

## Straight Convict

The tower gunner has his Ruger mini-14 ready as he keeps a close eye on the activity below him. The fact that it occurs daily does not diminish his alertness. A civilian woman is alone with a number of inmates and, if anything goes sideways, a Corrections Officer will never reach her in time. Her best chance of rescue will be a bullet.

In a fenced off corner of B yard, Neil glances up at the gunner, smiles to himself. *I can read your mind, motherfucker. Firing few warning shots into our spines would make your day, wouldn't it?*

Jo interrupts his musing. "Neil, you're still here among us and we are all still working. Care to join us?" Neil nods sheepishly as the other five men on either side of him laugh. They each have a leashed dog sitting at their left sides. "Okay," Jo says. "Forward." She walks backward as she directs them. "Stop... sit...down. Now, dogs in a stay and come around in front." The men put their dogs into a down-stay, then turn to face them, still holding their leashes. "Drop your leash and back up twenty feet." They move backward slowly as the dogs vibrate, dying to break. "Call them."

A bright chorus of "Here!" and "Front!" and the dogs rocket forward, reach the men, and spin to sit at their left sides. Grinning with pride, they stroke and praise them. Lalo, who has been jailing since Jesus was a baby, plants a big kiss on his dog's muzzle. "Lalo kisses his dog on the lips," Neil says, grinning, "and he hopes you *don't* like it, 'cause he might do it again." The men groan and act repulsed at the thought of it, then they all do the same thing.

They house their dogs in a nearby maintenance building. At her kennel, Neil scratches Annie's ears deep and slow. "You like that, don't you, pretty girl?" She presses into his hand and emits a low rumble of pleasure.

"It won't be much longer now. You getting excited yet?"

Neil looks up to see Jo standing there. "I'll be excited when that front gate hits me in the a... butt."

She smiles. "You've done great work the last few years, Neil. You helped get this program off the ground and you've helped a lot of dogs find homes. You should be proud."

"That means a lot, coming from you."

"Just remember, you're the first inmate I've ever recommended for a job on release. Don't make me look like a chump, okay?"

Neil breezes into his cell and pulls up short as his good mood evaporates. Truck lies on the top bunk, eyes squeezed shut, jerking off like he has the patent on it.

"Put that thing away, will you? Christ, I just had supper."

Truck opens his eyes, sighs, tucks his waning hardon into his pants. "Damn, I was almost there." He sits up, with effort. "You fucked my shit up, man. Why you gotta bug like that?"

"I'm bugging? You're a fucking moron, you idiot. How many times I told you, do that on the low and late at night, when I'm asleep. And quit yelling out that woman's name when you bust a nut. You scared the shit out of me the other night."

"If you ever saw that bitch, you'd be yelling, too. She loved the taste of my..."

"Enough, goddamnit. You know, I... aw, fuck it." Neil throws up a hand and stalks out.

Truck waits until he is well out of earshot. “I’m gonna let you slide this time, bitch, but don’t you *ever* come out of your mouth like that again because I *will* fuck you up.” Then he flops back down on the bunk and unzips his pants.

The next morning, Neil and Sonny – fifteen years older and hardened like iron - face each other as they stand for the patdown before entering C yard. They talk past the COs frisking them as though they are invisible.

“Truck’s got to go,” Neil says.

Sonny laughs. “Catch him with his joint in his hand again?”

The officers finish, motion for them to move on. They fall into step like an old married couple. Their pace is casual but their eyes never stop moving as they gauge the temperature of the yard. “He doesn’t even try to put any shade on it,” Neil says, “and if he isn’t jacking off, he’s talking about busting open some youngster’s ass. Dude’s got me half-spun and he’s only been in the house three weeks.”

“You been down, what, fifteen, sixteen years? And you’re gonna let a fat lop like that fuck with your mind?” His grin is almost hidden behind his white walrus moustache. “I thought you was hardcore, son.”

“It’s seventeen years and I am hardcore, motherfucker,” Neil says. “This whole thing is Speedy’s fault. If he hadn’t knocked out that Sergeant and pissed on him, we’d still be cellies. I hope he rots in Corcoran. All the times I hooked him up...”

“Stop sniveling. You can’t hang another couple weeks? Shit.”

“I’m not sniveling,” Neil says. “I’m just...”

Sonny nudges him, cuts a glance ahead and to their right. Neil follows it to see four Mexicans walking quickly, angling to come up behind two unsuspecting blacks. He and Sonny

start walking fast in the opposite direction. The Mexicans close the gap and run the last few steps to fall on the backs of the black men, stabbing furiously. No subterfuge, just a full-out gorilla assault. They all collapse into a convulsive tangle of fists and feet and knives. Electrified by the blood and action, nearby blacks and Mexicans pull their weapons and launch into the grisly scrum.

“*All inmates on the ground now!*” a voice booms over the p.a. Most men in the yard hit the dirt but a dozen keep brawling. A gas grenade explodes near them; some drop to their bellies, gasping and bawling. A warning shot cracks through the haze and kicks up a plume of dust at the feet of the four men left fighting. “*That’s your last warning! Get down now!*” Three comply, but one of the original attackers remains standing, howling and slashing with his dripping shank. A second shot snaps his head to the side as a bullet rips a chunk out of his skull. Strings cut, he crumples in a heap.

A siren wails as two medical teams rush into the yard. Two men are dead. A dozen writhe around, bleeding, while seven hundred others remain on their bellies in the dirt, silent. The gas languidly disperses over them and the sudden stillness is punctuated by random coughs and barks. Neil raises his head a few inches. The yard looks like a Civil War battlefield.

“I cannot wait to check out of this shithole,” he says.

Neil and Sonny sit with the other white men as they shovel down their tasteless food. A dozen new inmates in orange jump suits line up for chow. One of them has a power lifter’s muscles and a thousand prison miles carved into his features. Neil spots him and the color drains from his face; without a word, he picks up his tray and leaves.

Sonny catches up to him in the corridor, puts a hand on his arm. “Hey, what’s up with...?”

Neil whirls around, jerks his arm away. “Don’t be fucking grabbing me!”

Sonny steps back, raises his hands. “Easy there, brother. My mistake.” Men avert their eyes as they pass them. No one wants to be accused of minding another’s business.

Neil glares at Sonny, then shakes his head helplessly and strides down the range. When he enters his cell, he finds Truck sitting on the bottom bunk with a sweet-looking teenager. The boy smiles up at Neil. “Hey, I’m Billy, how’s it going? I just rolled in from LA. Man, they run you all over the state on that bus, don’t they? Took us, like, two days to get here.” Neil does not even look at him; he is busy staring a hole in Truck’s grinning face.

“Billy here’s a stone killer, aren’t you, Billy?” He pokes the boy in the ribs and Billy giggles. “Blew both his parents’ heads off with a shotgun. You can leave blood and hair on the walls with the best of them, right, Bill?” Billy, still smiling, shrugs. “And guess what? He’s only sixteen. Tried like an adult and all grewed up. Ain’t that interesting?”

Neil doesn’t blink. “You’re on my rack.”

“We are, aren’t we? Sorry about that.” He and Billy stand. “Billy boy, why don’t you run along? I’ll catch up with you later.”

Billy nods enthusiastically. “Perfect. And thanks for all the tips and stuff. I appreciate it, like, a lot.” He turns his smile on Neil. “Good meeting you...?” Neil turns his back, takes two steps to the toilet and unzips his fly. Billy’s smile falters as he hurries out.

Truck hauls himself up onto his bunk, lays back. A dreamy expression blooms on his face. “Man, that’s some sweet pussy there. I’ll be tapping that before he knows what hit him.” He massages himself, recollecting. “Had some trim like that once in Soledad. He murdered his folks, too. What are the chances, right? Anyways, he was looking for some understanding.” Neil’s face is stony as he finishes and zips up. He doesn’t flush. “I understood him, all right,”

Truck says, grinning. “I understood his asshole was tighter’n frog pussy. The first time I opened it up...”

Neil yanks him off the bunk by his hair. He crashes to the floor, bellowing like a farm animal. Neil shuts him up with a foot to the face, then drags him a few feet to the toilet and jams his head into it. He presses a knee into his back as he holds his face in the pisswater. Truck heaves and bucks, tries to get some air. Neil finally jerks him upright and slams him face first into the wall. His nose cracks like a pistol shot and blood gushes down his shirtfront. Neil knees him in the balls and he shrieks, doubles over and vomits on his shoes.

In the control booth at the far end of the range, one CO is on the phone while the other catches up on paperwork. They are both oblivious. Inmates drift over to see what is happening and to block the officers’ view.

Truck is on his belly now, moaning through pulped lips. His face is already lumped and misshapen and his eyes are swelling shut. Snot mixed with blood is smeared on his chin and he coughs out two bloody teeth. Wheezing fiercely, he tries to catch his breath.

Neil hisses in his ear. “You don’t live here any more, pig. Go see the cops and check in with the other faggots and you better lock down 24/7 because I don’t want to see you in my penitentiary while I’m still here. You snitch me off and I’ll kill you, understand?” Truck mumbles something as he nods into the floor. Neil grabs a magazine and rolls it up tight.

The men gathered outside the cell jump back as Truck hurtles out onto the range. His pants are bunched around his ankles and the magazine sticks halfway out of his ass. Somehow, he manages to push himself to his knees. The men cheer and hoot as he reaches back and extracts the magazine. Gasping, he starts dragging himself on all fours toward the control booth.

The first CO is still on the phone. The second glances up from his paperwork, then jumps up from his chair and shouts something at his partner, who quickly hangs up. The inmates melt into their cells, just as both officers rush out of the booth. Truck collapses on his belly on the now empty range.

“What happened here?” the first CO says, as he rolls Truck over. A dozen unseen voices yell out, “He fell!” “That’s right, just fell right down!” Neil appears at his cell doorway. The officers look over at him and he shrugs.

“Poor guy fell right off the top bunk. I was taking a big shit or I would’ve caught him.”

Sonny is on a prepaid phone in his cell. “Oh, fuck him in his ass with no grease, he can’t come down on the price. Of course he can. He always does.” He takes a pin joint from Neil, hits it hard, then squeaks into the phone, “Give me a second.” It is at least another full minute before he exhales. Only a few smoky tendrils escape. “I’m back,” he says into the phone, but nobody is there. “Well, shit, how rude is that?”

“You always do that,” Neil says, “you take those giant hits and hold it for three days and wonder why people hang up. Now, can we get this done?” Neil drops two grams of tar heroin on the bunk between them. They remove the paper wrapping and begin breaking each gram into ten roughly equivalent pieces. In the free world, a tenth of a gram of heroin costs less than ten dollars. This, however, is prison. “We putting these out at eighty?”

“Seventy-five,” Sonny says. “The fiends’ll be coming in their pants. And the cop’s bringing in two more phones tomorrow.”

“Five hundred minutes each?”

“Yeah, but I think we can get six bucks a minute this time, so let’s do that.”

Neil nods, busy wrapping each little piece of tar in its own paper. Sonny does the same. They concentrate on their task, until Neil finally speaks. “You know the other day, when I got all jacked up?” Sonny nods without looking up. “I know that big dude, rolled in with the new fish.”

Sonny keeps wrapping, still doesn't look up. “You two got history?”

“His name's Crabtree.” Neil considers, then plunges in up to his neck. “He turned me out in Folsom, my third day there. Just turned seventeen.” Sonny looks up now. “He and two of his partners caught me in the gym bathroom. They held me while he beat my ass, then they shoved my boxers down my throat and took turns fucking me. He went back for seconds. When he was done, he stuck three fingers inside me and pulled them out and wiped my own shitty blood all over my face and, the whole time, he was laughing and telling me how fine I was. At the hospital, they had to snap both my shoulders back into place and put a pin in my elbow. They stitched up my face and my rectum and I pissed blood for two weeks.” Sonny is silent as he finishes wrapping his tiny packages. “By the time I got back out on the main line, he was transferred out. He's the reason I had to fight my fucking heart out those first couple of years. You know how that goes; everybody thinks they can do whatever and you have to show them they can't. Problem was, all that badassing got good to me and I was hardly out of the SHU the next eight or nine years. I finally figured out I had to change it up or I was gonna die a convict, so I did and I finally get my papers and now he shows up and...” He releases a long, sibilant breath. “I'm all fucked up.”

Sonny carefully arranges his little bundles in a straight line, counts them, looks up at him. “Those are the most words I ever heard come out of your mouth at one time.”

“I know, I'm fucking exhausted.”

“What do you want to do?”

“What do you think? I want to kill him. Matter of fact, I’d like to kill him twice; once for what he did and once for showing up now. But I got a job and a place to stay waiting for me and Jo’s hooked me up with some good people out there. I can be free for the first time since I was a teenager. How can I risk fucking that up?”

“I heard that.”

“But if I don’t light the cocksucker up, I don’t think I could live with myself. Thing is, I get caught and the soonest I’ll hit the streets will be the year 20-don’t- make- me- fucking- laugh. Besides, you know word’s gonna get out like it always does. I don’t make a move, the whole joint’s gonna figure I’m cake and then I’m gonna have to hurt some people just to protect myself and there goes my parole.”

“Those are some seriously fucked up choices, son.”

“What would you do?”

“Me? I’d probably cut his throat till his head flopped back the wrong way but I’m doing life without, so I can’t really speak to it. You’re gonna have to figure it out yourself but you better make a decision fast so we can come up with a plan.” He grins. “Either way, best get ready for some action.”

Neil shuts the door to Annie’s kennel, then closes his eyes and rests his head against the wire. After a few moments, he heads out of the building. As he passes Jo’s office, she looks up from her desk. “Neil, come in here a minute, will you?” He shambles in, slumps down onto the chair across from her. “You were out in space today. Are you feeling all right?”

Neil stares down at the floor. “I’m good.”

“You don’t look very good, especially for someone on his way out of here. You

have any interest in telling me what's going on?"

She waits. Finally, he looks up at her. "We've known each other a long time and I've always had a lot of respect for you. You've gone out on a limb for me with this job and I can't tell you how much that means. But what's going on with me, you can't help me with it." He stands. "I appreciate you taking an interest but I have to deal with this in my world, my way." He turns to leave, turns back. "I don't mean no offense."

Jo stands. "None taken." She extends her hand and Neil takes it. "I hope it works out."

"Yeah, you and me both."

Sonny, reading glasses perched on his nose, looks up from his crossword puzzle to see Neil in his cell doorway. "Just the man I'm looking for. What's a four letter word for salamander?"

"I'm greenlighting Crabtree."

"Whoa," Sonny says, closing his crossword book, "you sure about that?"

"The man's got to go before I do. That's all there is to it."

"You're positive."

"What did I just say? Jesus."

Sonny removes his glasses and, beaming with pride, gestures at Neil with them. "Now that is some straight convict shit right there. That's what being down is all about."

They stay off the yard for the next few days. Neil doubts Crabtree remembers him but he doesn't want to spook him. He and Sonny enlist a few of their homeboys to clock him, so they know where he is and what he does from first count to last.

They strategize in Sonny's cell the evening before the deed. "We only got about six or seven steps in that blind spot," Sonny says. "After that, every tower gunner and CO on the yard can see

us, so remember, when I roll up on his right...”

“I fucking remember, okay? I come up on his left, stab the shit out of him, hand the piece off to Petey... I’m all set. Square business, Sonny, I am ready, willing and able.”

Sonny stares hard at him. “You better be. It’s my ass on the line, too.” Then he grins. “Now, let’s just go out there tomorrow and have some fun.”

Sweat drips off Neil’s brow as he sits on the toilet in his cell. His stomach spasms; he clamps his lips shut and swallows the bile threatening to erupt. Pulling up his t-shirt, he wipes his clammy face with trembling hands.

He and Sonny breeze through the pre-yard frisk. They head toward the outside bathrooms housed in the brick structure near their end of the yard: walls, an open entry, no doors and no roof, so the tower gunner can see down into it.

“Don’t fuck around in there,” Sonny says. “Get it and come out.”

Neil nods; he doesn’t trust himself to speak. They reach the bathrooms and he goes inside, while Sonny keeps an eye out. Satisfied it is empty, Neil drops his pants, sits on a toilet. As the tower gunner scans another section of the yard, Neil quickly extracts a thin, six inch metal bolt from his ass. It is wrapped in cellophane and one end is sharpened to a wicked point. He peels the plastic off and pockets it.

He gives Sonny a tight nod and they head toward the worn track that hugs the walls. “There he is,” Sonny says. They intersect with the path behind several other small groups of men ambling along in Crabtree’s wake. Neil’s heart bangs against his ribs and he clutches the bolt so hard in his pocket his fingers cramp. He feels sick with adrenaline.

They pick up the pace. Neil’s mouth is bone dry and the spike feels hot in his hand. They move past the men ahead of them, their eyes fixed on Crabtree’s back. As he nears the blind

spot, they are twenty feet behind him, moving faster. Crabtree reaches the spot and Neil glances right, just in time to see a passing convict slip Sonny a shank. Sonny bolts ahead, yanks back on Crabtree's hair and saws into his throat. Blood geysers everywhere but he just keeps hacking.

A warning shot kicks up dirt. The tower booms a command for all inmates to get down. Sonny drops the knife and raises his hands as four COs swarm him. They flip him onto his stomach, into Crabtree's pooling blood, then cuff him behind the back with plastic ties. When they jerk him to his feet, his bloody face is wild, exultant. He spots Neil and locks eyes with his astonished friend, his only friend.

"What are they gonna do," he yells, laughing, as he is dragged away, "put me in prison?"