

THE HITCHER

That night was full of premonition. Henry Berkin yawned in front of the steering wheel on his rental Ford Taurus and cursed himself for being out in this weather. He had begun his trip up to Portland two days ago thinking it would be a quiet journey through the vast Oregon landscape when he had been surprised by a tempest October storm that had turned the road into a torrent river which stream he could only follow, hoping that it eventually would release him from its grip and let him reach solid ground again.

In front of him raindrops whipped the windshield heavy as lead that the wipers hardly managed to keep away while the wind that roared over the treetops threatened to plunge him off the road. The storm seemed to have come from nowhere; in one moment the night sky had been dark blue and clear and the northern star, the lone walkers faithful lighthouse had whispered to follow her over the state line. Then suddenly the wind had increased its strength and made the threatening rain clouds, which had lured behind the treetops to stick out their faces and ravenously devour the night sky.

He remembered how he had smiled to himself. The northern states sometimes had a devious weather. During springtime and summer when the forests were filled with tourists and wildlife enthusiasts in search for raccoons, grizzlies and beavers it often happened that they fell victim to one of mother natures evil tricks and had to search for shelter until the storm had past. To search for shelter was also what he himself had had in mind, but it would almost be impossible to find a motel this far to the south. Many of them were closed off-season and those which were open would soon be crowded if the storm continued. He could almost see them there sitting at the bar, truckers alongside salesmen and families all of them looking at a portable TV where a bored meteorologist explained that they would be stuck where they were for a couple of days.

He would not be that lucky himself. Henry sighed to himself and had a look at the speedometer. For the past hour he had slugged his way forward in a steady pace of forty miles an hour and soon that too would be too much of a speed if he did not want an aquaplane and end up in the ditch. For a minute he had wondered if he would stop by the road and ride the storm out, but something had made him continue for yet another mile. There was something that lured in the dark among the trunks, something that watched him and had a scent of evil.

He shook the feeling off. Being a writer with a lively imagination was both a blessing and a curse. When he arrived at the book fair tomorrow he would tell Pauline, his agent, about the night and they would both have a good laugh about how someone who had made scaring people a living had been the victim of his own figments.

It was with these comforting thoughts that Henry's daydream ended when he saw something further ahead along the side of the road. In the dark it could be an illusion but as he got closer he could see it was a man waving for help. He seemed thin and skinny in his wind jacket, whose hood made it difficult to see how old he was. Clearly however he had been out in the weather for quite a while. The bare hands were blue with cold and looked chapped as if the cold had drained all the blood from them and mocked their owner by letting the rain fall on the skin beneath which the fluid of life no longer flowed. Without a shed the man would soon freeze to death and since there was no other traffic the writer felt himself forced to stop.

As he hit the brakes the Taurus slid along the moist asphalt and for a moment Henry thought he would not be able to keep the car on the road. Then suddenly the tires found solid ground and the car began to stop with a series of twitches as the ABS-system sat in.

The man came rushing towards him. Henry unlocked the door on the passenger's side and waited. He wanted to know who this mystic stranger was and to have someone to talk to. The last miles had been all too lonely and besides the hitcher hardly looked like a fugitive criminal. In fact he looked quite the opposite. When the man emerged into the light he could see a white pointed beard attached to an edgy, furrow lined face, marked by time. Only the grey blue eyes differed. Peering at him they gave away a respectful look, friendly but also decisive and mindful.

- Thanks for stopping, the stranger said in a mild tone. – The car broke down on me half a mile back.

- Don't mention it, Henry answered and smiled. – Get in here before you'll catch pneumonia.

The stranger nodded and climbed into the passenger's seat. He shivered in his soaked clothes and swept the jacket closer to himself. If he had stayed out for much longer he would soon have gone into hypothermia and it was not without a reason that the driver started to wonder why anyone would travel in this weather. Probably the stranger could read his mind for he pushed the hood back to reveal an almost bald head, cleared his throat and said:

- I haven't introduced myself. Jeremiah Stookes's the name. I live in a small town called Adewille about ten miles from here. Have you heard of it?

Henry shook his head. He could not remember if he had seen the name on the state map, but that would not necessary mean anything. Oregon was covered with small towns that noone bothered to mark out, and by the looks of it this old timer would very well fit the description of one of them. The wind jacket that he wore looked warm, but was hopelessly out of fashion as well as the brown saggy jeans and gave a feeling of a redneck county where everyone minded their own business and cared little for the outside world.

– That's okay, the old man answered. – You'll recognize the place when you see it. About two miles from here before you pass the welcome sign you'll see an old Texaco gas station. One of us old timers, Harper McKenzie that is, build it in the fifty's when the demand for lumber bloomed and made himself a fortune on pumping diesel and selling Coke while he chitchatted with the truckers. No stress back then you know. Anyway some nitwit county delegate decided to build highway 79 and since then the place has been dead as a corpse in the morgue.

Jeremiahs voice died out. Henry could almost see how he lived into his memories and wondered if the passenger really was telling the truth. The image of a deranged and lost old man had disappeared more and more and instead he was beginning to see that behind the mask of deception there was a man who knew exactly what he was doing. But there was also something else. The voice of the man was calm and to the point, but it also hid an imply of fear. During the past hour he had from time to time looked over his shoulder as he had expected to be followed. He had tried to hide it, but the fear had begun to betray him and soon he would have to tell his driver what he was doing.

- When we reach the town you'd better go east, he sighed. –It won't be a short turn, but I figger you'll make up for that once you reach the freeway.

- Yeah I probably will. Question is why should I?

Henry could not keep his curiosity back any longer. Basically he did not mind doing what he was told but somewhere in the back of his head he knew that something was about to happen. All his life he had fed on his curiosity made it a way of life and now with the answer within reach he had no intention of backing off without a reason.

Jeremiah began to answer him. His face looked even older than before as the wrinkles formed canals of skin in the leaning forehead. The whole expression gave the image of someone worn out who had reached his goal, just to find it swept away before his very eyes.

- I have to return certain something I happen to have, he said. – And I don't think I have much time left.

A nod formed his answer. His driver could not possibly have understood what he had meant, but remained silent and fixed his eyes on the road. The rain had eased up a bit, but the night would still be long and if the town really existed a mile ahead there would still be a while before they reached it.

If that ever had been meant to happen in the first place. Henry twitched when two blinding lights struck through the rear window. They seemed to have emerged from nowhere and glowed so strongly that the night itself appeared to be backing away from them. He could hardly make out the outlines of a jeep Cherokee behind him. On its roof the well known red and blue lights of a highway patrol car flashed, and its driver apparently indifferent to any fear, defied the weather and forced the last few horsepower's out of the vehicle in order to gain on them.

Jeremiah sank back into his seat.

- Not now! he screamed. – I'm too close! Don't stop! Whatever you do **don't stop!**

There was of cause no choice. The jeep roared past them and blocked off the road. Henry stepped on the brakes and felt how he lost control over the Ford as both the wheels locked. For a moment he thought he could parry the skid, but then the front of the car tipped over the ditch, hung for a split

second in the open air and then began to overturn. The bang made Henry loose his breath. He could feel how the steering wheel hit him between the ribs and how something beneath them cracked before everything went black.

A hundred yards in front of them the Cherokee had stopped and two men stepped out. One of them, a bald, fat man in a police uniform put on his trilby and looked at the destruction ahead.

- Gee what a mess, he said. – Do you think we got the right one this time?

The man beside him held in his answer. In the dark he was a mere outline of a man standing in his black coat and suit, indifferently looking at his colleague.

- It's the right one, the man answered in a chilling voice. – Wait here while I collect what we need.

He stepped down into the ditch and went over to the wreck. From a distance he could how someone was crawling of from the broken windshield and smiled to himself. The prey could not flee. Not when he was this close. Step by step he got closer until he stood face to face with Jeremiah who leaned his back against the wreck.

– So it's you, he panted. Half his face was bloody and from his only remaining eye came a look of accepted failure.

- You've hid long enough Jeremiah. –Give me what I want and I'll leave you to rest.

The old man laughed him in the face.

- Gettin' soft on me, are you Maddox? Do what you want. I hain't got what you're looking for.

The look he got cut through marrow and bone. In the dark eyes an unquenched hate flamed that never had been give time to rest and in their wild glow it seemed like they drilled into his mind, ripping and tearing his thoughts in hunt for the truth.

- I haven't got time for your games, he hissed. – You can lay here until rotten. I'll find it anyway.

With a violent blow he ended the old man's suffering, turned around and walked back to the car. From his place in the wreck Henry could hardly hear them driving away, leaving him to the silence and cold. He did not know what had happened, only that the men had not got what they were looking for. In his palm a small brass key rested in its holder. On top of it there was some obscure markings, but he could not have cared less to understand them. When someone eventually found him he would get rid of it as soon as possible. The hitchers and his one life were when everything came around separate and even if he had shared an unexplainable secret he knew that certain stories were better off untold.