

ordinates in a sea of emptying tables, then walked over and stood behind the girl who had been eyeing the watch. She tried to dart past him, but he grabbed a clump of her hair and spun her around, tore the dead man's wristwatch from her hand.

"That'll look better on me, *puta*." He held it up to the light and admired a genuine diamond-studded Cartier. He kicked the girl into the crowd pushing towards the door. When the last person was out, Marcellus began emptying the corpse's pockets. In the back of the joint, the manager cut off the air-conditioning. Marcellus yelled at him to turn it back on.

It was a typical Manila night—hot and sticky. Soon, the dregs milling about outside began thinning away, some to find another beer joint, others back to their cheap hostels with a hooker in tow.

Just in front of an ambulance, an old battered Ford screeched to a halt at the curb. A news photographer jumped out, ran up the steps into Buffalo Joe's. As the EMS team approached the saloon, a flashbulb exploded inside, followed by a torrent of curses from Marcellus. The newsman flew back out onto the street, taking off the screen doors and bowling down the paramedics coming up the steps.

Officer Marcellus rode with the body to the hospital. On the way, he ordered the driver to pull into an alley, to step outside for a cigarette. The driver started to say that he didn't smoke, then got the message and did as he was told. Marcellus turned off the light in the back of the ambulance. He took the corpse by the shoulders, hung the head over the gurney. He withdrew his nightstick, but thought better of it, rummaged around the ambulance, found a crowbar in the vehicle's emergency kit. Gripping the metal bar, he took aim, smashed it down with all his might. The dead man's skull cracked, caving in an inch between the eyebrows and the hairline.

Marcellus lit a cigarette, examined his work. It was a bit of overkill, but so what. Satisfied, he honked the horn and the driver came running back. Marcellus stepped out of the ambulance, looked at his new acquired Cartier. It was 2:30 a.m.

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Just before sunrise, Marcellus sat behind the wheel of his patrol car in the alley behind Buffalo Joe's. He zipped up his fly, and Lolita moved away, then began crying.

Marcellus withdrew a pint of rum from the glove compartment, took a swig. He watched drunks stumbling past his car, heading up the alley, dispossessing the rats in a pre-dawn search for old pros, well past their prime—Blowjob Boulevard.

Lolita wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Brian was a nice man, Reno. He never hurt nobody.”

“Whadda you care? You got Jordan, now.”

“You said the pills would just make him sleep.”

“Get your pussy back on the street, girlie.”

When she didn’t move, Marcellus leaned over, opened the door on her side and kicked her out. The contents of her purse spilled across the alley.

“I’ll call you when I hear from Jordan,” he said, slamming the door. He put the car in gear, cruised slowly up the alley with his lights off, looking for drunks to roll, hookers to extort. He was having a banner night, although the stiff from Buffalo Joe’s had been the real windfall on this shift.

Lolita squatted in the alley sniffing, and scraped her things into her purse; clean panties, tampons, cigarettes, a few pesos, and a vial of downers. “You bastard,” she screamed, knowing he was too far away to hear.

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