

Meat Hook

By David D. West

Blood plinked to the ground as the pig swung from the meat hook. Its skin sloughed off as I cut, draping down to cover its head in a veil shielding it from the horrors to come. Nothing unusual for a butcher's shop, but this swine's brethren would squeal if they could see what I was doing to their fallen brother. What he would become after I broke him down into chops, roasts, bacon ends, and a variety of other cuts. Knowing they were destined for a similar fate.

Used to be I would process a pig twice a week, a beef every other week. Last few months, business slowed down to a crawl and I was lucky to peddle what little meat I did. Not any fault of my own, of course. Everyone in town was feeling the squeeze.

As if summoning the very scourge of the city, a red light lit up above the door to the shopfront and a buzzer sounded throughout the cold room. My hand slipped at the interruption, cutting too deep into a flank and ruining a prime cut of meat. I cursed, mourning the loss of profit at having to chuck the piece into the grinder.

My wife is usually able to handle things in the front, but Tuesday's are a different story. No matter how slow of a week we've had, I can always count on at least one visitor on Tuesday. I opened the door to find my only consistent regular, Roy, leaning against the front counter. The cash register was open in front of Lydia and she was pulling out wads of bills. Neither of them heard me enter the room.

"How much is it this week?" Lydia asked, irritated.

"You're in luck, Mrs. Carlson," he said. Roy pushed away from the counter and started to peruse the meats lined up in the cold case. A finger thicker than my finest sausages pressed

against the glass, giving me even more work to do. “If you send me away with two of these steaks here, we can call it an even \$600. The missus needs a little winin’ and dinin’, and you always have the best cuts.”

“Much appreciated, Roy.” I stepped into the room.

The man perked up when he saw me, as if I was the favorite part of his Tuesday routine. “Mr. Carlson! Got anything fresher in the back? If’n you hook me up real nice, I could even cut it down to \$550 for ya.”

My eyes flashed to Lydia. She shrugged, two fistfuls of dollars pilfered from the register. Not nearly enough to cover Roy’s demands, even with the discounted price.

“How much you got there, hun?”

Lydia counted. “Just under \$300.”

Roy straightened and put his hands on his hips. The man stood a good foot taller than me and weighed at least three hundred pounds. If I ever found the opportunity to hang him from my meat hooks and separate his skin from the tender victuals hiding beneath the surface, I would not hesitate to parcel him out and hide the remains among the cold cuts.

A pit in my stomach. We’ve been short a few times, and it’s never ended well.

“Give us a second, would you, Roy?”

He nodded his head as I led Lydia through the door into our office. The inside was decorated with a few certificates from the health department, family photos, a square wooden desk pushed against the wall, and a staircase leading into our flat upstairs. Business this demanding, you can never get far.

“How much is in the safe?” I asked Lydia. Roy would hear our whole conversation through the paper thin door, but not much could make this situation worse. I knelt beneath the desk, opened a drawer, and started unlocking our safe.

Lydia sat down on the steps. “Aren’t you tired of this?”

The safe squeaked open. “Tired of what?”

“Giving them every dime we make.”

Understatement. I rooted through a few important documents in the safe, but couldn’t find more than another hundred dollars in cash. “Did you make the deposit already?” I asked, turning to her.

My wife slapped her palms against her thighs and stood up. “There was no deposit to make. We haven’t turned a profit in months, and now we’re actively paying them just to do our business here. I mean come on, \$600 this week, when just last month it was only \$400? And what good are they doing us anyway?”

I didn’t want to think about what happened to the last business that didn’t pay up.

“What other option do we have, babe?”

My wife emasculated me with the mix of emotions in her eyes. I built this business from nothing, and now it was slowly being dismantled by my very hand. If I never paid that first payment, no matter what repercussions came of it, maybe those fucks would have just left us alone. Put the squeeze on the rest of the neighborhood to recoup their losses. Lydia, understandably, was losing all faith in me.

“Way I see it,” she said, voice low so no interlopers could eavesdrop, “we can either pack and get the fuck out of here, or you man up and tell them you aren’t going to pay. But you got us into this, so I expect you to find a way out of it.”

I nodded. I really didn't see any other way out of the situation either.

"All right," I said. "Take that money there," I pointed to the wad of money still in Lydia's hand, "and stick it in the safe. They've got their last payment from us, as long as I'm still living."

I expected a different response from Lydia. Instead of showing renowned affection at my growing a spine, she pursed her lips and deposited the money as I asked.

"Wait here," I said, and left the room.

Roy wasn't leaning against the counter where we left him, but was standing in the entrance to my shop, holding the door open. With his arm up like that, I could see a pistol holstered to his side. The combination of his changed demeanor and the weapon told me Roy heard our choices and I knew I chose wrong.

His voice lost its usual playfulness and took on a tone of regret.

"Right this way, Mr. Carlson."

Through the door, a black car idled with its backdoor open.

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Roy sat in the backseat with me, saying nothing and answering none of my questions as the expressionless driver chauffeured us through the city. My phone rang, Lydia wondering where the hell I went, but Roy snatched it away before I could answer.

Half-an-hour after my abduction, the car pulled into the empty parking lot of a used furniture store. "Always wondered where you operated out of," I said.

Still silent, Roy pulled me out of the car and led me to the building. A bell, the same sound as the one in my shop, chimed when the door pushed open. A young man walked out of a back room, dressed in a button up shirt and a shit-eating grin plastered to his face.

"Welcome in!" he called.

Nothing looked out of the ordinary here. Rows of couches and sectionals, mattresses and dressers, created a maze through the room, but it looked like any other furniture store I'd ever seen. Were they all fronts for gang activity? I mean, how in-demand was furniture that it could keep a place like this afloat.

The worker weaved through the labyrinth like he'd done it a thousand times before, never blinking or letting his smile waver as he made his way to me. When the gap finally closed, he shook my hand, grabbing it with both of his.

"I'm Desmond," he said, customer service voice in full effect. "Roy, you mind letting us be for a while?"

Roy grunted and acquiesced, the doorbell ringing again as he exited.

"Mr. Carlson, the butcher, right?" Desmond asked. Before I could respond, he turned around and motioned for me to follow him. "Come, have a seat."

Instead of leading me back into whatever served as an office, we sat in a pair of recliners that faced each other over a modest coffee table. Desmond flipped the lever and kicked his feet up, but I was too on edge to do anything other than sit on the edge of my seat.

"Roy tells me you no longer want to pay your protection. Correct?"

"I'm sorry," I said, confusion getting the best of me. "Desmond. Who exactly are you?"

"Oh come on." He waved my question away. "You know who I am and why you're here. Looks can be a little deceiving, I know, but we come in all shapes and sizes."

Desmond must have worked in customer service at some point in his life before becoming the head of a crime organization, for his facade never crumbled.

"Now," he continued, eager to get on to business. "The protection. What gives?"

"We just can't afford it," I said. There was really nothing more to say.

Desmond stared at me, waiting for me to provide a further explanation that was unnecessary. The wide grin, hazel eyes, bore into me. I heard Lydia, saw her stare of contempt at this situation, and felt an anger flaring inside of me.

“Actually,” I said, “it’s more than just that. Do you realize what kind of damage you’ve done to this community? I opened up my shop ten years ago, and saw nothing but prosperity for my neighbors around me. But ever since you rat fucks moved in, more businesses have shuttered than opened. Less visitors. What little money we do have come in just goes right back to line your own fucking pockets. How many families have you displaced by taking everything they have?”

I stood up, unable to control myself, nevermind that I was in the belly of the beast and there were no doubt goons just out of sight, ready to neutralize me if they found me to be a threat. I stuck my finger in Desmond’s face, knees pressing against the coffee table, ready to wipe the grin off his face.

As if summoned, the bell chimed and Roy rushed in, hand on his pistol.

Desmond waved him away as if my threats amounted to nothing more than a child angry at a parent who denied them extra dessert. All bark, no bite.

“I understand your concerns,” Desmond said, voice mellow. “But I must ask you to treat me with the same respect I am treating you with right now. It would have been easy for Roy to stab your wife in her pretty little neck, drag you down here with your hands tied behind your back, and make you beg to give me the rest of your money. Instead, I am treating you like an equal. I expect the same out of you.”

All that, delivered in a calm voice. Rage drained from me, both at the thought of Lydia's demise and Desmond's refusal to escalate to my level. No longer in control of the situation, I fell back into the recliner.

"You're right," Desmond said, "we are actively driving members away from your community. We have a new clientele we are catering toward, and affordable real estate is especially hard to come by around here. We jack up the prices, force some to sell, move in our clients, then life is peachy. But it's more than just that, Mr. Carlson. The money that your business pays doesn't offer protection from me and my associates, but from the new guys in town. You'd know them if you met one of them, trust me. Not many make it away from an encounter with them alive. So really, we *are* doing you a service. Am I profiting off it all the same? Hell yes we are! You don't run your butcher shop out of the kindness of your heart, or just to pay your bills, you expect to have a little fun money at the end of the day, am I right?"

Controlling my emotions proved to be impossible in this place. I wanted to be angry at Desmond, to further air my grievances and walk away feeling like I came out ahead in this altercation, but his smile kept deescalating me.

"True," I said, any anger or malice out of my voice now. Maybe Desmond was right: he treated me with kindness and I needed to do the same, despite what brought me in today. "But at this point in time, I don't have any 'fun money,' let alone enough to pay the bills. We keep going like this, Desmond, and I'll be out of business in two months."

For the first time, Desmond's demeanor changed. His calm, smiling face furrowed at the edges, aging him five years. He looked away, contemplating something. Before a minute passed, the smartass customer service face returned.

“I have a deal for you, Mr. Carlson. How would you like to receive all the protection my associates can offer with none of the overhead?”

I perked up.

Desmond continued. “This is a deal of a lifetime here. Nothing to do with our meeting today, but everything to do with your profession. You see, our clientele prefers... exotic meat. Not the kind of thing you can purchase legally around here.”

I laughed. “What, do you mean like dog? Cat? Bald eagle?”

Patience flashed in Desmond’s eyes, but the smile remained the same. “I need to know if we have a deal, Mr. Carlson. My associates and I will supply you with the carcasses, you process and sell it to my clients. They’ll find you in such favor that I doubt you’d ever need our protection, but we will continue supplying the meat just the same. But I want to warn you. We will be doing business together, but that doesn’t make you part of my family.”

I nodded. I wanted very little to do with Desmond’s organization, but the prospect of doing business without any financial penalties at the expense of slicing up some endangered species couldn’t be passed up.

“Once you’re in, Mr. Carlson, you’re in for life.” A dangerous glint shone in Desmond’s eye, an odd juxtaposition with his smile. “Do we have a deal?”

My hand closed around his.

“Deal.”

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Roy dropped me back off at my shop. “Boss works fast,” he said. “First delivery is already waitin’ for ya.”

The car sped off before I could ask any further questions. Lydia met me on the sidewalk, the door ajar behind her.

“What happened?” she asked. “You just disappeared, and then ten minutes ago these guys—”

“I got it taken care of,” I said, pulling her in for a kiss. The act of affection did nothing to ease her anxiety. “I worked out a deal with them fucks. No more money problems for us.” The smile on my face could have been a perfect match for Desmond’s.

“What kind of deal?” Lydia pulled away from me, face awash with fear. I’d never seen her so pale before. “You mean you actually let them bring that into our shop?”

“What?”

Instead of saying anything further, Lydia pointed to the door leading to the cold room. One hand covered her mouth as she sat down on the curb.

The bell jingled as I entered the shop, crossing through the main room. A blast of cold air hit me as I pulled the door open and my arms broke out in goosebumps.

I flipped on the lights.

A man hung from the meat hooks, blood running down his calves. A bullet hole desecrated the center of his forehead and his glazed over eyes stared right through me.

My breath escaped me as I started shaking.

But a deal was a deal.

I pulled the door closed behind me, put on a pair of disposable gloves, and got to work with my knife.

It took Lydia two weeks to come around to our new business. At first, she wanted nothing to do with it. It wasn't the fact that we were cutting up and serving human meat, but rather who our clientele turned out to be.

Regular customers stopped coming once we added the new offerings to the cold case. It wasn't labeled as human meat of course. It must have given off some kind of aura, though, scaring off anyone (or anything) without that particular craving.

It threw me for a loop, too, the first time they came in asking for the special selections. The man looked as human as could be at first glance. But the longer we looked at him, the more we knew there was something off about him. His skin was too loose. Not like he'd lost a large amount of weight in his life, but rather like it never fit him in the first place. His eyes were solid white spheres without a lick of iris to be seen. He was bald and hid whatever scar or zipper or whatever else allowed him to slip in and out of this flesh suit with a small golf cap. Worst of all were his teeth. He kept them covered with his lips when he made his order, but when it came time to pay, he flashed Lydia and me a smile. Rows upon rows of gyrating teeth filled his mouth, circling endlessly like a chainsaw. I grabbed Lydia as her legs started to buckle, keeping her from smashing her skull against the counter.

The man paid the pretty penny for his wares and threw an extra twenty on the counter and walked away. Lydia didn't work the counter for a week after that. After much convincing, which included showing her how well every single one of Desmond's special clients tipped, Lydia resumed her post so I could spend my time in the back room getting the cuts ready.

The customers didn't get any less weird, but we became used to their eccentricities. The funny way they talked, like they were discovering human speech for the first time. Their empty, glazed over eyes whirling in their sockets, seeing things we couldn't. Nostrils flaring, guiding

them to the choicest cuts of meat to suit their needs. If Desmond came in and told me it was the same customer every time in slightly different dress, I'd believe him.

It didn't take me as long to get used to my new position in Desmond's business. Processing a human really isn't any different than cutting up a pig. Once they're skinned and hanging from meat hooks, the carcasses look eerily similar. I made a mess of the first two bodies delivered to me, but that was more out of nerves than incompetence. Once I was able to disassociate while separating flesh from bone, I quickly fell into my old routine: start with the calves first and work my way down.

The key difference between human carcasses and animals is the amount of fat on the bodies. On a rare occasion, I used to process a deer or elk for the hunters that would leave the city in search of wild game. Those animals would have varying levels of fat depending on how harsh the winter was going to be. The typical cows and pigs I'd process would have a consistent level of fat due to the controlled conditions they were raised in, all leading them to the slaughter.

Humans, though, are unpredictable.

The first body brought to me belonged to, I'm assuming, an athlete. The muscles were toned, large, and only small amounts of fat clung to the meat. I was grateful for such a specimen to pop my cherry; if it had been a body with more fat and less muscle mass, I might not have been able to salvage enough prime cuts after my nerves caused me to hack my way through the body. After him, the bodies slowly started gaining mass. One man they brought in had more fat clinging to his corpse than muscle. So much of him went to waste, getting bagged up and sent off for further rendering and processing.

Only two bodies gave me cause for alarm, making me rethink the deal I made with Desmond. This first belonged to my neighbor, Deborah. I'd spent the morning talking with her

about Desmond's thugs, about the twisted gentrification occurring in the neighborhood as more and more of Desmond's (and now, my) clientele took over the neighborhood, trying to conceal the smile on my face while I thought about how much money these things were bringing into my shop.

Deborah hadn't been so lucky. She was in the same position I had been in before I made my deal with Desmond. Maybe she had tried to do the same, but he found no further use for her than to be ground up, packaged, and laid out beneath the lights in my cold cases.

The other body belonged to a child. The first of many. It became easier to deal with them after that first time after I learned how lucrative they were. I don't know if the creatures could smell it in the air or if Desmond's goons clued them in whenever a kid got killed, but they would swarm my shop even before I could finish processing it. They would start a bidding war with each other, all of them desperate to claim the tender flesh for their own and gnash it with their endless rows of spiraling teeth.

All things aside, life was good.

For a while.

Lydia made it four months before she started to shut down. Grow more reserved. She talked to me less, wanted to go out less, put less effort into... everything. I tried to talk to her about it multiple times, but she would shrug me off and segue into a different topic.

When we neared the two year mark of our new business venture, she finally opened up to me.

"It's not right, what we're doing," she said.

We were laying in bed, just about to fall asleep when the words started pouring out of her. I rolled to face her, keeping the lights off, taking in her silhouette in the darkness.

“These are people. They had lives,” she continued. Her voice grew watery. “Have you noticed that all of our friends are gone? All of our clients? They’ve taken over damn near the whole town. Is there even any one human left?”

She had a point there. Aside from the occasional one of Desmond’s goons, I hadn’t seen a single human in at least a month. People still walked the street and perused the local business, sure, but they were all cheap facsimiles. Beasts in hiding, with terrible smiles and desolate eyes.

“Honey,” I said, reaching out and placing a hand on her shaking shoulder. “Things have changed. But not between us. If we hadn’t gotten involved with this, where do you think we’d be? In the gullets of those monsters along with the rest of the neighborhood? Ran out of town? I admit it’s not a great situation to be in, and certainly not a moral one, but look how much money we’ve made since we started selling...”

“I don’t care about the money!” Lydia shrugged my hand off and sat up in bed. She turned on her lamp. Tears ran down her face and her frizzy red hair framed her face. “What good is it anyway? We can’t go anywhere. We can’t do anything. Everywhere we go we’re being watched by those... things. When is it going to be our turn? When will they hang us from those meat hooks?”

She had a point. The flow of bodies waned until I only processed a human every four days. Maybe there was no one left to be removed. Once these beasts ran out of their preferred food source, would they come after us? And Lydia did have a point. We had no use for the money we’d racked up. Our new clientele tipped well enough to build up our nest egg over the years. We really could go anywhere, do anything, with our savings now.

Maybe it was time to hang it up.

“I’ll talk with Desmond tomorrow,” I promised. “Get us out of this mess. On to the next part of our lives.”

Lydia sealed the deal with a kiss.

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“We had a deal, Mr. Carlson.”

Desmond hadn’t aged at all in the time since we first sat in these recliners. Whereas lines furrowed deeper on my face, he almost looked younger than before. As the head of the organization, he likely saw more horrors than I had since our last encounter, but something kept the kid youthful.

“You haven’t paid us a dime in the last three years, and haven’t we pushed plenty of patrons to your business?”

“I know,” I said, trying to ham it up. “I’m perfectly happy with our arrangement, but it’s... my wife.” I didn’t want to throw Lydia under the bus, but maybe it would spark compassion in Desmond.

“So what is it you’d like to do?”

Seems Desmond would understand after all. Didn’t I serve him just as much as he served me? Loyalty must be taken into account.

“Sell the place,” I said. Confident, now. “Me and the missus will pack up, skip town, never speak a word of what goes on here.”

A pensive moment on Desmond’s end as he processed my request. Then he sat up straight, pulled a phone from his pocket, and started typing. “To me, Mr. Carlson, it sounds like you don’t want to leave us at all, but your wife is the catalyst here.” He put the phone back in his pocket. If you remember our first conversation here, I said that once you’re in, you’re in for life.

I know your wife didn't make such a bargain, but your fates are entwined nonetheless. We're going to pay your wife a visit, make sure she knows the importance of your presence in our community. Roy!"

Before I could interject, Roy stepped around a corner and approached us.

At least, it used to be Roy. The skin puppet had the same height, complexion, physical features of Desmond's #2, but his eyes were replaced by large white globes. A sinister grin, grinding teeth taunting me from within his mouth.

"Lead us to Mr. Carlson's, would you?"

The Roy Thing grabbed me from behind and pushed me out the door, into a running car. Desmond climbed into the passenger seat and Roy slid in beside him. With the push of a button, a reflective mirror slid up between us, leaving me alone in the backseat.

Controlling my breathing became a monumental task as thousands of scenarios ran through my mind, none with a positive outcome.

We rolled up to my shop, parking in the alleyway where Desmond's goons usually dropped the bodies. Speaking of the devil, two of the bastards were standing guard near the delivery door. One of them wrenched the door open and pulled me out. Drool ran from his face, as if he were anticipating the world's greatest meal.

"I'm sure Mrs. Carlson is home, isn't she?" Desmond asked his new goons. They'd slowly infiltrated his men, becoming their sinister doppelgangers until Desmond was the head of not just a criminal organization, but a bestial syndicate. How long would it take before the leader of those beasts slid into Desmond's skin?

The goon that opened the door for me nodded, smirking.

Desmond held out his hand. "Lead the way, Mr. Carlson."

I fumbled the keys from my pocket, but The Roy Thing pushed the door open. Someone already unlocked it. I stepped into the darkness, shivering against the cold in the cutting room. Five devils stepped in behind me. My fingers found the glowing orange lightswitch and flicked it up.

Lydia hung from the meathooks, ankles to the sky, arms reaching down for a grave she'd never be able to claim. Blood coated in her face in an all-encompassing mask from the gash made in her throat.

Commiserating, I felt someone hot dash around my own throat as I sank to my knees. Wails clawed their way up but the drooling thing pulled me to my feet and shoved me forward, slamming me into my dead lover's body. She swung on the hooks as I backed away, retching.

A knife clattered to the floor at my feet. Desmond put his hands on hips, surveying Lydia's swaying body.

"Not bad for an older broad. Shame what you're going to have to do to her." He snapped his fingers. The Roy Thing, the driver, and the things that broke in, killed Lydia, and hung her from her ankles, surrounded me.

I knew what they wanted. They wanted something to eat. I hesitated, and they bared endless rows of teeth. Threatening me. They would be eating *someone* this evening.

As usual, I started with the calf. One large chunk of meat came free with a single slice. I started over to the wrapping table when the things snarled.

"Raw," Desmond said.

They were making me *watch*.

I tossed Lydia's calf into the air. A spot of blood arced, following it on its final journey. The Roy Thing reached it first, his mouth extended. He snatched it in the cylindrical mouth and the teeth tore it to bits in an instant. Blood sprayed from his mouth, covering my face.

The rest of the process was a blur. I hacked my wife into pieces, tears blurring my eyes. Every chunk of her was tossed to the wolves, who descended into savagery as they fought each other for each bite, mouths extended and annihilating.

"Let this be a lesson," Desmond said, beaming, knowing the same fate would meet me if I ever tried to leave him again.