

Off the Record

by Mathew Paust

“You should know better than to dance with a thug like Teach, but then I guess you came out ahead, anyway.”

I said nothing, just stared impassively at the object on the desk between us. It was about the size of an elongated Zippo lighter, similar to my micro-recorder, which I'd just learned the other thing would trump. “And anything else electronic in this room,” my visitor had said, glancing tellingly at the ceiling light fixture. “Whatever is said here, was never said.”

“In other words you're going to lie through your teeth, and probly threaten me too, although you'll have to find another thug now that Teach is out of commission. You, know, Gladstone, your fall from grace is appalling. It's hard to believe you're the same man who exposed corruption in the Senate, and risked his life to protect a president from assassins.” I kept my voice level and my eyes steady on Gladstone's after looking up from the electronic device with its tiny green light blinking like a metronome. Confident my theater and courtroom experience gave this little extemporaneous speech convincing panache I nonetheless felt a creeping doubt it would succeed in distracting me much longer from betraying the shock I felt at Gladstone's physical appearance. The smirk on his rubbery lips told me he already sensed my true discomfort.

My first impression when I opened the door and watched him step past me into the office was that he'd sent his chauffeur ahead. I was about to peer through the small glass pane in the door with this in mind when the familiar voice disabused me of that notion. As my alarm and distrust at his unheralded arrival in Leicester was well stoked, I was able to remain dispassionately professional, which in Gladstone's case meant no extraneous civility. In particular this meant no recognition of an appearance so gaunt it disturbed me so much I considered my intent to avoid it a balancing act between oblivious and rude. Had I felt the slightest camaraderie with him I might have avoided this minor internal dilemma with some old-boy

cliché bundle like “Jeezuz, Bart, you look like warmed-over death. What the fuck, man? TB? AIDS? Should I be wearing a surgical mask, along with this damned collar?”

These thoughts jousting with the veneer of my posturing were heavily reinforced by the elephant in the room, or rather the lack thereof. I'd last seen Gladstone the Behemoth in my office over two years ago. He seemed just as tall now, and his face, though thinner by ghastly contrast was still as ugly with its obscene rubber lips and bulbous eyes—all the more froglike housed between the still heavy brow and now prominent cheekbones. From the previously barely noticeable knobby chin on down he appeared—I offer ashamedly the first comparison that comes to mind—Lincolnesque. With considerably less veneration: a skeleton draped with skin. Were my imagination up to the task I assume he'd have looked even more distressing naked. As it was, the baggy clothes I'd have expected on someone terminally ill had been succeeded by a well-tailored, evidently expensive pinstriped charcoal suit that might have given him an air of Fred Astaire were it not for his lumbering bestial muscle memory and undiminished obnoxious nature. He let me squirm with suppressed curiosity during our initial sparring.

He had been extracting a black cigar from inside his jacket, but moved it back out of sight and lowered his empty hand to the desk. As he listened to my hardened indictment his face seemed to tighten and lose color, creating the impression of a naked skull. The illusion faded during a pause after I finished speaking. Pink tongue tip pushed its way between the lips and darted from one corner to the other. retracting in time to assist the familiar basso voice: “Teach is too stupid to work for me.”

“Only the best for you, eh, Gladstone?”

“Hey, call me Bart, for chrissake. It ain't gonna kill ya. Gladstone's the name of a goddam cartoon duck. I hate it.”

“As I recall, a goose, a very lucky duck, in fact. I should think you'd be proud of it. And also, drawing on my childhood memories, isn't Bart the name of a villain? Black Bart?”

The lips stretched into their predatory signature smirk. “Rings a bell, Stone. No doubt he was misunderstood, too. Just the same, I'm asking you to humor me. You want me in good humor, don't you?”

“I don't care what humor you're in. You said you had something for me, which is why you're sitting in my office at the moment. Let's get to it. My neck is sore. I'd like to lie down for a bit, and before I get a pain in my ass, too.”

Bartholomew Gladstone stared at me for several heartbeats then nodded once and abruptly spread his bony fingers in an impatient gesture of conciliation. “As you wish, Counselor.” His voice rumbled with leaden weariness. He gazed for several seconds at the hand that had held the cigar, and it seemed he was reconsidering his abstinence. He leaned toward me and began speaking, more softly and nimble than I'd yet heard from him. We both knew the offer he was pitching I dared not refuse no matter my skepticism. It was the dangling carrot that promised a remote chance of saving my client from conviction for double murder.

It would come down, I knew, to me persuading Jasper Mundaigh to cough up his big secret. Neither Mundaigh nor Jamie Moriarty had told me specifically why he was tortured. Moriarty gave me the impression she didn't know the particulars and that we'd both be better off without the burden of even that parcel of knowledge. It seemed Gladstone now was about to reveal at least some of what *he* knew, enough, I expected, for me to find some leverage with Mundaigh. It strained my acting chops to convey a professional reserve with the stakes so high and the vague sense of dread that had entered the office with Gladstone. His first words in this strange new mode took instant control of the interview.

“You think I'm dying, don't you, Joe.”

