

So, these two men meet in a bar. One is a young military reject with delusions of soldierly machismo. The other is a white-haired snob harboring family-induced delusions that he is "well-bred."

Business is slow tonight at the Outlaw Lounge, a sleazy watering hole squatting in a stinking envelope of beer and vomit that leeches into the clean, balmy air around it.

The week-night bartender reveals his inadequacy to the demands of life with slumped shoulders, wasted-thin body and decayed teeth. He comes wiping the bar down toward the older man, humming a song. He looks at the man's nearly empty glass of Scotch and asks, "One more, Mister Hotchkiss?" He resumes humming.

The gray-haired man recognizes the tune, then remembers the words, "Make it one for my baby, and one more for the road."

He takes his elbow off the bar, sits up straight and says, "You cretin. I never drive drunk."

The barkeep shoots him a thin-lipped grin. "I reckon you don't, Mr. Hotchkiss."

Unsatisfied with administering a brief reprimand, Porter Hotchkiss snarls at the barkeep. "You idiot. 'One more for my baby?' For Mrs. Hotchkiss?"

A shrug rounds the barkeep's shoulders even more.

"You consummate bore. I'm slumming it here. Wilma wouldn't be caught dead in this place. Even a good stiff one wouldn't make her happy tonight."

His target's eyes flash with sly glee.

Hotchkiss instantly recognizes his *faux pas* which prompted the other man's obscene train of thought. Hotchkiss attempts to derail it with words. "Her latest book is driving us crazy. The publisher's deadline is next month." He rushes on, his voice louder. "You'd think the deadline

would be enough for her to complain about. Now she's worked up over the jacket. She needs a head shot for that. She needs a great head shot, and soon."

The bartender's eyes slide sideways toward the young man two stools down. His hair is dark, cropped close to his skull, his face flat and expressionless. Beneath a black t-shirt, his biceps, triceps and pectorals are well-defined. He wears camouflage-print fatigue pants and GI-issue boots. He eases over the empty bar stool to sit next to the older man. He wipes beer and glass-sweat from his right hand onto his pants and holds out the hand. He says, "Hi. Wolf Waringwerger."

Hotchkiss hesitates. He thinks, *Wolf? Like Wolf Blitzer? Even so, this fellow is forward, a bit full of himself.* For reasons that will bedevil him until the moment of his death, Hotchkiss yields to the mysterious machinations of fate. He shakes the young man's hand. "Porter Hotchkiss," he says, doling out his name slowly, doubtful the other man is worthy of hearing it.

Wolf doesn't waste time. He says, "I overheard. You got a job needs doing? Your wife?"

"I don't imagine that's any concern of yours."

"It is if you're serious. Happens I'm an expert at what you're talkin' about."

Hotchkiss sniffs, as if a whiff of smoke is irritating his nostrils. "I am always dead-serious, young man. Besides, you don't look mature enough for the artistic kind of thing we want. What have you done before? I certainly don't recognize your name."

Wolf swivels his barstool so his back is to the bar and he lowers his voice, which forces Hotchkiss to turn also. Wolf says, "I'm just now back on the block."

"What?"

"First civilian division.

"What?"

"You know, sofa squad."

"Pardon?"

Wolf barely conceals his own impatience. He utters the required explanations in a patronizing tone with inflections of superiority that lend credence to his lies. "I'm ex-Marine, combat decorated. Between jobs now, I'll be honest about that, but my civilian work is better than good."

"How good would that be?"

"My head shots are legend. I know my dominant eye. My point of aim is right on. I have a wide field of view. I don't goose neck. I'm good at positional shooting. I can do the work in any location, any time, under any conditions, including poor lighting."

As he contemplates Wolf's resume, Hotchkiss hears, emanating from deep in the recesses of his alcohol-infused brain, a snatch of repeated dialogue from an old TV show: "Danger Will Robinson, danger!" He dismisses it as an artifact of too many Scotch and sodas. He reassures himself that even though he's had a few, he will never be a sloppy, stupid drunk. He asks, "You can shoot in any location? Even at home? Actually, that might work. She doesn't want to leave the house, she's so busy with the conclusion of that blasted book."

Wolf anticipates a rapid closure to the pact. "Home is the best place. They're relaxed, the line of drift is limited and natural."

"Candid shots, hum?"

"You could call it that."

"But do you have the right equipment? Quality equipment is essential for professional results. We insist on the best, not some point and shoot hand-held."

"I have the best hardware around, two top notch babies. The first is a Precision Templar V2 6.5 Creedmoor. My favorite, though, is my Remington 700 BDL custom Poyer. Objective and ocular lenses, bipod, infrared, the works."

"Infrared?" Hotchkiss doesn't recognize the technical descriptions but he won't question this young "Wolf," because that would reveal his own ignorance. He is impressed by the detailed, dead-on descriptions of photography equipment and by the young man's real enthusiasm for his work.

He tilts his head and says, "We seldom deal with unknowns, but maybe you are the one to shoot frames for Wilma. You know, when my wife is pleased like I am now, she says, "It's to die for."

Wolf's laughter, long and loud, startles Hotchkiss. He thinks, *That was totally inappropriate. The man lacks class.* He turns down the corners of his mouth and gulps the last of his scotch before he says, "We haven't discussed business details yet. How much do you charge?"

"Low ball, five hundred Benjamins. Top rate, one large."

Hotchkiss is again at a loss. "Would you mind not using that military slang? In plain English, please."

The put-down raises Wolf's hackles but over recent years he's been learning to suppress his rage. "That's between five hundred to one thousand dollars."

"Rather steep! Tell you what, let's agree on five hundred, but I could go to seven if the results are good enough."

Wolf's mouth hardens. Then he speaks, "Cold barrel zero? One shot? I can do that. Five doubles will seal it, then just give me the address." The wrinkled face staring into his wears a blank expression. Wolf says tightly, "That's one hundred dollars--in twenties--if you have it."

"Of course I have it," Hotchkiss replies. He pulls out his wallet. He rubs each bill between thumb and finger before handing it to the young man. He thinks, *This is a strange place to do business. Still, I told my wife I would take care of her. As much as I sometimes hate the high-strung, demanding woman, she probably deserves it.*

Hotchkiss hands Wolf a card on which he's scribbled his address, then extends and opens his own hand. Wolf hesitates, gets it, says, "Oh, sorry. I'm out." He pats his pockets as if assuring himself he has no business cards. He turns over his bar tab, scrawls his name, the address of a downtown bar, and the number of his latest burner cell phone.

As soon as Hotchkiss is out the door, he turns to the barkeeper and says, "What a dickwad."

"Yeah, a real bag of smashed a-holes. Hey, Wolf, I never seen that tattoo on your arm before. What does FTA stand for?"

"Stands for f--- the Army. *And* the Marine Corps *and* the whole f---ing military. F--- Hotchkiss and his cranial rectosis, too."

"Yeah, rectal-cranial inversion, for sure."

Wolf slapped money on the bar and stood abruptly. "Got to un-ass. Gonna grab a pump-and-dump with the bitch. Then at zero-dark-thirty, take care of business. A deal's a deal, even with a douche-bag, bone-head like him.

Jimmy Smith, aka Wolf Waringwerger, has the good sense to leave his battered pickup truck on the outskirts of the upscale neighborhood. He carries his equipment in a harmless-looking pack slung over his shoulder. He is dressed in black, his face smeared with charcoal; he is virtually invisible as he strides to the address of the Hotchkiss home. There, he stows the bag beneath a well cared-for hedge, then circles the house, looking into windows, watching shadows cast on curtained windows, identifying his target, setting up the shot.

From across the street, unable to take the preferred, prone position, he takes the alternate standing one, attaches the infrared scope and loads the frangible bullets. It has to be cold barrel zero for the seven hundred dollars, one shot only. He takes careful aim. Crack! The Glaser bullet fragments on impact. At that instant, Jimmy sees the woman's head explode in a burst of bone, blood and brain tissue

Two days later, he chain-smokes as he paces the hallway of his apartment, torn by uncertainties. Is Hotchkiss ratting him out to the police this very minute? Where is the seven hundred owed him? The night of the job, when he went to the door to collect, Hotchkiss was a screaming maniac on the phone to the police and he had to run. Should he track down the dickwad and beat the Benjamins out of him? Then again, maybe he should he just forget the whole thing. Skip town to some place where the cops and news vultures don't freak out over the death of a dotty old civilian split-tail.