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**PACKAGE  
DEAL**  
**LAWRENCE BLOCK**

Four thugs had moved into Arlington, and they were ruining the town. So the leading citizens called in a hired killer....

"IF I WERE YOUNGER," JOHN HARPER said, "I would do this myself. One of the troubles with growing old. Aging makes physical action awkward. A man becomes a planner, an arranger. Responsibility is delegated."

Castle waited.

"If I were younger," Harper went on, "I would kill them myself. I would load a gun and go out after them. I would hunt them down, one after another, and I would shoot them dead. Baron and Milani and Hallander and Ross. I would kill them all."

The old man's mouth spread in a smile.

"A strange picture," he said. "John Harper with blood in his eye. The president of the bank, the past president of Rotary and Kiwanis and the Chamber of Commerce, the leading citizen of Arlington. Going out and killing people. An incongruous picture. Success guts a man, Castle. Removes the spine and intestines. Ties the hands. Success is an incredible surgeon."

"So you hire me."

"So I hire you. Or, to be more precise, we hire you. We've had as much as we can take. We've watched a peaceful, pleasant town taken over by a collection of amateur hoodlums.

We've witnessed the inadequacy of a small-town police force faced with big-town operations. We've had enough."

Harper sipped brandy. He was thinking, looking for the right way to phrase what he had to say. "Prostitution," he said suddenly. "And gambling. And protection—storekeepers paying money for the right to remain storekeepers. We've watched four men take control of a town which used to be ours."

Castle nodded. He knew the story already but he wasn't impatient with the old man. He didn't mind getting both the facts and the background behind them. You needed the full picture to do your job properly. He listened.

"I wish we could do it ourselves. Vigilante action, that type of thing. There's a precedent for it. Fortunately, there's also an historical precedent for employing you. Are you familiar with it?"

"The town-tamer," Castle muttered.

"The town-tamer. An invention of the American West. The man who cleans up a town for a fee. The man who waives legality when legality must inevitably be abandoned. The man who uses a gun instead of a badge when guns are effective and badges are impotent."

"For a fee."

"For a fee," John Harper echoed. "For a fee of ten thousand dollars, in this instance. Ten thousand dollars to rid the world and the town of Arlington of four men. Four malignant

men, four little cancers. Baron and Milani and Hallander and Ross."

"Just four?"

"Just four. When the rats die, the mice scatter. Kill four. Kill Lou Baron and Joe Milani and Albert Hallander and Mike Ross. Then the back of the gang will be broken. The rest will run for their lives. The town will breathe clean air again. And the town needs clean air, Mr. Castle, needs it desperately. You may rest assured of that. You are doing more than earning a generous fee. You are performing a service for humanity."

Castle shrugged.

"I'm serious," Harper said. "I know your reputation. You're not a hired killer, sir. You are the twentieth-century version of the town-tamer. I respect you as I could never respect a hired killer. You are performing an important service, sir. I respect you."

Castle lit a cigarette. "The fee," he said.

"Ten thousand dollars. And I'm paying it entirely in advance, Mr. Castle. Because, as I have said, your reputation has preceded you. You'll have no trouble with the local police, but there are always state troopers to contend with. You might wish to leave Arlington in a hurry when the job is finished. As I understand it, the customary method of payment is half in advance and the remaining half upon completion of the job at hand. I trust you, Mr. Castle. I am paying the full sum in advance. You come well recommended."

Castle took the envelope, slipped it into an inside jacket pocket. It made a bulge there.

"Baron and Milani and Hallander and Ross," the old man said. "Four fish. Shoot them in a barrel, Mr. Castle. Shoot them and kill them. They are a disease, a plague."

Castle nodded. "That's all?"

"That is all."

The interview was over. Castle stood up and let Harper show him to the door. He walked quickly to his car and drove off into the night.

Baron and Milani and Hallander and Ross.

Castle had never met them but he knew them all. Small fish, little boys setting up a little town for a little fortune. They were not big men. They didn't have the guts or the brains to play in Chicago or New York or Vegas. They knew their strengths and their limitations. And they cut a nice pie for themselves.

Arlington, Ohio. Population forty-seven thousand. Three small manufacturing concerns, two of them owned by John Harper. One bank, owned by John Harper. Stores and shops. Doctors and lawyers. Shopkeepers, workers, professional men, housewives, clerks.

And, for the first time, criminals.

Lou Baron and Joe Milani and Albert Hallander and Mike Ross. And, as a direct result of their presence, a bucketful of hustlers on Lake Street, a handful of horse drops on Main and Limestone, a batch of numbers-runners and a boatload of

muscle to make sure everything moved according to plan. Money being drained from Arlington, people being exploited in Arlington, Arlington turning slowly but surely into the private property of four men.

Baron and Milani and Hallander and Ross.

Castle drove to his hotel, went to his room, put ten thousand dollars in his suitcase. He took out a gun, a .45 automatic which could not be traced farther than a St. Louis pawnshop, and slipped the loaded gun into the pocket which had held the ten thousand dollars. The gun made the jacket sag a bit too much and he took out the gun, took off the jacket and strapped on a shoulder holster. The gun fit better this way. With the jacket on, the gun bulged only slightly.

Baron and Milani and Hallander and Ross. Four small fish in a pond too big for them. Ten thousand dollars.

He was ready.

Evening.

A warm night in Arlington. A full moon, no stars, temperature around seventy. Humidity high. Castle walked down Center Street, his car at the hotel, his gun in its holster.

He was working. There were four to be taken and he was taking them in order. Lou Baron was first.

Lou Baron. Short and fat and soft. A beetle from Kansas City, a soft man who had no place in Kerrigan's K.C. mob. A big wheel in Arlington. A man employing women, a pimp on a large scale.

Filth.

Castle waited for Baron. He walked to Lake Street and found a doorway where the shadows eclipsed the moon. And waited.

Baron came out of 137 Lake Street a few minutes after nine. Fat and soft, wearing expensive clothes. Laughing, because they took good care of Baron at 137 Lake Street. They had no choice.

Baron walked alone. Castle waited, waited until the small fat man had passed him on the way to a long black car. Then the gun came out of the holster.

"Baron—"

The little man turned around. Castle's finger tightened on the trigger. There was a loud noise.

The bullet went into Baron's mouth and came out of the back of his head. The bullet had a soft nose and there was a bigger hole on the way out than on the way in. Castle holstered the gun, walked away in shadows.

One down.

Three to go.

Milani was easy. Milani lived in a frame house with his wife. That amused Castle, the notion that Milani was a property-owner in Arlington. It was funny.

Milani ran numbers in St. Louis, crossed somebody, pulled out. He was too small to chase. The local people let him alone.

Now people ran numbers for him in Arlington. A change of pace. And Milani's wife, a St. Louis tramp with big breasts and no brains, helped

Milani spend the money that stupid people bet on three-digit numbers.

Milani was easy. He was home and the door was locked. Castle rang the bell. And Milani, safe and secure and self-important, did not bother with peepholes. He opened the door.

And caught a .45-caliber bullet over the heart.

Two down and two to go.

Hallander was a gunman. Castle didn't know much about him, just a few rumbles that made their way over the coast-to-coast grapevine. Little things.

A gun, a torpedo, a zombie. A bodyguard out of Chi who goofed too many times. A killer who loved to kill, a little man with dead eyes who was nude without a gun. A psychopath. So many killers were psychopaths. Castle hated them with the hatred of the businessman for the competitive hobbyist. Killing Baron and Milani had been on the order of squashing cockroaches under the heel of a heavy shoe. Killing Hallander was a pleasure.

Hallander did not live in a house like Milani or go to women like Baron. Hallander had no use for women, only for a gun. He lived alone in a small apartment on the outskirts of town. His car, four years old, was parked in his garage. He could have afforded a better car. But to Hallander, money was not to be spent. It was chips in a poker game. He held onto his chips.

He was well protected—a doorman screened visitors, an elevator opera-

tor knew whom he took upstairs. But Hallander made no friends. Five dollars quieted the doorman forever. Five dollars sealed the lips of the elevator operator.

Castle knocked on Hallander's door.

A peephole opened. A peephole closed. Hallander drew a gun and fired through the door.

And missed.

Castle shot the lock off, kicked the door open. Hallander missed again.

And died.

With a bullet in the throat.

The elevator operator took Castle back to the first floor. The doorman passed him through to the street. He got into his car, turned the key in the ignition, drove back to the center of Arlington.

Three down.

Just one more.

"We can deal," Mike Ross said. "You got your money. You hit three out of four. You can leave me be."

Castle said nothing. They were alone, he and Ross. The brains of the Arlington enterprise sat in an easy chair with a slow smile on his face. He knew about Baron and Milani and Hallander.

"You did a job already," Ross said. "You got paid already. You want money? Fifteen thousand. Cash. Then you disappear."

Castle shook his head.

"Why not? Hot-shot Harper won't sue you. You'll have his ten grand and fifteen of mine and you'll disappear. Period. No trouble, no sweat,

no nothing. Nobody after you looking to even things up. Tell you the truth, I'm glad to see the three of them out of the way. More for me and no morons getting in the way. I'm glad you took them. Just so you don't take me."

"I've got a job to do."

"Twenty grand. Thirty. What's a man's life worth? Name your price, Castle. Name it!"

"No price."

Mike Ross laughed. "Everybody has a price. Everybody. You aren't that special. I can buy you, Castle."

Ross bought death. He bought one bullet and death came at once. He fell on his face and died. Castle wiped off the gun, flipped it to the floor. He had taken chances, using the same gun four times. But the four times had taken less than one night. Morn-

ing had not come yet. The Arlington police force still slept.

He dropped the gun to the floor and got out of there.

A phone rang in Chicago. A man lifted it, held it to his ear.

"Castle," a voice said.

"Job done?"

"All done."

"How many hits?"

"Four of them," Castle said. "Four off the top."

"Give me the picture."

"The machinery is there with nobody to run it," Castle said. "The town is lonely."

The man chuckled. "You're good," he said. "You're very good. We'll be down tomorrow."

"Come on in," Castle said. "The water's fine."