

Trouble Will Find Me

A Jeep Mabry Fracas

by

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Jeep Mabry found Renfro back of his Pulleys Mill farmhouse, just done burying something in the soft earth. Renfro was small, hollow chested and cheeked. Skinny also. Almost skeletal. A stiff wind would eat his lunch and make him buy a candy bar for dessert. He'd been a low-miner for a while, a scratchback man. Jeep liked him good enough. He was shirtless. When he saw Jeep coming, he scrubbed the back of his wrist across his forehead. It left a dirt track in the sweat. Shoveling was strenuous work, even a small grave, as this looked to be. He secured the tip of his spade in the mound of clay atop the new grave and walked to meet Jeep and shook his hand.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"What's the story?"

"Neighbors again. Rambo and that crew."

"I thought they'd cleared out," Jeep said. "I thought the cops moved them along."

Renfro nodded. He pulled a pack of smokes from his jeans and shook one out. He put it in his mouth and lit it with a lighter from another part of his jeans. He offered Jeep the pack. Jeep didn't smoke, but he liked Renfro and didn't want him to die of cigarettes, so he took one and put it behind his ear. One less coffin nail.

"Did," Refro was saying. "For a while. Cops came. Rambo and his guys skedaddled. Cops went away. Rambo and his guys come back. Couple weeks later. Got right back to doing their thing, cookin that meth."

Jeep nodded. He thought. He was a slow thinker, careful. He liked to look at all the angles. Into the blind spots. Because there were always blind spots.

Finally, he said, "Call them again."

"The cops?"

"Yeah. The cops. The sheriffs. Whoever. The meth taskforce guys. They come, clear the house out again. Maybe this time Rambo and his guys get the message."

Renfro shook his head.

"We're beyond cops at this point," he said. "Way beyond cops."

Jeep nodded. He thought some more. He looked at Refro and then behind him at the little grave and the shovel sticking out of it.

He said, "What were you burying just now?"

"My kid's dog," Refro said. "Rambo killed her dog."

They'd had a shouting match, Renfro and Rambo and one or two of the others. A dude called Moon and another guy. Travis maybe. Refro wasn't sure. Travis-Maybe wasn't around enough to become familiar. Not like the others. Not like Rambo.

He knew it was a mistake, too, the shouting match. But it'd been a long bad day. Bills. Headaches. His vehicle on the fritz. The usual. Life being a bitch. And then he'd come home to find Rambo and Moon and Travis-Maybe and some of the others discharging weapons at a steel tank they'd dug up somewhere and decided to use for target practice. Pigtail tank, it was. An old kerosene pot, maybe. Bullets hit something like that, it's not like a soft tree stump or an earthen berm. They hit steel, they fly off in all directions. Left, right, up, down. Toward Renfro's house even. His kids. Two girls: Sandee and Maybell. Renfro's wife was dead. He was raising the girls on his own. Like Jeep's friend Slim was doing with his kid, Anci. Except there wasn't no Peggy in Renfro's life to lend a hand. So he'd gotten hot under his collar and shouted some shit at them. Called then names. Told them to go fuck their mamas. Threatened them with law. The next morning, he awoke and came downstairs and outside and there on the front porch was Maybell's dog, shot full of bullets and strung up by one leg with a bit of motorcycle chain.

And there was a note, pinned to the dog's fur: "We used this instead."

Jeep said, "You got an axe handle?"

Jeep liked Renfro. They'd worked together once or twice in the past, and Renfro was a good work buddy. He didn't talk too much. Jeep appreciated that. He liked words

good enough, just not by the bucket. He liked Sandee and Maybell even more. They were good kids. Sweet. He didn't want them to grow up without a daddy, even a hollow-chested one like Renfro.

They walked around the house together, Renfro carrying the spade. They went into a toolshed. Renfro put the spade on some pegs in the wall, the way you might mount a hunting gun. There was a muck bucket in the corner with some axe handles in it.

Renfro said, "Hickory or composite?"

"Hickory."

Renfro handed him the axe handle. Composite was fine, but there wasn't anything better than a hickory axe handle for laying out some justice. Jeep felt the weight of it in his hand: hard and reassuring and, basically, foolproof. A good tool.

Renfro said, "You sure you don't want a gun? They have guns. Rambo and them."

"I don't plan on killing them."

Renfro looked away then suddenly. He wanted them dead, Jeep knew. They'd killed Maybell's dog, made her cry, maybe made him cry, too. They'd taken something from him, and he wanted it back, but he didn't know how to get it. That's where Jeep came in.

Renfro looked at him again.

"You got a plan?"

"I got a plan."

"Well, what is it?"

“I’m going to beat the dog shit out of them.”

Rambo’s house was just east of Renfro’s Pulleys Mill farmhouse. A quarter mile maybe. Not far. The two residences shared an access road, gravel once but now mostly dirt and potholes, then split further up the way. There was a patch of chinquapin oak and something else. Coneflower, maybe. Jeep wasn’t sure. Slim would know. He knew that kind of thing. Jeep usually had to guess.

It was a warm early fall day, and Rambo and his guys were in the yard in front of the house. Lounging, catching rays, sucking suds. That kind of thing. Country-fried assholes in their native environment. Probably it smelled like meth inside, and they didn’t want to be stuck in there, assuming they even noticed. There was a boom box playing some music. Heavy metal something. Jeep didn’t recognize it. His own taste ran to country, but he tried to be open minded, and the metal sounded okay. Anyway it was a soundtrack he could live with. There were four of them. Or five. Moon was there, a fat man with a short red beard and pale skin. Three others Jeep didn’t recognize. They weren’t much bigger than Renfro, so unless they were carrying, they weren’t going to be a problem.

Rambo was going to be a problem. He was pumping iron. He was on his back on a black vinyl bench with a catch-rack and a barbell stacked with dull iron weights and a pair of cinder blocks because at some point the iron weights weren’t enough. Rambo was huge. Much bigger than Jeep, who himself was pretty damn big. He had arms roped with veins as thick as Jeep’s pinkie and a shaved head that might have been cut from

bronze. His size combined with the upward travel of the barbell was forcing the vinyl weight bench deeper and deeper into the soft earth of the front yard. If Jeep waited long enough, he might disappear altogether.

He didn't wait. He walked up to them. Moon noticed him first. He stepped forward out of the group with a shit-eating smile on his face. He looked at the axe handle some, too. Then he shrugged his fat shoulders as though to dismiss the sight of the handle and swigged at a can of Coors.

"Hey, there, partner," he said. "We ain't open for business yet today. Maybe later."

"I'm not a customer," Jeep said.

"You ain't?"

"No."

"What then?"

Jeep pointed the handle at his chest. The sternum. It didn't quite touch. A half-inch away maybe. Moon smiled at it. He sipped at his beer again. The sound it made said: empty can incoming. There was a pile of empties around his feet where he'd dropped them. The weights on Rambo's bench went clank clank clank.

"You assholes killed a dog the other day. A little kid's dog."

"Did we?"

"I like dogs."

The weights stopped clanking. Rambo sat up on his bench, wiped his big bald head with a grey towel that had probably started out white.

He said, "We got a problem over here?"

Moon didn't look back at him. His mouth twisted to the side of his face a little, but his eyes stayed on Jeep.

"Someone from the neighbor. Renfro. Still steamed about the other day."

Rambo said, "Muscle?"

Moon said to Jeep, "Fair to call you muscle?"

Jeep shrugged. "I guess."

Moon said to Rambo through a sideways mouth, "Muscle."

Rambo got off his bench. You could practically hear it sigh in relief. He tried to drop the towel on it but missed and it landed in the dirt and patches of grass gone badly to seed. Noted: Rambo and the boys didn't do lawn care.

He stalked over to where Moon and Jeep were standing. He was so yoked, it was like he wasn't able to move his arms and hips independently of his massive trunk. His hands looked like flanged basketballs, and his neck was nearly as big around as Renfro's entire body. The dude barely looked human. He came very close to Jeep and stood there staring down at him, a head taller. Seven-foot-one, Jeep guessed. A monster.

"Now what is it you say you're doing here, boy?"

Jeep said, "I'm serving an eviction notice."

"That so?"

"Yeah."

Rambo smiled a little. His teeth were black, purple, and yellow and seemed to have been melted with a TIG welder. He glanced at Moon and snorted, and Moon

obliged by snorting in reply. The other guys were holding back, watching the show but staying cool and keeping distance. Probably keeping minimum safe from Rambo was a good policy.

He said, "And what if we don't want to go?"

"Want's got nothing to do with it. Want's irrelevant. You're going. End of story."

"That so?" Rambo said again. "Well..."

Jeep liked words good enough, just not by the bucket. Anyway, he'd already talked more to Rambo than he'd planned to.

He hit him with the axe handle, bringing it up hard and flat with his right hand. The sound was like a Major League fastball smashing a bank of fluorescent lights. The hickory club struck Rambo right in the teeth, sent him staggering backward in pain and shock. Jeep used that instant to take out Moon, who was standing there gasping, his fat mouth open. Jeep took two steps to his left, struck Moon a solid blow on the outside of his right knee and broke it cleanly. Moon howled and sank to the ground. Jeep stomped on his right hand, bringing his reinforced boot heel down just above the knuckles, where the palm meets the fingers, breaking them in several places. Moon didn't know which part of himself to grab first. He screamed.

By which point Rambo had recovered. He spat a tooth away from his lower lip. His spit was pink with blood. He centered himself, charged toward Jeep. The fury was coming off him in waves.

Too angry. Too fast. His emotions had got the better of him, and Jeep made him pay. Rambo overran him, tried to twist back around, but he slid in the grass and

overextended his left leg behind him. Jeep swung the handle, broke his collarbone then swung again and broke his right knee. Rambo fell to the ground howling.

Jeep said, "I'm giving you a chance here, son."

Rambo didn't want the chance. Somehow he lunged off the ground, using his unbroken leg to thrust his massive bulk forward and toward Jeep. The boy was a science experiment gone badly insane. There was a knife in his hand now. He swung it at Jeep's belly.

This changed things. He hadn't wanted to use lethal force, but Rambo was pressing the issue. The boy swung again and again. The knife's blade whistled. It had a wide, flat blade that hooked up cruelly at the end. A flensing knife, Jeep realized. Odd choice.

A bad choice, too. Rambo leapt forward, the knife swinging wide. Jeep stepped back just as the hooked blade snagged in the front of his jacket, in the placket behind the brass buttons. It caught there. Rambo tugged at it then stepped up to create some slack and release the hold.

Jeep pulled the piece from the back of his jeans and shot him in the head. Rambo's eyes looked at him suddenly and Jeep shot him again. The boy dropped to the earth, straight down like he'd stepped off the side of a cliff.

Moon said, "Jesus fucking Christ."

"I tried to warn him."

Moon looked at Jeep, at the body, he seemed uncertain what to say.

So Jeep said, "Here's what: You and your boys are going to take this body somewhere. I don't care where. Bury it. Sink it. Feed it to pigs. Your call. I'm coming back here tomorrow. If you're here, if any of you are here, I'm going to kill everyone of you."

Moon nodded, speechless. Jeep took that as a yes. He turned and walked back down the hill and across the property and back up to Renfro's place. Renfro was smoking behind the house.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Pretty well," Jeep said.

He drove home then. The little house at Crenshaw Crossing, near the abandoned strip mines. His wife was there, Opal, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He told her everything that had happened, omitting nothing. He never lied to her. It disrespected her and dishonored himself. So he didn't do it.

She listened to his story and frowned a little and finally said, "He killed a dog?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess he deserved it, didn't he?"

"I sure thought so."

He woke up the next morning and made the trip back to Pulleys Mill. He didn't stop in to see Refro this time. There wasn't anything left to say. He parked and walked up to Rambo's place and looked around some and even went inside. Nobody there.

Satisfied, he went back to his truck and got the gas can and came back and burned the house to the ground. When it was at the foundation line, he got in his truck and drove toward home again. He switched on the radio. A song came on, a country tune, one he knew. An old classic. He sang.