

STILETTO LIBRETTO

by BAVO DHOOGHE

Chapter 2

It would have been a lie to say that Roland Knox was looking forward to the day Jimmy got out. It was equally untrue that he would rather Jimmy stayed inside for a while. The truth was somewhere in between, namely that Roland couldn't give a fuck if, when or where Jimmy Hendricks was released. For him there was only one real Jimi Hendrix and that was the guitarist who sang about gypsy eyes and all those other things. When the other Jimmy sat down in front of him at one of his clubs on Wilshire Boulevard, L.A. on the day he got out, Roland couldn't do anything other than act as if he were pleased for him. And it was true. He was pleased for him. He was a bit less pleased for himself, though. Jimmy wasn't exactly his number one man. If he really had to pin a number on him, then Jimmy had to be something like – what, his number thirty-seven man seventeen times removed. To put it simply, Roland could do with Jimmy like a hooker could do with a hernia.

'You're looking good, Jim,' said Roland.

'Things are starting to work out,' said Jimmy. 'I've got some catching up to do. You didn't visit. I had kinda hoped you'd drop by'.

'Yeah? We're talking about Corcoran here'.

'So?'.

'Jimmy, if I had to go visit every guy who ever worked for me in the slammer then I'd have to organise an actual tour, with like an actual manager, man'.

'I know. I got myself into that mess'.

'Hey, what you get up to outside working hours is your own business'.

'I know. But I'd still hoped for a bit of moral support'.

'Support? I sent you a card, didn't I?'

'I was hoping for something more, after keeping my mouth shut all that time'.

'*Did you keep your mouth shut?*'

'Yeah, otherwise I'd have been sitting here before now; we'd already have had this conversation a year ago. They offered me all kinds of stuff, Roland, but I didn't go for it. I kept my yap shut'.

'Thanks, Jimmy. I appreciate the fact that you kept it zipped, man. Honest. I can really appreciate something like that. You kept yourself strong and didn't give in to that bunch of sissies' improper proposals. That takes balls and demands respect'.

'Well, all that's over and done with now,' sighed Jimmy.

'Yes, it's all over and done with,' said Roland, mentally rolling his eyes. What was he doing wasting time here with a mug like Jimmy Hendricks? He had a business to run. Christ, more than one business. He had a whole street of businesses to run and they ran best when Jimmy Hendricks stayed as far away from them as possible.

Just look at Roland sitting here now, in a salmon-coloured – not pink, but salmon-coloured – long-collared shirt without a tie under his Gucci suit, just like one of those two ultra-cool plastic surgeons in that series.

Roland hadn't missed this worm for a second. No, Roland definitely had better things to do. Like filling bags with coke, which he was doing now. He filled a couple of little hand-made silver-coloured bags and put them aside one by one.

'I became a father while you were inside, Jim'.

'Congratulations. Boy or girl?'

'It's another mouth to feed. That's what these sugared almonds are for'.

'Sugared almonds?'

'Yeah, a little something for a couple of acquaintances'.

'Oh, I get it'.

Roland carefully filled the bags with a spoon, the tip of his tongue between his teeth. He didn't spill anything. Without looking up from his work, he said,

'So, you've written a book'.

'Not any old book'.

'That's what they all say. What is it? A cookbook?'

Roland saw the sucker force a smile. He was curious to know whether Jimmy had the imagination to write a novel.

'I didn't know you could write'.

'I didn't know you could be so funny, Roland'.

'Have you got a... what you call it yet? A printer?'

'You mean a publisher? A book has to be accepted by a publisher first before it goes to the printer. There's a hell of a lot involved, man. You wouldn't believe it: they have to read it forwards and backwards first, and then they set up a team that...'

'Yeah, okay, I get it Jim. So you've already got all that? A publisher?'

'I've already got a publisher'.

'So why are you coming to me with that thing? Have they read it yet?'

'I only just got out, Roland. It generally takes three months for a publisher...'

'So they haven't read it yet'.

'Actually, I'd hoped you would come up with something there, Roland. You know, after everything I've done for you. Or rather, after everything I didn't say about you'.

Oh, no, not that bullshit. Roland tied a ribbon round a little bag of christening coke and weighed it carefully on a small pair of scales. He took off a couple of grams, like a butcher who's cut one slice of ham too many. All the time, he concentrated on the coke.

'What do think I am, Jimmy? Am I in the book business?'

'I gotta have guarantees'.

'Do I look like a publisher? I left school at sixteen and now I sell coke, smack and hookers. Have you ever, at any second in my life, for one moment seen me with a book? No. I only read fines and search warrants'.

'Okay, but you can give me guarantees, Roland'.

'What kind of guarantees? You're not expecting me to write you a reference, are you? The only guarantee I can give anyone is that I'll break his legs if he doesn't pay on time. But I don't suppose that was the kind of guarantee you had in mind. Or did you really think I'd put the pressure on some publisher because you'd like to be able to wear a sports jacket and autograph a couple of chicks' bellies? And by the way, Jimmy, if you're in it for the chicks, then I've got bad news for you. You chose the wrong profession. This is California, not Californication. At least I think so. I don't know a single writer and I know why. They're totally uninteresting people. Ask up on Hollywood Boulevard'.

'I'm talking about sales guarantees. You know how it works in that world, Roland. It's no better or worse than in yours. It's all about money. That book has to sell and preferably as many as possible. A bestseller would be great; after all, let's be honest I'm not exactly the next Steinway'.

Steinway? What was the little shit talking about? Wasn't that a make of piano or something? It did ring a bell for Roland, though. Jimmy must have meant some writer or other, but he was as incapable of remembering a name as he was one of Roland's shopping lists. Roland decided to hear the poor guy out; maybe that was the only thing he could do for him. He listened to Jimmy rattling on, throwing round terms that meant as much to Roland as stock market figures. Even before he went in the pen it was never easy to talk to Jimmy, but Roland always knew how to deal with him. He advised the guy on dead ordinary things, like how to dress, how to cut his hair to disguise the thinning patches at his temples, like that surgeon in the series did. But what was all this the prick was coming out with now? Roland couldn't give him any advice here. Even worse, he felt extremely awkward and missed the effect of playing the father. It was as if the world had been turned upside down and that wasn't the way it was supposed to be. He only half heard what Jimmy was saying.

'It'll just be this one. But if I can go to a publisher and give him a few figures for a kind of presales, then I'm already one step ahead. You don't think I can handle waiting three months for a publisher's opinion just to get a rejection

slip through the letterbox, do you? I can't take a psychological blow like that, Roland'.

'Oh sure, you can sit for a couple of years in a cell playing strip poker with a bunch of rapists, but you can't handle being rejected by a publisher?'

'I wasn't with the heavyweights in Corcoran, Roland. I'm no hardened criminal'.

Roland shrugged.

'You know what I mean, Roland. This is a new start for me. If this takes off, then I'm seriously thinking of giving up working for you. I'm not as young as I used to be. I want a more regular life, too. I understand this is maybe a heavy blow for you, but...'

At that point, Roland glanced up with interest. He even left the bag of christening dope his was filling half full and stopped working for a moment. Hmm, now things were getting interesting. A heavy blow? Hey, what the fuck, why not? He could play that game for a while. As long as it didn't mean he had to feel guilty or give that mug any golden handshake. Roland carefully licked his fingers, one by one, and hung a label with the baby's name on the last bag.

'Well, yeah, this really did come out of the blue,' lied Roland. 'Do you already have a name for that thing?'

'What, the book? Eh, sure. Lame Dogs Bite the Dust Faster.

'Is it autobiographical?'

'It could become autobiographical if I miss this chance, Roland. It's a challenge. A crossroads in my life'.

It could become autobiographical, thought Roland, if you go on working for me much longer and next week make such a fuck-up that you end up back in the slammer again. He knew Jimmy would never be able to pull the stunt he'd been pulling the past year twice in a row. He wouldn't be able to keep his trap so tight shut the second time around. No, if Jimmy got collared again in the future – and the possibility was greater than you'd think – then he'd be talking within the week once he got back inside. Talking about Roland Knox, talking about his job and about the nice christening coke he was giving out to his friends. So Roland sat

and listened to Jimmy's proposal, which was sounding increasingly like music to his ears.

'Suppose it becomes a bestseller,' Roland was daydreaming himself now. 'You'd become a real writer, Jim. You wouldn't have to bother with this bullshit here any more'.

Jimmy looked as if he was swallowing it, too. Roland saw him looking wistfully at the bags of christening coke. He picked up the half-empty bag and shoved it over to him.

'Here. A bit of extra inspiration'.

'Does that mean you'll do it? Lean on a couple of people to get a few orders? No snow or chicks this time, just paper. It'll be dead easy, Roland. With your background and your connections, you can have five thousand copies sold just like that before I've even set foot in a publisher's. They'll be impressed with this whole premarketing campaign'.

'I'll have to read it first, of course,' decided Roland, starting to fill bags again.

'Sure. But I'm happy to inform you that you're not in it'.

There was a moment's silence. When it became clear that Jimmy was expected to get up and leave, he picked up the bag and asked, 'So what was it then? A girl or a boy?'

'What's it to you?' was the reply. 'You're likely put it in a book'.

A week later, Roland Knox was sitting in a real office. He was in a leather chair in the not uncomfortable office of Mr Browning, prison governor by profession and, to be more precise, governor of Corcoran, the California State Prison that had had the pleasure of accommodating Jimmy Hendricks for a year. Browning leaned back in a slightly heavier chair behind his desk and stared at the bag of christening coke Roland had brought for him.

'Congratulations on the baby. May I ask whether it's a boy or a girl?'

'It's lucky to have a father like me,' said Roland.

'I understand you wanted to talk about another order. My secretary said something about a delivery of goods. What kind of goods might they be?'

'I heard from a friend - who's had the pleasure of staying here - that the library is no great shakes. What that friend of mine had actually expected was a cosy place with lots of books, but he was a bit disillusioned to find nothing but the same bullshit they have in the supermarket. You know: science fiction and audio books. He wanted to read something else for a change, like true-life facts or thrillers. But it seems you don't have that kind of thing. He thought it was really a shame, if not to say unjust'.

Mr Browning put his little finger in the bag, took out a bit of coke and snorted it. A shiver went through him. He was put off his stroke for a moment by the nature of the conversation. Roland Knox generally came to visit him – if he visited at all – to tell him about an inside job. Sometimes he came by to see where something had gone wrong in the white powder business. To check where the clot in the artery was that was blocking the way to the heart. After all, since its establishment in 1988, Corcoran had had the reputation of being the most 'lively' of all the thirty-two Californian prisons. Apart from the fact that the screws sometimes deliberately gunned down the wrong guy, they also had crazy days, like the Gladiator Days, when two inmates fought for their lives with drawn knives.

'Well, we can't have our visitors getting the wrong idea, of course. You must understand that. Before you know it, reality is trailing behind fiction. Who knows what's in all those books: background information, 100 ways to escape?'

'Yeah, well, all the same, my friend and I feel it's a pity the needs of the people here aren't taken into account. I mean, wouldn't it be a good idea to keep these animals quiet with a bit of reading? Maybe they wouldn't be slaughtering each other quite so often and making your life miserable. I mean, what was it they were talking about on the CBS Evening News a couple of years ago? About the prisoners here being abused by guards? I'm telling you: Put them in the corner with a book and you won't hear another peep out of them'.

'Well, to be honest I'd never thought about that'.

'Didn't think so. That's why I wanted to drop by'.

'It's actually a matter for the deputy governor. I can ask him to join us if you like'.

Browning was just putting the coke bag away and picking up the phone, when Roland's hand was on top of his like a flash.

'This is a matter for you, Browning. I'm talking to you'.

'Why all this sudden interest in the library? Has this got something to do with the goods?'

'Finally, the penny's dropped'.

Agonisingly slowly, Browning withdrew his hand from the receiver. The bag of coke, he'd already pocketed.

'I still don't get it,' said Browning. 'What do you need a library for? Is this some new way of smuggling the stuff in? That's it, isn't it? Where are you going to hide it? On the inside? In the boxes?'

'You still don't get it, do you, Browning?'

'I don't? Well what, then?'

'I'm talking about the books. About ordering one book. *Lame Dogs Bite the Dust Faster*. That's the title and, the way things are looking now, it's going to be a genuine bestseller. I shouldn't really be saying this, but you're getting a bargain; the thing will be sold out in a week. And then you can show off to your buddies at City Hall and the California Department of Corrections that you managed to get hold of a first edition, which will be worth a whole lot of money later. And that you've kept these swine here on the straight and narrow'.

Roland had to restrain himself from getting up and leaving the office and spending his time on really serious business, like interviewing the new consignment of Latino girls from Puerto Rico and New Mexico. But he'd promised Jimmy. And more than that, he'd promised himself. Just grin and bear it a little longer, pay a couple more calls to the institutions and that would be it. Jimmy would be gone, gone for good. Over the past few days, Roland had already done a round of four institutions and palmed off all four with a batch of that piece of shit *Lame Dogs Bite the Dust Faster*. The police recruitment library, the L.A. Central

Library, a school for difficult delinquents and some kind of sect based on Schrader Avenue. Roland had read the manuscript himself in three days. Diagonally. Roland was someone who didn't much like reading, but he was quite good at reading that way. The one led to the other. It did mean that he missed a couple of sentences on each page, though; that was the disadvantage of reading diagonally. He thought the book was written smoothly, but then smoothly the way a monkey might put down a few quick squiggles. The story wasn't so important; the main thing was, indeed, that it didn't have him in it. He could see Governor Browning still didn't understand.

'A book?'

'Yes. But not just any old book'.

'This must be a real special friend of yours,' said Browning, 'if you're putting yourself out to sell it so personally'.

'Ah, but it's a special book, too'.

'Okay,' said Browning, without blinking an eyelid. 'No problem. I'll pass the title on to the acquisitions department. We must have room for it somewhere on the shelf here. It's not as if the things get read from cover to cover every five minutes. Mostly they only get borrowed for hiding a weapon or jacking off in'.

'I appreciate it, Browning. I'll put you down for two hundred copies'.

Roland wrote down the order on a notepad, acting as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He knew Browning was surprised and his mouth was almost falling open.

'Two hundred copies?'

'Not enough? Shall I make it three hundred? Then I might be able to get you a discount'.

'Why two hundred?'

'That's the minimum order.'

'What on earth am I supposed to do with two hundred copies of a book?'

'You can lend them to two hundred men at the same time'.

'There are barely two hundred men here who can read'.

'You could use it to *teach* the others to read. Am I speaking Chinese or something, Browning? It's written very simply. You can hold a reading session once a week and get someone to read it out loud and next thing you know they'll want to know what happens next and they'll finish it. I've seen it happen before, you know. You just have to draw those guys out. Like at school. Maybe you think they're all hardened criminals and illiterates, but there are still other things than games and rap these days, I'm telling you'.

It was the same story he'd been trotting out all week. And he was beginning to get sick of it. Not much longer and he'd start believing it himself, too.

'I can't order two hundred copies of the same book just like that. It'll cost me almost four thousand... I've got a budget to keep to. I have to allow for the other costs, the wages, the...'

'I heard from another friend that there's another strike coming,' said Roland suddenly.

'Eh?'

'Yep, that other friend is staying here and he managed to let me know that there's not only a guards' strike coming but a group of guys are planning to create a bit of a disturbance, too. You know the kind of antics: Refusing to go back to their cells after exercising, climbing on the roof and playing the clown, maybe causing a little fire here and there, smashing the chow hall to pieces. You have no idea of all the things they're planning. How much does a chow hall actually cost? It'll soon add up to more than four thousand, surely? All I'm trying to say, Browning, is that maybe the strike and the disturbance are actually because the boys here are dissatisfied with the library. Maybe a new acquisition, *this* new acquisition, might just stop them going off their nuts like a bunch of gorillas. It could be a mark of respect. You know: you actually acknowledge the fact that they can read. That they can do so much more than beat each other up, pull a stiletto and deal blow. It could even get a couple of them on the straight and narrow for good. I've seen it before. A book can change somebody's life. Honest. One book. One life. You can play a significant role in their lives. A redeemer, a messiah. So, what do you say?'

It was quiet for a moment. Roland gave Browning a piercing look.
'Well, if you put it like that...'
'I'm telling it the way it is, Browning. You can do a good deed'.
Roland had already stood up and walked to the door when he was called back.
'I'll take four hundred,' said Browning.
'Four hundred. You don't have to go over the top, you know. I don't want to put you under any pressure'.
'You can put me down for four hundred pieces'.
'Okay, four hundred it is, then'.
'I'll get rid of them one way or another'.
Roland smiled, his hand on the door.
'You want them signed or unsigned?'

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