

The Collection

by

Fred Wiehe

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The fat man was on his knees. Dressed in red pajamas. Hands bound behind his back. A sock stuffed into his mouth with a piece of black duct tape slapped across his lips. Sweat beaded on his face and plastered thinning, brown hair to his scalp. The breath blowing in and out of his nose was rapid and shallow. His heart was a steady thud. And tremors shook his large frame until he looked like a quivering mass of red Jello.

Standing in the fat man's living room, Jamison understood the guy's fear. After all, he himself stood over the trembling lump, a Glock 23 pressed against his quarry's temple.

The fat man struggled against his restraints.

Jamison grinned. This was the part he loved the best. Not the collection itself. Yeah, that was the end game. But the fear before is what excited him most. The sight of it. The sour smell of it. Sometimes, like now, the fear was almost palatable.

The fat man blew air out his nose and struggled to speak. But

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with the balled-up sock firmly in his mouth and duct tape sealing the deal, all he could manage were muffled pleas.

Jamison took the pistol away from the guy's head. He hunkered down, so they were eye to eye. "You got something to say?" he asked, still grinning.

The fat man's face reddened from exertion. Tears welled in deep-set eyes. Streamed down chubby cheeks. His muffled cries intensified.

"You want to plead for your life, Mr. Applebee?" Jamison asked.

The fat man stopped struggling, stopped trying to talk. He just sat there, bugged-eyed, face tear-soaked, snot hanging from his nose.

"That's right," Jamison said. "I know your name. I know who you are."

Applebee's breath raced. His bulk trembled.

"What?" Jamison asked. "Did you think this was just a random act? And you were just a poor victimized sap?" He shook his head.

Applebee's fear had reached new heights. He looked as though he was about ready to piss his pants. From the smell maybe he already had.

This was getting fun.

"So maybe I should let you plead for your life, huh," Jamison said, toying with the guy. "You going to tell me how you never hurt nobody? That you're a good guy? And you don't deserve this?" He shook his head again, the grin never leaving his face. "That what you going to tell me if I take that gag out?"

Applebee's muffled sobs answered.

Jamison nodded. "Okay, I'll give you a chance," he said. "But you better not disappoint me." He reached up and stripped the snot-soaked duct tape away with one quick swipe.

Applebee let out a muffled cry of pain.

What a wuss.

Jamison shook his head and chuckled. With two fingers, he pulled the sock out of the guy's mouth. Then he tossed it aside.

Applebee coughed and gagged. Worked his tongue around his mouth. Licked his lips. "Bastard," he croaked with false bravado. For his still quivering bulk and the wet stain on the crotch of his pajamas gave him away. "Fucking, bastard." This time the curse came out more like a whimper. "Bastard ..."

Jamison shrugged off the obscenities. "You're not really helping your case," he said. Standing, he circled the fat man like a vulture. "You see, Mr. Applebee, my employer demands that I collect one soul by tonight. After some consideration, I've carefully chosen you." He stopped in front of the kneeling fat man. "Why should I go to all the trouble of changing my mind?"

Applebee gathered himself. He choked back his sobs, sniffed snot back up his nose, and took a deep, hitched breath. "What have I ever done to deserve this?" he asked. "I've never done anything to you or your employer. I've never even seen you before, you son of a bitch." He coughed, dry and raspy. "Far as I know, I don't even know your goddamn employer." He worked his tongue around his mouth, across

his dried lips. "I'm a good man." Tears again formed in his sunken, dark-rimmed eyes. A sob strangled his voice. "I've never hurt anyone."

"You're a good man," Jamison mumbled. "You never hurt anyone." He thought for a moment while he twirled the Glock around his finger like a Western gunslinger. "Hmm, if this were a black and white world then that may be true. As bad men go, you certainly aren't the worst. At least, not yet." He stopped twirling the pistol. Pointed it at the fat man's head. "But this ole' world is grey, shades of grey, Mr. Applebee. And you've operated in the darkest shades of this grey world most of your life. You've worked in the shadows. Behind the scenes. Stabbing people in the back. Or stepping on them and squashing them like worthless bugs. All to your advantage. All the while working your way to the top."

"I'm a fucking businessman," Applebee sniveled, as if that were a defense. "Like any other."

"Like any other," Jamison repeated with a nod. "That may be true."

"Certainly it is," Applebee said, sniffing back snot, trying not to whimper, trying to show courage.

"What about your employees?" Jamison asked. He went back to twirling the pistol. "You treat them like dirt, don't you? Pay them next to nothing. Steal their ideas. Pass them off as your own. Profit from them."

Applebee shook his head in apparent disbelief. "Again, you're

going to fucking kill me because I'm a shrewd businessman? That's not a crime."

Jamison stopped twirling the Glock. He pointed it at the kneeling fat man. "Kill?" Now he shook his head. "My employer and I prefer to think of it as collecting a soul."

"However you think of it," Applebee bemoaned, "it's still goddamn murder. Plain and simple."

Jamison stepped forward. He pressed the barrel of the Glock against the fat man's temple. He cocked the hammer.

Applebee shuddered at the loud click of the pistol. He shut tight his tear-soaked eyes. Braced his bulk for the inevitable.

But it didn't come.

Instead, Jamison took the pistol away. He asked, "And what about your wife?"

Applebee opened his eyes. "What about her?"

"You cheated on her, didn't you?"

Applebee squinted. His jowls set firm. "Is she ..." He gulped hard. "Is she ... your employer?"

Jamison grinned. "Did you cheat on her?"

Applebee's face turned hard as stone. "She cheated on me too," he spat. "That bitch is no angel."

"Didn't she only cheat to get back at you for screwing your secretary?" Jamison paused. "Excuse me, administrative assistant."

Applebee didn't answer.

"And didn't you hit her after you found out? Gave her a black

eye, didn't you?"

The fat man looked away. "She shouldn't have cheated on me," he muttered.

"Shouldn't have cheated on you," Jamison repeated the fat man's words. He shook his head in disbelief at the logic. "Didn't you cheat on her first?" He didn't wait for an answer he knew wasn't coming anyway. "Don't you cheat on your taxes? And didn't you cheat your first business partner all those years ago, leaving him broken and penniless? In fact, Mr. Applebee, don't you cheat on everything and everyone?"

Applebee didn't respond.

"Nothing to say?" Jamison asked. "Run out of excuses?" He chuckled. "Really, Mr. Applebee, I expected you to plead for your soul better than this."

Applebee shook his head. "I love my wife ..."

Now Jamison outright laughed. "You do?"

"She just made me mad is all. Shouldn't have cheated on me." Applebee hung his head. "As for the rest," he muttered, "I'm just a businessman."

"Not much of a defense, is it?" Jamison asked.

Applebee raised his head. A look of inspiration passed across his jowly face. "Wait, I'm a businessman. You're a businessman. Let's strike a bargain."

"No deals," Jamison said. He pressed the pistol against the fat man's head. "My employer demands a soul collected. Tonight. I spent

days setting you up. There's no time to find another. And even if I could, why should I bother? The trouble just wouldn't be worth it to me."

Applebee's large frame trembled anew. Gulping hard, he said, "Wait. I can make it worth your while. And it would be easy. Uncomplicated. No bother to you. I could serve up a ... *soul* ... to you on a silver platter."

There it was.

Jamison grinned.

What he'd been waiting for.

"How?" Jamison asked.

"There's another soul besides me right here for the taking," Applebee insisted. "Ripe for the taking."

Jamison removed the pistol from the fat man's head. "Your wife?"

"I'll pay you three times more than she's paying you."

"I never said she was my employer."

Applebee squirmed. "I'll pay you anything you want!"

"Interesting," Jamison said. He began circling his prey. "A soul for a soul."

"That's right," Applebee confirmed. "Does the soul have to be me? Can't it be her?" His voice was almost a sob as he continued, "There'd be no further bother or work on your part. She's right here. No fuss, no muss." Fresh tears of desperation ran down chubby cheeks. "And you'd profit from it threefold to boot."

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Jamison nodded. "Love your wife, do you?"

Applebee didn't answer. Instead he asked, "Do we have a deal?"

Jamison gave the Glock one twirl around his finger. Caught it. Then aimed it at the fat man's head. "And you'd have no qualms in ... *servicing up her soul?*"

"No," Applebee blubbered. "Let the bitch die. Not me."

"How will you explain it to the authorities?"

"Home invasion," Applebee explained. "Leave me bound. The description of the *perpetrators* will be anything but accurate on my part. Trust me."

"Trust you ..." Jamison grinned. "Trust you ..." He chuckled. Twirled the Glock. "And the money?"

"In my safe," Applebee answered. "Through that doorway." With his head, he motioned toward a doorway off the living room. "Down the hallway, in the den. The safe's in the floor, under the desk."

"Combination?"

"Twenty-five, right. Thirty-two, left. Nineteen, right."

Jamison continued twirling the Glock. "Call her down here," he said.

Now Applebee grinned. "What about the money?"

"Later," Jamison said. "Call her down here."

"We have an agreement then?" Applebee pressed.

Jamison stopped twirling the pistol. Instead, he again aimed it at the fat man's head. "Call her down," he hissed.

Applebee gulped. "Maggie," he called, voice cracking. He cleared his throat. Again, he called, "Maggie!"

At the top of the stairs, a hallway light went on. Footsteps padded down that hallway.

"Albert?" Maggie called back. "Is that you?"

"Yes, *dear*," Applebee answered. His jowly face contorted into a villainous mask. "Down here, dear, in the living room."

"What is it?" Maggie asked from the top of the stairs.

"Come downstairs," Applebee instructed. Under his breath, he added, "Bitch."

Jamison's gaze never left Applebee's. He had chosen well.

Maggie started down the stairs. Halfway down, she stopped, let out a strangled gasp, and then screamed.

Jamison never let his gaze stray from the fat man. Still, he swung the Glock around and, without aiming or even looking, fired once.

The gunfire echoed. Maggie's scream instantly silenced. Her body thumped down the stairs.

In the fat man's eyes, Jamison saw it. What he knew was there all along. Evil. Madness. He had indeed chosen well.

He turned away and looked at Maggie for the first time. The woman's body lay at the foot of the staircase, head blown apart. Blood pooled there. More blood, as well as chunks of brain, flesh, and hair, splattered the wall behind where the woman had been descending the stairs.

"Well, you did it, Mr. Businessman," Jamison said. "You stepped out of the grey, out of the shadows you've been operating within for years. You stepped into blackness."

He looked back at the fat man who stared at his wife's dead body with what could only be described as delight.

"We did it," Applebee acknowledged. Grinning, he looked back at his assailant. "Your employer should be happy now. You collected your soul."

Jamison nodded. "I did indeed." He twirled the Glock one last time before holstering it underneath his jacket. "And I'll be back for that soul when the time comes to take possession."

The fat man's grin faded. "What? What do you mean?" Confusion crept across the features of his round face like a lunar eclipse. "You took possession of my wife's soul just now. I saw it with my own eyes."

Jamison looked back at the dead woman. "Oh, your wife's soul was just set free." He turned back to the fat man. "Yours on the other hand." He shrugged.

Applebee's face turned red. Tremors racked his bulk. He squinted at Jamison. "What are you talking about? We had a deal."

Sirens wailed in the distance. Someone must have heard the shot and called the cops.

Jamison grinned. "Did we?"

"I paid you, you bastard," Applebee growled. But the expression on his face was more like a beaten dog rather than a rabid wolf. "I

paid you ..."

Jamison walked to the front door, forgetting the money. "Did you?" He didn't care about the money. Never worked for money. For him, it was all about the collection.

"I don't understand," Applebee bemoaned.

After opening the door, Jamison turned back toward the fat man. "My employer only demanded the collection of the soul by tonight," he explained. "He's a patient man. Once he has it, he's willing to wait to take possession." He shrugged. "My employer will always be there, Mr. Applebee. Hell will always be there. Waiting. They are eternal."

"What are you raving about?"

"Why, your soul, Mr. Applebee." Jamison winked. "You gave it up willingly." He paused. "I'll be back to take possession. When it's time."

Sirens wailed. Getting closer.

Jamison hurried away. Into the night.

The fat man screamed.

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