

The Ledger

(excerpt)

Bloody Boots

The sun had just cracked the horizon when Sergeant Jim Medeiros pulled into the prison's parking lot and shut off the truck's ignition. Sitting back, he took a few moments to ponder the ominous red-brick fortress.

Concrete walls, thirty feet high, were topped with coils of concertina wire, a devious invention designed to bite deeper into an escapee's flesh with every move—like a python squeezing its victim to death. A guard tower loomed in the northwest corner, the silhouette of a rifleman gawking from its framed window. *Home, sweet home*, Jim thought, snickering.

Built in 1875 in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, S.E.C.C. was a menacing bastion that still protected society by housing 1,200 hardened criminals behind its thick walls. It was an eerie stronghold, surrounded by razor wire and steel fence. Black bars and tight mesh covered the filthy windows, while dark shadows moved behind them—warehousing those who'd committed the most unspeakable acts and could no longer be trusted to interact within society.

Jim grabbed his keys, swung open the pickup's door, and stretched out his aching back. *Two more years in this shithole and I'm a free man*, he thought. With each step, he studied the oldest penitentiary in the system. The very shadow could strike fear in the hearts of frigid men. *It's as though the sadistic designer had intentionally created hell on earth, or at least his interpretation of hell.*

Housing a diverse population from armed robbers to petty thieves, the "Island of Misfits" also accommodated its fair share of arsonists and rapists. Unique in two ways, S.E.C.C. included an Addiction Center for detoxing patients, men who were court committed to the program for a period of thirty days. There was also a Minimum-Security Unit attached to the sprawling facility, housing close to two hundred inmates.

S.E.C.C., the cesspool of the system, Jim thought, *a wasteland for protective custody inmates, as well as the mentally ill bugs—criminally-insane inmates—that spill over from the state hospital.*

Jim kept marching ahead. *After all these years, it's still a wonder I show up every day*. In nearly three decades, few things had changed. Concealed behind the tons of concrete, bricks, and steel, reality continued to take on a horrifying appearance. Time stood still within the hidden jungle, while the desperate cries of men fell upon deaf walls. Shunned by a self-sedated world, yesterday knew no memories, today was blind, and tomorrow tasted of broken glass. Like the caches of lethal weapons and plentiful drugs, these truths were also well concealed.

Jim paused before reaching the heavy steel door. *Somewhere along the way, the hypnotic routine replaced the exciting dreams of a young man*. He looked to his left, where the gun tower stood as some abandoned exit sign. *I should've left when I still had a chance... when I still had a future ahead of me*. He reached the trap's heavy steel door. *But this place is where hope goes to die.*

Banking a few deep breaths, Jim surrendered to another day of mayhem. Attempting to retain any semblance of sanity amid the constant madness was exhausting.

Upon entering the pedestrian trap, the shakedown of the day consisted of every sixth officer emptying the contents of his or her pockets; it was a random search which caught two rookies—also referred to as ‘boots’—Officers Letendre and Olivier. As they passed the search, Medeiros watched as the two baby-faced men punched their timecards and stood in the narrow trap to await entrance.

“Fresh out of the Academy, huh?” Jim asked.

Letendre nodded. “Yes, sir. We graduated last week.”

“Lucky you,” Jim said. “Did your parents attend the cap and gown ceremony?”

“There was no cap and...” Olivier began to reply.

“He’s screwing with you,” another officer barked, cutting the kid off. “You might want to figure out the difference, or you won’t last long in here.”

The new boots went silent.

“Here’s what you need to know for now,” Jim told them, his face serious. “You are going to be tested. Expect it.” He half-shrugged. “If you don’t want to get your feet wet, then you shouldn’t become a lifeguard. Same thing here. If you can’t tolerate someone cursing at you or spitting insults behind your back, then corrections is probably the wrong business for you.” He winked. “Sticks and stones, right?”

The new officers nodded in sync.

“Yes, Sarge,” one of them mumbled. It was barely a whisper.

“Speak up,” Jim told him. “When you chew on your tongue, you risk the ability to use it.” He gazed into the kid’s eyes. “Value your own voice, okay?”

“Okay,” the new fish barked.

Smiling, Jim looked toward the steel door. “Whatever happens to you in there, remember that there’s no going around it... over it or under it. There’s only going through it. And only until you go through it, do you know that you can.” He studied them. “Make sense?”

“Yes,” they replied in chorus.

“The good news is,” Jim said, smirking, “we’re all in the same boat, rowing through the river of piss and shit together.” As he’d done for twenty-eight years, Jim showed his Corrections ID to people who knew him well.

With a smile, the female officer behind the bulletproof glass nodded.

Jim glanced down at his ID. *It’s an old picture*, he thought. *It must have been taken ten years ago.* Officers were required to update photo IDs every ten years. *So, it’s only my third since starting at the fun house.* He shook his head. *I was smaller then, at least in width.* He looked closer. *Maybe thirty pounds lighter and more solid.* His face had the same scowl, minus two new scars: the one over his right eye and an earlobe missing a chunk of flesh. *And my nose isn’t original either*, he thought; it now leaned a bit to the left from multiple breaks. *All souvenirs from my chosen profession.* Although he wasn’t what anyone could accuse of being handsome, Jim had something that the women liked—and whatever that was, it was good enough for him. He realized how much older he felt—and not just looked—than his photo. *It’s been a long, jagged road*, he thought, *and I’m not quite there yet.* He slid the ID into his pocket and punched his timecard.

An obnoxious buzzer sounded, before the thick steel door began to slowly slide open.

“Just remember, boys,” Jim told the rookies, “once that last door closes, we’re all considered expendable.”

A few of the more seasoned officers chuckled at the old timer’s attempt to spook the recruits.

Letendre smiled. “Yeah, sure we are, Sarge.”

“This time, he wasn’t joking,” another officer blurted, wiping the smile from the kid’s innocent face.

“At least it’s Friday,” Jim said for all to hear. “Now, let’s go see what the animals have in store for us today.”

After roll call—informing the day shift that “there was an unsuccessful suicide attempt last night”—Jim snapped a new battery into his radio and clipped the ring of block keys onto his weathered belt.

He was walking toward his half-year assignment, Essex III, when his new flip phone rang. Fumbling the phone out of his pocket, he checked the caller ID. “Shit,” he muttered, “if it was anyone else...” He answered the call. “Hi, baby girl.”

“Hi Dad,” Heather said. “Hey, are you around at all next weekend?”

“This weekend?”

“No, next.”

“Not sure. I know Kay made plans for next Friday night. We’re supposed to go to some fancy restaurant in Providence. But I should be home the rest of the weekend.” He slowed his gait to finish the call. “Why? Are you going to treat me to that new greasy burger joint that...”

Pausing to listen, he smiled. “I like Kay, too,” he said, “and I’m always a gentleman. Don’t you worry about that.”

He listened more.

“I have no plans of screwing anything up, Heather. In fact, I really like...”

“Code 70,” a male voice screamed over the radio, “inmate down, The Fort.” The radio squelched once and went dead.

At a full-out sprint, Jim told his daughter, “Love you, baby, but Daddy’s got an urgent meeting to attend.” He was already gasping for air, as he charged toward the emergency.

“Stay safe, Dad,” he heard Heather say just before he ended the call and rushed into the unknown situation.

Even at a full sprint, he had to smile. Heather was the only good thing that came out of a marriage that his job helped to destroy.

Jim rounded the corner and slowed his pace on the polished concrete floor. First tier inmates—locked in their cells for 23 hours each day—were screaming and kicking their steel doors, doing all they could to contribute to the chaos. Jim followed two younger officers as they bound up a flight of stairs, their feet barely touching the floor. *I remember those days*, he thought, panting.

On the second tier, neighboring inmates howled in delight.

“Shut the fuck up!” Jim screamed, before entering the cell of the inmate that required medical assistance. Even with all his years of experience, the barbaric sight stopped him cold and threatened to steal his breath away.

The cell floor was covered in crimson, the coagulated blood nearly blackened, some of it pooled in spots. “Damn...” Jim took a few steps toward the bed, his boots creating a sucking sound from the jelly beneath his feet. A cold shiver traveled the length of his spine.

The two younger officers, no longer as enthusiastic about offering their assistance, backed away to give their sergeant ample room to make a proper assessment.

Jim took another step forward.

The older inmate, pale enough to play Dracula, was lying prone on his blood-saturated bunk.

“What the hell did you do, Frank?” Jim asked the future cadaver.

“I... I cut up,” he gasped, his words no more than broken coughs and whispers.

“I can see that from all your blood on the floor,” Jim said matter-of-factly. Surveying the scene, he spotted the two massive gouges carved lengthwise down the dying man’s wrists and forearms.

Jim yanked the blood-soaked sheet from the bed, nearly flipping Frank onto his side. With one grunt, he ripped the sheet down the middle before wrapping the zombie’s arms as tightly as he could. “What did you use to cut yourself, Frank?” he asked, his voice calm.

“A false...” The convict struggled for air. “...tooth.”

Shaking his head, Jim grabbed for his radio. “Southeast, this is 147. We need all medical personnel to report to room 24, the Fort. And call for a bus. There’s significant blood loss.”

Nodding weakly, Frank shut his eyes.

“Hey,” Jim barked at him, his voice booming off the tiny cell’s walls.

Frank opened his eyes to slits.

“Help is on its way, Frank, but you need to stay awake. If you don’t fight off the sleep, you won’t spend another minute in this world.”

Jim watched as the slightest grin flashed across the vampire’s mouth—just before he closed his eyes again and went to sleep. *Can’t say that I blame you, Frank*, Jim thought. *If I had to live out my days in here, I’d choose death too.* With a correction officer’s life expectancy being fifty-five years, Jim wasn’t far behind. He was fifty.

As the medical personnel piled into the cramped room, the veteran sergeant squeezed his way out. “The skinner’s gone,” he reported, “and it looks like I’m the one stuck with the damned paperwork again.”

“Skinner?” a voice repeated.

“That’s right,” Jim said, stopping. “Old Frank was a serial rapist, so don’t waste too many of your tears on him.”

“Damn, Sarge. That’s cold.”

Jim smirked. “No colder than Frank is right now.”

~ ~ ~

After getting cleaned up—washing his hands like he was preparing to perform surgery—Jim drafted his initial report before arriving at Essex III, the most feared block in the joint.

Three tiers, twenty cells each, knew two-thirds of its clientele to be lifers. These often proved to be the best inmates. Once they’d accepted their fate, they settled in and clung to a routine the way a child would its mother. Every one of them was institutionalized. *After a few years inside, no man can escape it... inmate or officer.*

Entering Essex III, Jim conducted a quick equipment and radio check before beginning his first round. Counting off one head after the other, he spotted Pauli Patricio, surrounded by a circle of younger convicts.

Oddly enough, Patricio was one of Jim’s favorite characters. *He’s a charming psycho... in a Jeffery Dahmer kind of way.*

Patricio had been a vicious hitman for the Monarco crime family before he took the fall on a murder beef many claimed he didn’t commit. Those same people, however, agreed, “It’s

probably the only crime he never committed.” Nevertheless, Pauli now served the ‘book’ or a life bid, spending his twilight years in the nursing home for tough guys and maniacs.

By all accounts, the shot-caller was the most feared man to walk the streets in his day. An unnaturally powerful man with a will to match, he was a collector in every sense of the word, using a ball-peen hammer as his chosen tool for settling overdue accounts. By the time Jim had met him, the ox was already well beyond middle age, so he’d slowed a bit. That’s not to say, however, that Pauli didn’t run things within the inmate population. He did. According to Patricio, “Essex III is my house. I don’t give a damn whether some con serves a day or thirty years here, the punk’s still just a guest passing through my house.”

Due to the nature of Jim’s employment, he couldn’t afford to fear the man. It was imperative, though, that he be aware of the old timer’s cruel capabilities—and *temper to match*. *If something goes down, Patricio has either orchestrated it, ordered it, or at least knows about it*, Jim thought. *He might not have been the big boss on the street, but his presence demands respect inside these walls.*

Patricio claimed his home at the end of the first tier in a cell he affectionately called “the honeymoon suite.” For a cold-blooded killer, he had a great sense of humor.

Jim watched as the old thug regaled his audience with another colorful tale. “I’d been trained to kill in Vietnam, and there was no better place to sharpen my skills,” explained Patricio. “Trust me, boys, I got really good at my job.” He looked up and made eye contact with Jim. They exchanged grins. “So when I returned home,” Patricio continued, “it seemed silly to try my hand at anything else.” He shrugged. “When you’re good at something, why mess around with anything else, right?”

Everyone laughed.

Jim shook his head. *I’ve heard this same friggin’ story for more than twenty years*, he thought. Even still, he leaned against the wall and took it in.

“I came back from the jungle and could’ve either gone into law enforcement or organized crime,” Patricio said, shrugging. “A life of crime seemed less corrupt to me, so I joined the ranks.”

This time, Jim laughed.

“I started as a runner, collecting for Benny O’s book. It was easy work. It didn’t take me long to learn that being successful was less about being tough than...” He paused to find the right words. “It was more about where I was willing to take it to, you know? And I already knew that I could go all the way.” He shrugged again. “Killing’s never cost me a wink of sleep.”

A few of the inmates exchanged nervous glances.

Grinning, Jim shook his head. *The Italian minstrel still wields a silver tongue.*

“I’ve never given a rat’s ass about anything but making a name for myself,” Patricio explained. “Dangerous men, I mean *real* dangerous men, don’t have to worry about watching their backs.” While his audience leaned in, hanging on to his every word, Patricio added, “So those first few weeks I collected for Benny O, I busted up two guys so bad that one of ‘em ended up in a wheelchair. After that, I had enough street credit to grab a few new opportunities for myself.”

That’s right, Jim thought, *and a few months later, Benny O was found floating in the Charles River. They said it was a company contract, an inside job. Not long after, Pauli Patricio was adopted by the Monarco family.*

“Okay boys, story time’s over,” Jim told the group. “Let’s break it up and get lined up for chow.”

The younger inmates looked to Patricio, who nodded that they comply.

“Welcome back to *my* house, Sergeant Medeiros,” Patricio told Jim, grinning.

“Oh, I think we both know better than that,” Jim replied, returning the grin. Of all people, Pauli Patricio knew that Jim Medeiros ran his block with an iron fist. “This is my house, convict, and I’ll let you hang around just as long as you behave yourself.”

Patricio laughed. “Hey, I heard about the old timer in the Fort who bled out.”

“News travels fast,” Jim said, careful not to reveal any details.

“What a shame,” Patricio said, smirking.

“Is it?” Jim asked.

“Sure,” the con said. “It’s a real tragedy every time a sexual predator goes down for the long nap.”

Damn, Jim thought, *old Pauli’s got the drop on everyone in this joint*. He nodded in agreement. “I hear ya. My heart breaks clean in half every time we lose one of you fine gentlemen,” Jim said, throwing every inmate—regardless of their crimes—into the same rusty bucket. He returned the heartless man’s smirk to him.

The muscle just below Patricio’s left eye twitched. Although it was subtle, the tick was all the evidence Jim needed. *I just crawled beneath the hitman’s skin*.

“Oh, I bet it does,” Patricio replied through gritted teeth.

“Think about it,” Jim added, hunting for another nerve to pluck, “what would I do if I ever lost all of you?”

“I don’t know,” Patricio said, “find a real job?” He was quick.

You’re right, Jim thought. *Unfortunately, I’m too stupid to quit this one*. He smiled wide. “Line up for chow,” he told his cunning adversary. “I’m sure you don’t want to miss whatever delicacies they’ve whipped up for you.”

Nodding, Patricio started to make his way toward the front of the long line. “You know, Sarge, now that I think of it... I’m going to be heartbroken when you finally leave us.”

“When I retire?” Jim asked.

Patricio found his smile again. “Retire, die... whatever.”

“I’m sure you will,” Jim said, “but rest easy. I have no plans of going anywhere for a while.”

Patricio looked back and smiled; his eyes glassed over in some devious thought. “Ahhh, more time...” he mumbled, like he knew something Jim didn’t.

Thank God it’s Friday, Jim thought before remembering he still had a few reports to write before he could kick off the weekend. He looked back at Patricio, who was still grinning. *Retire, die...* he repeated in his head. *Whatever*.

It was nearly shift change, when Captain Tony Coletti made his first appearance on the block. “I have good news and bad news, Jim. Which do you want first?”

“It’s been a long week, Cap. How ‘bout we skip the games and cut to the chase?”

“You’re being assigned a rookie officer to shadow you for the next few...”

“No, Tony!” Jim complained. “Not the training thing again. How many has it been now?”

Coletti shrugged. “Jim, I’m not trying to blow smoke up your ass, but you’re one of the best in the business.”

“That smells like smoke,” Jim quipped.

“But you won’t be with us much longer,” Coletti added, shrugging. “We need you to pass on your knowledge to the next wave of crime fighters.”

“I’ve already danced to this song too many times,” Jim groaned, “Personally, I don’t care who takes over for me. In fact, they can have my job right now.” He stood to stretch out his back. “And I hope they’re better at it.”

“I’m not sure anyone...”

“But as far as trainees go,” Jim interrupted, “they get in the way of any...”

“I’m not asking, Jim,” Coletti said, cutting him off.

Jim glared at him. “This work relies so little on knowledge or skill, Tony. You know that. It’s all about instincts, gut feelings... being able to crawl into some con’s twisted head.” Jim paused to hammer his point home. “I can’t teach gut feelings, Tony. No one can. You either have them, or you don’t.”

Coletti nodded. “The rookie’s name is Luke Lambert; and from what I’m told, he’s already shown some pretty good instincts.”

“Where, in the Academy?” Jim said, rolling his eyes. “That does sound promising.”

“He’s a Gulf War vet,” Coletti added.

Jim pondered the fact, careful to conceal his admiration. “If Lambert has good instincts, then he doesn’t need me,” Jim said. It was a final attempt to sidestep the new responsibility.

“He’s all yours on Monday,” Coletti said, before starting for the barred door.

“Tony,” Jim called out.

The man turned.

“What was the good news?”

“I just gave it to you.”

In spite of himself, the veteran sergeant laughed. *Good thing I didn’t ask what the bad news was.*



Pulling into Mucky’s Liquor Store parking lot, Jim experienced a sobering thought. *I wonder what other people think about when they drive home from work?*

Even old man Mucky didn’t know.

Heading for the back cooler, Jim picked up a six-pack of cold pints before returning to the counter.

“The Sox are playing the Orioles tonight,” old man Mucky announced from behind his ancient cash register.

“Who’s on the mound?” Jim asked, feigning interest.

“That new kid they just brought up from Pawtucket. From what I hear, he’s a flamethrower.”

“I’ll have to catch the game then,” Jim fibbed, throwing two Slim Jims and a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips onto the counter.

“Will that do it?” the old timer asked.

Jim shook his head, scanning over the display of colorful scratch tickets. “Give me five of those new two-dollar tickets. Any winners yet?”

Mucky counted out five, tearing them off the roll. “You’ll be the first,” he said.

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” Jim said, paying for his Friday night loot. Suddenly, he remembered his daughter’s call from earlier in the day. *I wonder what Heather’s planning for next weekend?* he thought, wearing the day’s first genuine smile. *Whatever it is, it’ll be nice to see her.*

After all this time, he could still hear the door to her childhood slam shut behind them. *And we can never go back.* The truth of it echoed sorrowfully in his soul. He then he pictured Heather as the amazing woman she'd become. *At least I got something right, he thought, or helped to, anyway.*

Tearing the plastic wrapper away with his teeth, he snapped into a Slim Jim. *For now, I'm just hoping to get a good night's sleep, he thought. But after this miserable week, what are the chances?* He looked down at his blood-stained boots. *I have some cleanup to do first.*