

HARD CANDY

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a novel by
ANDREW VACHSS



ALFRED A. KNOPF

NEW YORK

1989

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vachss, Andrew H.

Hard candy : a novel / by Andrew Vachss.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-394-57791-4

I. Title.

P 53572.A33H37 1989

813'.54—dc19 89-45272 CIP

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Manufactured in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

They don't give medals on this planet
for courage in urban combat.
But there are silver stars shining in the sky
that the astronomers can't explain.

ALMA HENRY

BESSIE MYRICK

MARY SPENCER

I

CITY VULTURES never have to leave the ground.

I was standing on the upper level of the Port Authority Bus Terminal, waiting in the November night. Back to the wall, hands in the empty pockets of a gray raincoat. Under the brim of my hat, my eyes swept the deck. A tall, slim black youth wearing a blue silk T-shirt under a pale yellow sport coat. Baggy pants with small cuffs. Soft Italian shoes. Today's pimp—waiting for the bus to spit out its cargo of runaways. He'd have a Maxima with blacked-out windows waiting in the parking lot. Talk about how hard it was to get adjusted to the city—how he was the same way himself when he hit town. He'd be a talent scout for an independent film producer. If the girl wanted, he'd let her stay at his place for a few days until she got herself together. Projection TV, VCR, sweet stereo. A little liquor, a little cocaine. High-style. The way it's done, you know. Another black guy in his thirties. Gold medallion on his chest under a red polyester shirt that would pass for silk in the underground lights. Knee-length black leather coat,

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player's hat with a tasteful red band. Alligator-grain leather on his feet. Yesterday's pimp—waiting his turn. He'd have an old Caddy, talk his talk, make you a star. A furnished room in a no-see hotel down the street. Metal coat hangers in his closet that would never hold clothes.

You could go easy or you could go hard.

Two youngish white guys, talking low, getting their play together. Hoping the fresh new boys getting off the bus wouldn't be *too* old.

A blank-faced Spanish kid, black sweatshirt, hood pulled up tight around his head. Felony-flyers on his feet. Carry your bags, ma'am?

A few citizens, waiting on relatives coming back from vacation. Or a kid coming home from school. A bearded wino picking through the trash.

The Greyhound's air brakes hissed as it pulled into the loading port. Night bus from Starke, Florida. A twenty-four-hour ride—change buses in Jacksonville. The round-trip ticket cost \$244.

I know—I paid for it.

The man I was waiting for would have a letter in his pocket. A letter in a young girl's rounded handwriting. Blue ink on pink stationery.

Daddy, I know it's been a long time, but I didn't know where you was. I been working with some boys and I got myself arrested a couple years ago. One of the cops took my name and put it in one of their computers. He told me where you was, but I didn't write for a while because I wanted to have something good to tell you. I'm sorry Sissy made me run away that time without even telling you goodbye like I wanted. I wrote to her but the letter came back. Do you know where she's at? I guess she got married or something. Anyway, Daddy, you'll never believe it, but I got a lot of money now. I'm real good at this business I'm in. I got a boyfriend too. I thought you could use a stake to get you started after you got out, but I didn't want to mail no cash to a prison. Wasn't that right?

Anyway, Daddy, when you get ready to come out, you write to me at this Post Office box I got now and I'll send you the money for the ticket up here. It would be like a vacation or something. And I could give you the money I have saved up. I hope you're doing okay, Daddy. Love, Belle.

The slow stream of humans climbed down. Hands full of plastic shopping bags, cartons tied together with string, duffel bags. Samsonite doesn't ride the 'Hound too often.

He was one of the last off the bus. Tall, rawboned man, small eyes under a shock of taffy-honey hair. Belle's eyes, Belle's hair. A battered leather satchel in one hand. The Spanish kid never gave him a second glance. A cop would, but there weren't any around.

I felt a winter's knot where my heart should have been.

His eyes played around the depot like it was a prison yard. I moved to him, taking my hands out of my pockets, showing them empty. He'd never seen me before, but he knew the look.

"You're from Belle?" he asked. A hard voice not softened by the cracker twang.

"I'll take you to her," I promised, turning my back on him so he could follow, keeping my hands in sight.

I passed up the escalator, taking the stairs to the ground floor. Felt the man moving behind me. And Max, shadow-quiet, keeping the path clear behind us both.

2

THE PLYMOUTH was parked on a side street off Ninth Avenue. I opened the driver's door, climbed in, unlocked his door. Giving him all the time in the world to bolt if he wanted to try it.

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He climbed in next to me, looked behind him. Saw a pile of dirty blankets.

"No back seat in this wagon?"

"Sometimes I carry things."

He smiled his smile. Long yellow teeth catching the neon from a topless bar. "You work with Belle?"

"Sometimes."

"She's a good girl."

I didn't answer him, pointing the Plymouth to the West Side Highway. I lit a smoke, tossing the pack on the dash. He helped himself, firing a match off his thumbnail, leaning back in his seat.

I turned east across 125th Street, Harlem's Fifth Avenue, heading for the Triboro Bridge.

"You all got nothin' *but* niggers round here," he said, watching the street.

"Yeah, they're everywhere."

"You ever do time with niggers?"

"All my life."

I tossed a token in the Exact Change basket on the bridge and headed for the Bronx. The Plymouth purred off the highway onto Bruckner Boulevard, feeling its way to Hunts Point. He watched the streets.

"Man, if it's not niggers, it's spics. This ain't no city for a white man."

"You like the joint better?"

His laugh was short. Ugly.

I motored through the streets. Blacked-out windows in abandoned buildings—dead eyes in a row of corpses. Turned off the main drag heading toward the meat market. Whores working naked under clear plastic raincoats stopped the trucks at the lights. We crossed an empty prairie, tiny dots of light glowing where things that had been born human kept fires burning all night long.

I pulled up to the junkyard gate. Left him in the car while I reached my hand through a gap in the razor-wire to open the lock.

We drove inside and stopped. I got back out and relocked the gate. Climbed back inside, rolled down the window. Lit a smoke.

"What do we do now?"

"We wait."

The dogs came. A snarling pack, swarming around the car.

"Damn! Belle's *here*?"

"She's here."

The Mole lumbered through the pack, knocking the dogs out of his way as he walked, like he always does. He came up to my open window, peered inside at the man in the front seat.

"This is him?"

"Yeah."

He clapped his hands together. Simba came out of the blackness. A city wolf, boss of the pack. The beast stood on his hind legs, forepaws draped over the windowsill, looking at the man like he knew him. A low, thick sound came out of the animal, like his throat was clogged.

"We walk from here," I told the man.

His eyes were hard, no fear in them. "I ain't walkin' *anywhere*, boy. I don't like none a this."

"Too bad."

"Too bad for you, boy. You look real close, you'll see my hand ain't empty."

I didn't have to look close. I knew what he'd have in his satchel—they don't use metal detectors on the Greyhound.

The dirty pile of blankets in the back of the Plymouth changed shape. The man grunted as he felt the round steel holes against the back of his neck.

"Your hole card is a low card, motherfucker." The Prophet's voice, low and strong for such a tiny man. "I see your pistol and raise you one double-barreled scattergun."

"Toss it on the seat," I told him. "Don't be stupid."

"Where's Belle? I came to see Belle."

"You'll see her. I promise."

His pistol made a soft plop on the front seat. The Mole opened

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his door. The man got out, the Prof's shotgun covering him. I walked around to his side of the car. "Let's go," I told him, my voice quiet.

We walked through the junkyard until we came to a clearing. "Have a seat," I said, pointing toward a cut-down oil drum. Taking a seat myself, lighting a smoke.

He sat down, reaching out a large hand to snatch at the pack of smokes I tossed over to him.

"What now?"

"We wait," I said.

Terry stepped into the clearing. A slightly built boy wearing a set of dirty coveralls. "That him?" he asked.

I nodded. The kid lit a smoke for himself, watching the man. The dog pack watched too. With the same eyes.

The Mole stumbled up next to me, the Prof at his side. The little man supported himself on a cane, the scattergun in his other hand.

"Pansy!" I called out. She lumbered out of the darkness, a Neapolitan mastiff, a hundred and forty pounds of power. Her black fur gleamed blue in the faint light, cold gray eyes sweeping the area. She walked toward the tall man, a steamroller looking at fresh-poured tar. "Jump!" I snapped at her. She hit the ground, her eyes pinning the man where he sat.

I looked around one more time. All Belle's family was in that junkyard. All that was left, except for Michelle. And she'd already done her part.

The Prophet handed me a pistol. "Here's the sign—now's the time."

I stood up.

"They got the death penalty in Florida?" I asked the man.

"You know they do."

"They got it for incest?"

His eyes flickered. He knew. "Where's Belle? Let me talk to her!"

"Too late for that. She's gone. In the same ground you're standing on."

"I never did nothin' to you . . ."

"Yeah, you did. I don't have a speech for you. You're dead."

"I got people know where I am."

The Prophet smiled at him. "Motherfucker, *you* don't even know where you are."

"You want the kid to see this?" I asked the Mole.

Light played on the thick lenses of his glasses. "He watched *her* die."

I cocked the pistol.

He kept his voice low. Reasonable. "Look, if I owe, I can pay. I'm a man who pays his debts."

"You couldn't pay the *interest* on this one," I told him.

"Hey! I got money, I can . . ."

"I'm not the Parole Board," I said. The pistol cracked. He jerked backwards off the oil drum. I fired twice more, watching his body jump as each bullet went home.

The Prophet hobbled over to him. The shotgun spoke. Again.

I looked at the body for a dead minute.

We bowed our heads.

Pansy howled at the dark sky, grief and hate in one voice. The pack went silent, hearing her voice.

I didn't feel a thing.

3

AFTER THE COPS took Belle off the count, I thought about dying too. Thought about it a lot. The Prophet told me the truth.

"If there's something out there past this junkyard, she'll be waiting for you, brother."

"And if there's not?"

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"Then what's your hurry?"

"I feel dead inside me," I told the little man with the hustler's soul and the lion's heart. The man who helped raise me inside the walls. Everyone called him the Prof. I thought it was short for Professor—he knew and he taught. But Prophet was the true root. A man who sees the truth sees the future. He showed me both—showed me how to be a man.

Or whatever it is that I am.

"You know what to do with it," he told me.

I knew. Survive is what I knew. What I know. The only tune I know how to play.

Down here, we have rules. We made them ourselves. Feeling dead inside me—that was a feeling. It wouldn't bring Belle back to me—wouldn't get me closer. But making somebody dead . . . that was a debt.

Belle's father. The maggot who made her older sister into her mother. He loaded her genetic dice. She never had a chance. Her mother died so she could run, and she ran until she died.

I was holding her in my arms when she went, torn to pieces by bullets she took for me. She looked it in the eye when it came for her.

4

BELLE DIED in the spring. I went cold through the summer. Waiting.

Her father was in a prison in Florida, finishing up a manslaughter bit. I did some checking—learned they'd cut him loose in late October.

Michelle wrote the letter, copying Belle's handwriting from a poem the big girl once tried to write.

If her father had any family left to spend Thanksgiving with, there'd be an empty chair at the table.

But the cold was still in me.

5

I SLIPPED MY PLYMOUTH through Chinatown, heading for Mama's. The car didn't feel the same since Belle left. I couldn't make it sing the way she could. Her Camaro was cut up into a thousand pieces in the Mole's junkyard. Her body was in the ground. She left her clothes at my office, her life savings stashed in the hiding place in my garage. I burned the clothes. Kept the money. Like she would have wanted.

It was the fourth day I'd made the run past Mama's, checking the dragon tapestries in the window. One red, one white, one blue. Mama's a patriot. But not a citizen. None of us are.

The blue tapestry had been up for days. Cops. The newspapers said the porno theater had been blown up by some extremist group. The searchers found enough evidence to drop Salvatore Lucastro—drop him hard. His snuff-film business was as dead as the little girls he made into movie stars. Sally Lou was looking at a bunch of life sentences, running wild. Some flowers can only grow in the dark. The local badges had a bad attitude. They weren't surprised that the *federals* snatched the evidence. They knew Sally Lou's ass was going to be RICO'd. Continuing Criminal Enterprise. But there was supposed to be something left for them. A couple of bodies. I left pieces of one all over a construction site in Times Square. Took the other one with me to the junkyard. Put it through the recycling program: it turns freaks into dog shit.

That was months ago. By now, the cops knew they'd never find the bodies. But they knew where to find me.

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It played the same way it had for the last few dead months. The cops would come around, ask their questions, make their threats, go away.

When they got tired of sending around the hard boys, they sent McGowan.

"I thought we had a deal," he said, his cop's eyes sad and hard at the same time. A good trick. Pimps can do it too. He and his partner, Morales, they had let me run a massage parlor in Times Square with police cover. The perfect bait for a maggot who took his pleasure in women's pain. Blood-orgasms. I was supposed to leave them something when I cleared out, but I took it with me. And left it in a junkyard.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah you do. You think you walk away from this, you're wrong. I don't give a good goddamn about another collar. You know that. But you're on the list now. I don't know how you made the shooter disappear, but they found pieces of that karate freak all over the lot."

The karate freak who'd crippled the Prophet to send me a message.

"What karate freak?" I asked him.

"You want to play it that way?"

"I'm not playing."

"Not anymore you're not," he said, getting up to leave.

6

THE WHEEL spun too many times. They'd always be them—I'd always be me. Some cops went bad. I couldn't go good.

I stayed low to the ground for months, waiting for the Greyhound to deliver Belle's father. Didn't get a parking ticket, didn't bet on a horse. Lived like Gary Hart should have.

There was nothing else to wait for.

IT PLAYED the same way with Max too. He'd sit across from me, make the gesture for "Why?" I'd shrug my shoulders. Who knows? He never pushed it past that.

Mama knew why. Maybe she'd told Immaculata, I didn't know. But she'd never tell Max.

Only the white tapestry was in the window. I pulled into the alley behind the restaurant, just past the Chinese characters neatly marked on the wall. I didn't bother to lock the car.

I went through the back door, barely glancing at the collection of thugs pretending to be the kitchen staff. Took my table at the back.

Mama was saying goodbye to a customer at the front by the cash register. She didn't put her heart and soul into it—the customer had only bought food.

She came back to where I was sitting, waving her hand at the waiter. He knew what to do.

I got up as she approached. Thick glossy hair tied in a rigid bun at the back of her head, plum-colored sheath covering her from neck to ankles, same color nail polish and lipstick. Dignified, not sexy. Mama never got older.

I bowed to her by way of greeting. "Cops all gone?"

"They come back soon."

"I know."

"Something else happen. Soon enough. Police get tired easy."

"Yeah."

The waiter brought a steaming tureen of hot-and-sour soup. Mama filled my bowl first, then hers.

We ate the soup in silence. She filled my bowl again. I finished it. Shook my head no at her unasked question. The waiter took the bowls away.

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I lit a smoke. "It's done," I told her.

"All finish now?"

"Yeah."

She bowed slightly. "Soon, be yourself again?"

I tried a smile, watching her face. She knew a three-dollar bill when she saw one.

"Max on his way."

I didn't say anything.

"Time to stop all this, Burke. Max your brother."

"You think I don't know that? It's not my fault. I did the right thing."

It didn't even feel right saying it.

I felt Max behind me. I didn't turn around. Lit a cigarette as Mama bowed to him. She went back to the front desk. He flowed into the booth across from me, watching my face the same way he had ever since he came back from Boston. Where Mama had sent him on a phony mission to clean up some problem she was supposed to be having with a street gang shaking down one of her joints.

Max the Silent doesn't speak. He can't. He was a free-lance warrior until he met Mama. I met him in the jailhouse—he brought me to Mama when we got out. I took a fall that was part his years ago, when the wheels came off a sting we'd put together. I was there when he met his woman, Immaculata. His baby daughter, Flower, was named for another baby—a baby who never lived to grow up. A baby a chubby little blonde fought a death-duel to avenge. Flood was her name. She loved me and she went back to Japan.

I used to dream about her coming back.

I don't have any more dreams.

He didn't ask me today. The waiter brought him a bowl of fried rice and a pitcher of ice water. I watched him eat, smoking another cigarette. I wasn't hungry.

The waiter took the rice bowl away. I got up to split. To go nowhere. Max pushed his hand toward the tabletop, like there was a