

**"BURKE IS BACK, TOUGHER THAN EVER....  
GRITTY...HARD-EDGED."  
*San Francisco Chronicle***

# ANDREW VACHSS

**Burke plunges into the darkest of pits:  
a lair of evil where children  
are taught to kill....**



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# SACRIFICE

**A NOVEL**

# SACRIFICE

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Andrew Vachss  
藏书章

IVY BOOKS • NEW YORK

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Author of *Six Days of the Condor*

**Please turn the page  
for more reviews. . . .**

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*for*  
SHEBA

a warrior who fought blindness  
until the last battle closed her eyes

if love would die along with death,  
this life wouldn't be so hard



ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Bob Gottlieb  
none better, ever



WHEN YOU HUNT predators, the best camouflage is weakness.

The E train screeched into Forty-second Street. I got to my feet, pulling slightly on the leather handle of the dog's harness. She nosed her way forward, wary. Citizens parted to let me pass. A black teenager wearing an oversized blue jacket with gold raglan sleeves braced one side of the doors with his arm, making sure they wouldn't close as I passed between them. "You okay, man. Step through."

My dark glasses had polarized lenses. The kid's face was gentle. Sad. Someone in his family was blind. I mumbled thanks, stepped off the subway car onto the platform.

I pushed forward on the harness handle, like shifting into gear. The dog headed for the stairs, waited for a clear path, then took me up along the rail.

On the sidewalk, I turned my face toward the sun, feeling the warmth. "Good girl, Sheba," I told the dog. She didn't react, a professional doing her work. I shifted the handle and she went forward, keeping me in the middle of the sidewalk. Away from doors that might open suddenly, maintaining a safe distance from the curb. I closed my eyes, counting steps.

Sheba halted me at the corner of Forty-fourth and Eighth. She didn't watch the traffic signals any more than the other pedestrians did. It's the same rule for everyone here—cross at your own risk.

I made my way carefully along the sidewalk, counting steps, guided by the dog. Found my spot. Tugged slightly backward on the handle—Sheba sat down. I unwrapped the

blanket from around my shoulders, knelt, and spread it on the ground. When I stood up, Sheba lay down on the blanket, made herself comfortable. I opened my coat. Inside was a cardboard sign, held around my neck with a loop of string. White cardboard, hand-lettered in black Magic Marker.

PLEASE HELP

I held a metal cup in my hands. Added a few random coins to sweeten the pot.

Waiting.



HUMANS PASSED AROUND me, a stream breaking over a rock. They didn't look at my face. If they had, they would have seen a couple of rough patches where the blind man had missed with the electric razor. I was wearing high-top running shoes, loosely laced, denim pants, a gray sweatshirt. All under a khaki raincoat that came past my knees. A well-used black fedora on my head.

The local skills were used to me by now. I made it to the same spot every day. Patiently collected coins from passing citizens, face held straight ahead.

I was a piece of scenery, as anonymous as a taxicab.

My eyes swept the street behind the dark lenses.

Sheba settled into her task. An old wolf-shepherd, mostly gray, soft eyes watchful under white eyebrows. She had a warrior's heart and an undertaker's patience.

Hooker's heels sounded on the sidewalk. A bottle blonde, wearing a cheap red dress, short-tight, black fishnet stockings, a hole the size of a half-dollar on the front of one thigh,

pale skin poking through the mesh. Low-rent makeup smeared her face. Getting ready to work the lunchtime crowd.

"Your dog's so pretty."

"Thank you."

"Can I pet her?"

"No, she's working."

"Me too . . . I guess you can't tell."

I drew a sharp breath through my nose, inhaling her cheap perfume as greedily as a cokehead. She laughed, bitter and brittle. "Yeah, I guess maybe you can. I seen you before. Standing here."

"I'm here every day."

"I know. I seen you smoke sometimes . . . when someone lights one for you. You want one now?"

"I don't have any."

"I have some . . ." Fumbling in her red vinyl shoulder bag. "You want one now?"

"Please."

She stuck two cigarettes in her mouth, fired them with a cheap butane lighter. Handed one to me.

"It tastes good," I told her, grateful tone in my voice.

"It's menthol."

"The lipstick . . . that's what tastes good."

"Oh. I guess you don't . . . I mean . . ."

"Only my eyes don't work."

She flushed under the heavy makeup. "I didn't mean . . ."

"It's okay. Everybody's missing something."

Her eyes flashed sad. "I had a dog once. Back home."

"And you miss her?"

"Yeah. I miss a lot of things."

"Go home."

"I can't. Not now. You don't understand . . . Home's far away from here. A million miles away."

"What's your name?"

"Debbie."

"These are bad streets, Debbie. Even if you can't go home, you can go away."

"He'd come after me."

I dragged on my cigarette.

"You know what I'm talking about?" she asked, her voice bitter-quiet.

"Yeah. I know."

"No, you don't. He's watching me. Right now. Across the street. I spend much more time out here talking to you, not making any money, I'm gonna get it from him."

Even with my eyes closed, even with her facing me, I could see the coat-hanger marks across her back. Feel them. I shifted my face slightly, let her hear the core to my voice.

"Tell him you made a date with me. For later."

"Sure." Melancholy sarcasm.

"Put your hand in my coat pocket. Your left hand."

"Wow! You got some roll in there."

"It's mostly singles, two twenties on the inside. Take one . . . Tell him you asked for half up front."

She glanced over her shoulder, hip-shot, leaned close to me. "I tell him that and he'll be waiting for you later . . . when you go home."

"I know. Tell him the roll was a couple a hundred, it's okay."

"But . . ."

"Just do it, Debbie. You live with him?"

"Yeah . . ."

"You can go home tonight. Away from here."

"How . . .?"

"Take the money, go do your work. Tell him what I told you."

"Mister . . ."

"Reach in, pull out the roll. Shield it with your body. Take the bill, put the rest back. Pat my dog. Then take off. Tonight, you go home, you understand? Stay out of the bus station—take a train. It'll be okay, Debbie."

She reached in my pocket, knelt down.

"Sheba, it's okay, girl," I said.

The dog made a sweet little noise as Debbie patted her. She straightened up, looked into the lenses of my glasses. "You're sure?"

“Dead sure.”

I listened to her heels tap off on the sidewalk. A different rhythm now.



IT WAS ALMOST two o'clock before he showed. I recognized him easily by now. In his thirties, close-cropped brown hair, matching mustache, trimmed neat. Wearing a blue windbreaker, jeans, white basketball shoes. Youth worker from one of the Homeless Shelters. Last time he stuffed a dollar bill into my cup. I remember saying, “God bless you.”

Watching his smile.

This time he wasn't alone. The kid with him was maybe eight years old. Skinny kid, wearing a brand-new sweatshirt with some cartoon character on the front, munching a hot dog. Having a great time. Probably spent a bunch of quarters in the video arcades first.

They turned into the electronics store a few doors in front of where I was standing—the same place he'd gone into the last time. When he'd come up behind me and put the money in my cup. The same place he always went.

He was inside almost an hour. When he came out, he was alone.

HE WALKED PAST me. Stuffed another dollar in my cup. "May the Lord follow you always," I thanked him. He smiled his smile.

The Prof strolled up to me. A tiny black man, wearing a floor-length raincoat, scuffling along.

"You got him?" I asked.

"Slime can slide, but it can't hide."

"Call McGowan first," I told him, holding his eyes to be sure he got it. McGowan's a cop—he knows what I do, but kids are his beat, not hijackers. "Tell him the freak made a live delivery this time. Tell him to go in the back way—Max is there on the watch."

"I hear what you say—today's the day?"

"The bust will go down soon—they're ready, warrants and all. You find out where the freak goes, where he holes up. They'll take him tomorrow, at work. Then we take our piece out of his apartment. Just the cash—the cops can have the rest."

The Prof took off, disappearing into the crowd. The freak would never see him coming.

TIME TO GO. I gently pulled on the harness and Sheba came to her feet. I folded the blanket, wrapped it around my neck, and let the dog pull me forward. I turned the corner, headed down the alley where Max would be waiting.

I spotted Debbie's owner lounging against the alley wall. Tall, slim brownskin man wearing a long black leather coat and a Zorro hat. Stocky white kid next to him, heavily muscled in a red tank top. A pimp: he needed reinforcements to mug a blind man.

I plodded on ahead, oblivious to them, closing the gap.

The pimp pushed himself languidly off the wall to face me. The muscleman loomed up on the side.

"Hold up, man."

I stopped, pulling on the harness, squeezing the button on the handle that unsnapped the whole apparatus from the dog.

"Wha . . . ?" Fear in my voice.

"Give up the money, man. No point in getting yourself all fucked up, right?"

"I don't have any money," I whined.

I saw the slap coming. Didn't move. Let it rock me to my knees, pulling the harness off as I fell.

"Sheba! Hit him!" I yelled, and the dog sprang forward, burying her wolf's teeth deep into the pimp's thigh. He shrieked something in a high octave just as the muscleman took a step toward me. I heard a crack and the muscleman was down, his head lolling at a chiropractic angle.

Max the Silent stepped into view, his Mongol face ex-



pressionless, nostrils flared, eyes on the target. Hands at his side: one fisted to smash, the other knife-edged to chop.

“Sheba! Out!”

The dog backed off, cheated, but acting like a pro. The pimp was holding his thigh, moaning a plea to someone he didn’t know.

I squatted next to him, patted him down. Found the little two-shot derringer in his belt, popped it open. Loaded. No point warning this dirtbag—he wouldn’t be a good listener. I held my hand parallel to the ground, made a flicking motion like I was brushing crumbs off a table. I heard a pop, like cloth snapped open in a gust of wind. The pimp slammed into the wall, eyes glazed. Blood bubbled on his lips. I stuck the derringer back into his belt—it was all the ID he’d need at the hospital.

He wouldn’t come home tonight. The rest was up to Debbie.

A putty-colored sedan lumbered into the alley at the far end, bouncing on a bad set of shocks. The cops. Max merged with the shadows. I put on my dark glasses, snapped Sheba’s harness, and made my slow way out to the street.



THE € TRAIN let me out at Chambers Street, the downtown end of the line. I found my Plymouth parked at the curb near the World Trade Center. Unlocked the back door, unsnapped Sheba’s harness. She leaped lightly to the seat.

I took off the dark glasses and climbed behind the wheel.

None of the watching citizens blinked at the miraculous transformation.