



A Pressing Problem

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MS EVALDI! GET JONES IN HERE RIGHT AWAY.” Carnavan released the button on the intercom, leaned back into the over-stuffed comfort of his tilting swivel chair, and sighed contentedly. He was a bulldog of a man and even the custom-tailoring of his Italian suit couldn’t disguise the heavy muscles that were running slightly to fat with the approach of middle age. Self-made and proud of it, he drank in the feeling of accomplishment that came from surveying the costly accoutrements of his office. The opulent oaken walls were hung with dozens of expensively-framed copies of the covers of various magazines and books he had published, the source of his wealth. A wealth, he freely admitted, that was built on violence and death—*International Mercenary*, *Gun and Bullet*, and *Fortunate Soldiers* were but a few of the titles. The lurid photographic covers screamed blood from the walls, perhaps the most infamous being the close-up of a mercenary from the Congo wars, his head blown open by a large caliber bullet, his eyes staring wide and glassy.

At times even Carnavan was surprised by humanity’s fascination with violence and death—but he wasn’t about to complain. Humanity’s foibles had made him a millionaire several times over, fueled the growth of his ever-expanding publishing empire, and even allowed him to buy into various more “acceptable” magazines and publishing companies in recent years. In particular he was happy with the growing circulation of his women’s and bridal ventures.

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They had made him even more millions, but somehow his heart stayed with the magazines that had given birth to his career and fortune.

His self-satisfied daydreaming was interrupted by a brisk knock at his office door. He answered with a sharp, "Come in."

Jones—his executive assistant, man-of-all-jobs, director-of-dirty-deeds, whatever one wanted to call him—entered. Tall, muscular, with a short military haircut, he was immaculately dressed in a somber business suit and moved with a tense alertness. There was a coldness in his eyes that bespoke the manner in which he carried out his assignments.

"Yes, A.C., you wanted to see me?"

"Take a seat. I've got a project for you."

He put a hand on the over-size hardcover book with the colorful watercolor painting on its cover that lay open on his desktop and slid it across the desktop towards his assistant.

"My daughter bought me that for Christmas. Can't figure out why. Probably wanted it more for herself than for me, but—"

He paused, absently cutting and lighting a huge black "Churchill" cigar while Jones picked up the book and flipped quickly through its illustrated pages.

"*Pressed faeries*, Sir?" Jones looked at his employer in confusion.

"Yeah, I know. Silly, right?" Carnavan took a few deep puffs to get the cigar burning well; to tell the truth he enjoyed cheaper, drier cigars that didn't make him feel like he was smoking through water, but he'd never smoke one of those at the office. He had to keep up appearances. "I've looked into it. This book is a classic—sells incredibly, year after year! *Pressed faeries*—like pressed flowers. Used to be all the rage in my great grandmother's time. The flowers, not the faeries." For a moment his mind wandered to his childhood—the one-room walk-up in Asbury Park, the ubiquitous smell of boiling cabbage because they couldn't afford anything else, and, most of all, his great-grandmother's endless stories of the old country, told as she moved slowly around the room, aching with arthritis but always talking, always cheerful. He cut his reverie short with a slight start, embarrassed. "Actually, it's quite an interesting idea, and the illustrations are damned good. But suppose,"—he leaned forward in his chair, eyes bright with inspiration—"just suppose we could do the real thing? What a seller!! Not paintings, but *real* faeries, pressed. Real blood. Think of what we could charge the sick bastards out there!"

He leaned back, satisfied he'd made his point. Jones had always been quick to grasp any idea that was bloody and explicit enough to produce a profitable magazine or book. He'd even come up with a few ideas of his own, like *Forbidden Police Shots*—an anthology of murder victims, bloody and splayed *in situ*. That alone had brought in over \$500,000 with almost no outlay, except for a few "considerations" placed in the right hands.

"But, Sir. *Faeries*?"

"I know, I know. Fantasies, right? But I'll tell you, my mother and her mother