

You Always Pay

By Pat Lambe

The whore giggled as Donovan sniffed the cocaine off the pockmarked space between her breasts. I knew they were pockmarked because my face had been there an hour ago, before me and Donovan had pulled the old switcheroo.

The other whore looked up from painting her toenails at the base of the twin bed we were lying on and said to me, "I know you."

"I hope so, I just finished fucking you."

She put down the nail polish and crawled the length of the bed toward me, placing her face close to mine. "You're that wrestler, right. My boyfriend used to watch you on 'Grapplers Galley' every Monday night."

Donovan sat up and inadvertently propelled his whore into the valley between the hotel beds. I would never have sex in front of any other man besides Donovan, but we had already seen each other naked in the showers hundreds of times after wrestling practice in high school, so I said what the hell when had suggested picking up the hookers.

Besides, we were ahead of schedule, and the wrestling groupie I usually banged when I was in the Ocean City area was out of town for the day.

"That's him babe, Richard Dukevsky; Duke Dick, scourge of the squared circle," Donovan said.

I hadn't been in a ring for nearly six months, and if this deal worked out with Donovan, I would never have to endure the humiliation again.

"I've never been with somebody famous before," the whore said, right before she kissed me.

"I've never been kissed by a whore before," I said as she adjusted herself and straddled me.

"You mean besides your mother," Donovan said, laughing just as hard as did the first time he had made that joke, when we were in third grade, before either of us understood it.

The whore took me inside her and I felt her muscles tense as she rode me up and down. It wasn't like being with a girlfriend, but it wasn't quite like being with a whore either.

I suspected I was in trouble when Calhoun Lounighan called me into corporate headquarters for a little face time. Actually, I knew I had problems before the meeting; when I strutted down the aisle leading into the ring and no-body booed or spit at me.

The best wrestlers, the ones who make the big money and get the choice pay per view matches, are the ones who are the most hated.

I'd been a bad guy since day one, using foreign objects, (my favorite being a post office box) ambushing my opponents and beating them unmercifully after being defeated in fair combat, bouncing chairs off referees heads when they had their backs turned: the usual stuff.

A fan had actually climbed into the ring, and tried to pull me off my archenemy Virgil 'the American Standard' Kent. We'd laughed about it while doing lines of coke riding in the limo to our next gig. I actually took it easy on the misguided asshole when Cal had hired him for a rematch instead of pressing charges against him.

Calhoun had recently bulked up in preparation for his debut match against Virgil, who'd turned bad guy. The fans had fueled their hatred from me to Virgil after he'd turned on me when we had teamed up as a tag team against some mutual enemies. He kidnapped my buxom manager/girlfriend; who was actually a lesbian 'actress' leaving the wrestling circuit because she figured she could make more money in lesbo porn.

I knew my career was over when a fan sent a bouquet of flowers and a sympathy card to my hotel room.

Cal pushed a folder across the length of his desk towards me. I opened it and saw the standard ADP check envelope on top of an official looking medical form.

"Sorry about this Duke, but the tests came back positive."

"That's fucking impossible. I have never once in my entire career used any type of steroid."

"The tests didn't come back positive for steroids. It was coke."

"Coke? Your doctor didn't say anything about testing for coke. I thought it was just for 'roids."

"Our insurance costs more than the gross national products of some small countries. I have to release you from your contract. The insurance people aren't giving me a choice."

"And this sudden random drug test had nothing to do with the fact that the fans have suddenly began to like me? How're you going to write me out of the storyline Cal?"

"I didn't have to give you anything Duke, but you've been good to me over the years."

I ripped open the envelope and read the numbers on the check. It would be enough for me to live a couple of months if I gave up eating and quite my gym membership.

"You're what, a couple of years over fifty Cal. You put on the muscle pretty quick for your fight. I'd borrow some piss from your kid if I was you. I hear that if you place it in a baggie under your arm, run a tube down your side and attach it to your dick it stays pretty warm."

The fucker couldn't even meet my eyes when I threw the folder with the medical report at him, after I folded up the check and placed it in my suit pocket.

I heard Donovan talking to the girl in low whispers when I woke up just before dawn. In an unprecedented event, the whores had decided to spend the night with us, without charging anything extra. I guess my half-assed version of fame was paying off.

"I'm telling you honey, me and Duke have a plan. We've got a fortune in that truck parked outside and that's just a test run. We're talking about making a killing on a regular basis here."

I propped myself up on my whore and stared Donovan down.

“Forget about what I just said, I’m a little stoned, shooting my mouth off to impress a beautiful girl,” Donovan said as he avoided my eyes.

There were two Indian guys involved with the deal, the Curry Indian guy who managed the distributing company in Jersey, and the War Paint Indian guy who handled things on the reservation in Florida.

Donovan had met the Seminole in Florida when he moved down there for a brief period after high school. Donovan still stayed with him whenever he returned to attend the biker rally in Dayton.

They had inadvertently wound up on the same side of a bar fight during one of the biker rallies; and they had done one job together, knocking over a funnel cake stand on the boardwalk. When I say knocking it over that’s literally what I mean. Donovan noticed the owner/operator of the stand usually forget to empty the cash register if he had been drinking. Donovan became a regular at the stand, buying several funnel cakes a week, washing them down with beer wrapped in a small paper bag. One day he bought a flask in and shared it with the owner.

Donovan and the Seminole waited until 3 am before they tried to break into the stand. After more than a half hour of trying, Donovan tied a chain around the small establishment and pulled it over with his pick up truck. Their efforts had yielded them \$275.00 each, and enough funnel cake and soda to feed them for a week.

The Curry Indian guy was my contact. I wanted to hold onto the money Cal had given me, so I answered an ad in the paper for a fork lift driver’s position at a distribution company on Jersey Avenue in New Brunswick. I knew how to drive one from my early days in the wrestling business, before I was fairly well known and had to help set up and take down the ring. It was the only job I was qualified for, besides running around in my underwear beating the shit out of people.

The curry Indian guy distributed all kinds of things to bars and restaurants, but his big money came from cigarette sales. His business was way down because of the sales of cigarettes from Indian nations through the internet. The white man, in some misguided show of guilt, had decided that Indian tribes could sell cigarettes without tacking on any money for taxes. These sales didn’t apply to bulk distributors and were generally held to a couple of cartons per purchase. The Indians had discovered the internet and put on the war paint in html.

Donovan and I got to talking about our Indian guys when met at the Court Tavern for a couple of beers after another mindless day of work. Donovan had just been released from a three-day stint in jail. He’d been laid off at his job as a mechanic at a bus company in Newark, but he didn’t let the disagreement with management prevent him from doing his job.

He made a copy of the keys before they laid him off. Arriving at the bus yard before the company opened in the morning, he’d park himself behind the wheel of one of the buses that was marked down as in the shop for repairs. He’d place a sign on the fare box that says it’s broken you have to pay the driver, and he would drive a route from Newark to the Short Hills Mall pocketing the passenger’s cash.

He'd do one; two runs a day then sneak the bus back in when the mechanics were on their lunch break. The only way they caught him is because he was on time a little too often. He had \$32.34 in bills, quarters and dimes when they arrested him. Luckily for Donovan, the owners of the bus company refused to press charges. They let him sit in jail for a few days but I guess they felt guilty about laying him off.

Donovan's Indian guy could get us the cigarettes in bulk and my Indian guy assured me he could get rid of them. They would doctor the paper work on each end of the deal. My separation money from Cal would provide the bulk of our up front money, and Donovan and I would split the driving and the grunt work.

We caught a coach flight from Newark on a Saturday afternoon in January. I used up the last of my frequent flier miles I had accumulated in my years of traveling with the wrestling league.

The Seminole met us as a self-storage place on the edge of a swamp. We pulled the rental truck up to the unit after we'd punched in the code he had given us. Donovan forgot to write the number down. He remembered the numbers but not their order, so we had to go through a series of four digit variations until he lucked out on the right combination.

The Seminole had a Harley parked outside of the roll up door. He kept an eye on me as he and Donovan hugged each other.

I handed him the cash after we shook hands. He had a team of Mexican day laborers with him who carted the cigarettes from the storage unit to the back of the truck.

"We didn't say anything about using labor to load up the truck," I said, watching their progress.

The Indian glared at Donovan, pissed off. "Of course we did. I talked to Donovan three days ago and explained to him the faster we loaded up the truck the better. We agreed to use Mexicans who didn't speak too much English."

I would have to talk to Donovan about this later. We'd agreed to go over any changes, no matter how small or insignificant seeming in relation to our deal. I was angry with him, but wanted to put up a show of solidarity in front of this guy that I really didn't know.

"I guess that's a pretty good idea," I said.

"I haven't seen you on the Monday night wrestling events recently." The Indian strolled up next to me and leaned against the storage unit.

"I had a problem with management."

"Do you still keep in touch with the wrestlers?"

"Some of them."

"Come over here to my bike, I've got something to show you."

He pulled out a small duffle bag from one of the voluminous saddlebags straddling the back fender of his bike, handed it to me. I unzipped it and saw a large number of orange prescription drug containers.

"I hear wrestling is a painful way to make a living," the Indian said.

I picked one of the containers open and read the label: a prescription for codeine.

“I ran into these almost by accident. I can’t unload them here. I don’t have the contacts. I figure a guy who has a number of friends in chronic pain...”

It had been years since I had ridden a bike, but the Indian’s Harley handled well enough as I drove it around the hot Florida sun gathering the money to buy the codeine. I had to hit four ATM machines because I kept reaching the maximum cash withdrawal limit.

We were halfway through Georgia when the smell of cheap grade marijuana woke me out of a sound sleep. I looked around the cabin of the truck and finally focused on Donovan, an idiot grin on his face, a loosely rolled joint in his mouth, seeds spilling out the end onto the floor.

“Pull over Donovan, I have to take a piss,” I said.

I grabbed the joint out of his mouth the second he had stopped the momentum of the truck on the shoulder of the highway, crumpled it up, rolled down the window, and threw it out.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“If you were a Georgia state trooper and you pulled over a guy with tattoos, a Harley t-shirt and liquid shit for brains, smoking a joint in the cabin of an out of state rental truck, what would you do?”

“We have all this paperwork on the cigarettes, and you know I never carry more than personal use after the last time I got busted. It can’t be more than a fine. You know I’d tell them you had nothing to do with the pot.”

“Those shipping papers don’t look so good to me, and you don’t think the cops would just search the cabin without taking a look in the back? You’ve got to start using your head a little bit Donovan.”

He looked away from me, stared at the center of the steering wheel with the half feigned look of humility he used whenever he fucked something up since we were in the third grade. I must have seen this expression a hundred times, and it always had the same effect on me.

“Listen Donovan; maybe I’ve overreacted a little, but we’ve got to be careful. If we do this right we can turn it into a long term deal.”

“I know Rich. I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.” He must have felt bad, calling me by my first name.

“I’ve reconsidered your suggestion about stopping to see your buddies in Ocean City. I had figured we’d spend a half a day loading up the truck by ourselves, and we’re making good time. Maybe we could spend a couple of days getting a load on.”

Donovan pulled the truck back into traffic. “We’ll have a great time with my biker buddies. I’m sure they can set us up with some high quality blow. We’ll shoot some pool and have a couple of drinks, relax. You’ll like them.”

Donovan introduced his biker buddy as Chaindog. Chaindog had called Donovan Donleavy; and despite Donovan’s assurance that I would like him, I didn’t.

I joined Donovan and his buddies at a booth after I had lost a round of pool. The conversation died before I took a seat, but I had definitely heard cigarettes and truck in the same sentence.

I followed Donovan to the far end of the bar when it was his turn to buy a round. “How well do you know these guys Donovan?”

“We’re buds Duke. They were at the camp site next to me at Sturges last year. We partied hard my friend.”

“You just met them last year at a biker rally? The fucking guy Chaindog didn’t even remember your name, and you’re shooting your mouth off about our set up.”

“Chaindog had my back when I almost got into it with a couple of rednecks at a bar out there. I can trust him. You’re overreacting, have a couple of drinks and lighten up.”

I glanced back at the booth, trying unsuccessfully to catch Chaindog’s eye.

“If you want me to feel any better maybe you can tell me his real name.”

“As far as I know, Chaindog is his real name.”

And I was the one saddled with the Polish last name.

I knew the guy was serious well before he stuck the gun barrel in my mouth. They had broken down the motel door at some ungodly hour the night after we were with the whores. There were three of them, each wearing a black ski mask, two with shotguns, one with an automatic and an attitude.

They tied Donovan and me back to back in two chairs, attaching our heads together with duct tape - an economic move on their part: they could kill us both with one shot from the automatic.

“Key,” the guy with the automatic said; the only thing any of them said. He pulled the gun out of my mouth just long enough for me to say, “Bible, Revelations.”

One of the guys with the shotgun grabbed the Gideon by the covers and shook it upside down over the desk until we hear the metallic cling of the key hit the fake wood veneer.

The first thing Donovan said, after we had cut the duct tape from our mouths, was “Why didn’t you stall them a little. We could have gotten rid of them if you’d kept your cool.”

“They stuck a gun in my mouth. I can still taste the fucking metal.”

“What time does the car rental agency open up Duke? We’ve got to get an early start if we’re gonna get those guys.”

“What the hell are you talking about Donovan? Getting those guys, are you out of your fucking mind? They had guns and they knew how to keep their mouths shut. We’re not getting those guys.”

“I guess we can just write the money off on our taxes,” Donovan said, his anger building.

“Our taxes Donovan? Most of the money was mine.”

“Well, I’m going after those fucking guys. You were right Duke, I didn’t really know Chaindog and his boys too well. I’m going to get to know those fucking thieves a whole lot better over the next couple of days. I can’t believe you’re just gonna sit there and let those scumbags get away with our load, after all the shit we’ve been through over the years.”

We must have argued for a couple of hours because it was almost nine a.m. by the time I made my decision. I told Donovan to walk up the highway to the car rental place while I took a short nap. It would take him about an hour and give him some time to cool his head and maybe use it for something else besides a pillow rest for once in his life

I waited ten minutes, then went into the bathroom and removed the ceiling tile to retrieve the duffle bag I’d hidden there the night before. I took it from the truck after Donovan collapsed into a drunken sleep.

I called a cab from the hotel phone and ducked down in the back as we passed Donovan on the first steps to a beating he was destined to receive from the hands of his biker buddies when he made his baseless accusations against them.

I didn’t want to see my buddy get the shit kicked out of him, but I was pretty sure the bikers wouldn’t treat him as badly as the whore’s boyfriend and his shotgun wielding buddies; the guys who had broken into our room and stuck a gun in my mouth. I had seen a tattoo on the guy’s forearm, a badly inked rendering of the logo of the wrestling organization I used to work for.

I guess I had paid for that last fuck from the whore. We had both paid, Donovan and me; but I was through paying with interest compounded by Donovan’s motorcycle-callused hands.

Pat Lambe has had short stories in various web sites and magazines, as well as short stories in the Plots with Guns anthology and the upcoming Dublin Noir anthology due out in March from Akashik Books. My short story 'Union Card' was listed as a distinguished mystery story in The Best American Mystery Stories of 2005. I'm currently working on a novel and hope to make enough money to invest in a compound in Montana and a harem or two.

<http://patlambe.com>

patlambe@patlambe.com