



An excerpt from *Secondhand Genes*,
a novella available as an eBook at [Amazon](#).
The novella is part of *The Collected Bubba Gumble*,
available as a print book at [Amazon](#).

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I had a full day ahead of me and needed to get going, so I told Virge I'd see him in a year and took off for Waco to pick up Preston Feerce. He'd been asking to go on a scanning job with me. I planned to take him along on one that afternoon.

With three days of canned food behind me I was ready for a change of diet, so for lunch I picked up a couple of burgers at a drive-through place on the outskirts of Waco. I ate while I pushed on to Preston's.

He lives above his computer shop, in a shabby old building in a rundown part of town. It was about noon when I got there so I expected him to still be in bed, but to my surprise he was up and ready to go. He didn't squawk much either when I asked him to install a pin camera on the flip-up lid of my computer before we left. He adjusted it so it would point at my face when I sat at the keyboard, and after he finished working he said, "Don't trade *this* camera away. Not even for *two* litters of tamales."

I was going to drive straight west, to the job, but Preston asked me to make a stop first. He said he had to pick something up. So we drove north on the interstate, convertible top down, me wearing my Stetson to keep my hair out of my eyes and Preston wearing a baseball cap to keep his comb-over out of the eyes of the motorists behind us. Preston's pretty thin on top, and thick and squattish from the armpits down. And he dresses to suit his body type. For our trip he was wearing a stretched-out T-shirt, baggy shorts and cruddy jogging shoes.

"Exit here," he said, pointing to an off ramp. "It's a lot faster." I was zipping along at seventy-five miles per hour, but I exited, and two minutes later we were stuck dead still in a traffic jam on the highway's access road. Hot diesel fumes washed over us. I looked at Preston, irked because he had

me driving him around on errands, and I saw that he'd changed from his baseball cap to a porkpie hat.

"What's with the hat? I thought you always wore caps."

"Oh, well, I need to keep up appearances if I'm going to help run a successful business."

"A successful business?"

"Yeah, The Hay Bail Bondsman. That's where we're going now. I'm the bookkeeper."

"What's the Hay Bail Bondsman?"

"You know. The bar that Spinster owns."

"Who's Spinster?"

"The bail bondsman I met when you got me arrested, you bastard."

I sifted through my recollections until I pulled up the incident he was talking about, and I felt bad. For maybe one second. Preston gets into plenty of trouble on his own. One time he ran afoul of the law when he and a dozen other men bought raffle tickets in a police sting operation. It was a vice squad sex thing, and the other guys had to pay hefty fines. Preston paid a fine *plus* he got a year's probation, for asking the judge if she was the first-prize hooker.

"But it turned out to be a good thing you got me arrested," Preston said. "That's how I met Spinster."

"I remember him now. You said he got the deed to a bar when someone jumped bail."

"Yeah. And he took my advice about combining the bar business with his bond business. The place was already called The Hay Bale, so he just changed the name to The Hay Bail Bondsman, and he's doing pretty well. You know how it is with a bar . . . people drink to forget their troubles, and they drink when they want to celebrate. Steady business."

"And is Spinster the one who talked you into wearing a porkpie hat?"

"Yeah. He says it makes me look cool."

Preston couldn't look cool standing in a walk-in freezer.

"He sounds like quite a salesman," I said.

"Yeah, I guess so. And he knows a good thing when he hears it. He really liked my idea of getting the customers into fights so he can bail them out of jail. He says the bar makes more on bail now than it does on beer sales."

"He 'says' that? You're the bookkeeper and you don't know?"

"Well, I don't really keep the books, I just sign off on them. Spinster's the whiz with numbers. Mostly I just hang around the bar when I have free time. Spinster says I give the place class."

I looked at Preston, with his paunch, his baggy clothes and long tufts of comb-over hanging out from beneath his porkpie hat.

"You give the place class? I can't wait to see it."

But I was forced to wait, through another twenty minutes of start-and-stop traffic, then Preston pointed to a parking lot and I turned in.

The lot looked like it had been shelled by artillery. And in the midst of the potholes and chunked asphalt stood a dilapidated old wood-frame building that actually *did* look like Preston might be able to class it up a bit. A fourthhand truck was nosed up to its sagging front porch, like a piglet to the belly of a sow, and several bales of hay were stacked near the door. An old COLD BEER sign bled a trail of rust down the front wall.

I parked at the side of the building and saw the grille of a shiny new Mercedes in back. The vanity plate on its bumper said SPNSTR.

"Nice ride," I said, pointing, but Preston was already hustling around to the front porch. I followed and we climbed the rickety steps and went inside.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the low light, but once they did I saw a large room with

a bar running the length of one side wall. A few tables and chairs were spread around in front of the bar, and the walls were covered with antlers, photographs and colorful signs. The two largest signs said HE CAN'T TALK TO YOU LIKE THAT!!! and I BET YOU CAN KICK HIS ASS!!!

The place was quiet. The only customers I saw were two rough-looking characters sitting across from each other at a table bristling with beer bottles. One of the men had a prosthetic leg. It was detached and on the floor beside his chair. The other guy was missing an earlobe. The men scowled at each other.

Preston went around behind the bar and spoke to a slender black man perched on a stool there. I knew it was Spinster even though we'd never met. I saw him once on my computer when Preston called. Now I was looking at him in person while he looked at a TV mounted high on the wall. The set's sound was off, but basketball players ran around energetically on the screen. Spinster didn't take his eyes off the game as he and Preston spoke in hushed tones. After they conferred, Preston disappeared through a curtained doorway beneath the TV.

I walked up to the bar because I thought I saw a bowl of peanuts, but it turned out to be an ashtray full of cigarette butts. I wanted a beer but asked for a soda since I was driving. Spinster didn't hear me. He was caught up in the basketball game.

I studied him and saw that he was a snappy dresser—sport coat, slacks and what looked like a silk shirt open at the throat. Everything was combinations of beige and blue, and a beige porkpie hat was pushed back on his head.

A tiny “ka-ching” sound came from one of his coat pockets as I was about to ask again for a soda. He pulled a phone from the pocket and answered it. He spoke in a low voice but the conversation quickly developed into an argument that sounded

like it might take awhile. I pushed away from the bar and headed across the room. The wall on the other side was crowded with framed photographs I wanted to see.

I gave the table with the two scowling men a wide berth on my way past, and when I reached the wall I leaned in for a close look.

Most of the photos were really old. They showed cowhands on horseback, men working in corrals, and headshots that could have come from wanted posters. Some of the pictures bore dates that went back nearly a hundred years. Cattle brands were burned into the wall here and there, and I even saw a bullet hole or two.

I got drawn in by the pictures and moved sideways down the wall, thinking what a good scanning project the photos would make, and I didn't notice the man sitting in the corner until I bumped into his table. "Excuse me," I said, backing up.

The guy was old. He had leathery skin and a foot-wide handlebar mustache waxed hard and turned up at the ends. The mustache was white, the same as the thick head of hair that was combed straight back from just above his bushy white eyebrows. He wore a red western shirt stretched tight across a chest that warned he could still do some damage if he wanted to, so I apologized again for jostling his table.

"Don't fret about it," he said, then he took a swig from a bottle of beer and wiped his mustache with a flourish.

"This is quite a collection of pictures," I said as I turned my attention back to the wall.

"That it is," he agreed. "They match up with the brands next to 'em."

"Really?" I looked more closely and saw that the brands burned into the wood were also on some of the horses. "Yeah. That's interesting."

The old man made a growling sound. I looked

at him and he nodded toward Spinster, who was still talking on his phone.

“Fancy-pants there got the wall out of order when he took over, but I put things back the way they were.”

“Well,” I said, looking down the line of pictures, “this is a quite a collection, like I said. It must’ve taken awhile to assemble.”

“Sure did, but then this place has been here for a while. All the ranchers from hereabouts used to come in to drink when they were in town. They’d put up their pictures and burn the wall with their brands.”

“Did you know any of them?” I asked.

“Most all of ’em. Used to work with some, drink with others. My name is Bill, by the way. Buckalong Bill.”

I introduced myself and shook his big, knobby hand, then I looked back to the wall.

One old black and white photo showed a wild-haired, middle-aged woman. Her face was turned slightly away from the camera, but her far eye was drilling into the lens with a look so hostile it made me jerk back. Bill saw me flinch.

“That’s Chrissy,” he chuckled, “and that’s her brand beside the picture.” The brand burned into the wall was an eight on its side, with a dot inside each loop. The dots were almost touching the nexus where the lines crossed. Bill said, “People called her Cross-Eyed Chrissy, but never to her face. I saw her lick many a man, and if they complained, she’d *whup* ’em, too.”

Next to Chrissy’s photo was a picture of three men, all of them tall and broad-shouldered. They could have been related, but it was hard to tell because their heads were wrapped in mummy-like bandages. Five fierce eyes glared out from gaps in the gauze.

“Those are the Macho brothers,” Bill said. “Their real name was Camacho, but they preferred

to be called Macho. The oldest one, Oscar, burned their brand into the wall there.” The brand was a bar that stuck straight up from between a pair of big round dots.

Bill said, “Elojio, there in the middle, he was a tough one. Started out busting horses, then traveled with a circus as a trick rider for a spell. A punk tried to beat him up in New York City once.”

“I’ve heard that happens a lot there.”

“Elojio heard the same thing,” Bill said, “but he had to slap a half-dozen before he found one that would fight.”

I heard Spinster finish his phone call, and I turned to see Preston coming back out through the curtained doorway. I said goodbye to Bill and walked over to the bar.

Preston had gone in back to get a box. It was a little larger than a shoebox and wrapped in pink and white gift paper.

“Is this it?” he asked, walking up to Spinster. He was still seated on his stool. I leaned on the bar to watch and listen.

Spinster nodded. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Preston hefted the box, judging its weight. “It’s heavier than I thought it’d be.”

“Well, that’s the way they’re makin’ them this year, them demitassy cups. Your mama’ll love it.”

“Where’s the receipt, in case I need to return it?”

Spinster squirmed. “Well, uh . . .” He smiled. “Return it? Your mama’s not gonna want to return it. I mean, her baby *boy’s* givin’ it to her for her *birthday*, right? She’ll love it.”

Preston looked at the package and said, “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Do you have my change? I need it for our trip.”

Spinster squirmed again. “Oh, well, uh, that’s the good thing. I was able to get you the *expensive* one, like we talked about. It was on sale for half price, but that still took up all your money. I even

had to kick in a little of my own but we can settle up on that later. Your mama's gonna *flip* when she sees you got her the deluxe."

"Well, yeah, that's nice," Preston said, "but that was a lot of money and I . . ."

Spinster turned to me and smiled. "You must be Bubba." He stuck out his hand and we shook. "Preston says you two sports are takin' off for the day."

"That's right," Preston said. "I'll check back in tomorrow."

"Not a problem. I think I can manage the crowd 'til then."

I looked around. The crowd was still just the two men staring at each other, and Bill in the corner.

"Don't judge us by this," Spinster said, talking to me. "We do all right on paydays. Friday nights this place is *jumpin'*. Couple Fridays ago I only stocked one case of beer, and we made a *fortune*."

"A fortune," I repeated. "Off one case of beer?"

"Sure. I bailed out *thirteen* that night, after they finished fightin' over that last six-pack. One's still in the hospital, and if he doesn't show for his court date I'll be gettin' his motor scooter." He smiled broadly, then he looked at the two men at the table. "Oh, yeah, that reminds me." He slid off his stool, brushed a piece of lint from his slacks and stepped out from behind the bar. He went to the table where the men were and bent down to whisper into the ear missing the lobe. When he finished saying whatever it was he said, he chuckled and glanced at the other man, who frowned.

Spinster made his way back to his stool, but before he sat he reached up and straightened a wall sign that said ARE YOU A MAN OR A MOUSE?

"So," he said, looking at Preston. "Where you been the last couple of nights?"

"I've been working on computers."

Spinster shook his head. "Man, you need to

give that up. Your place is *here*. We *need* a good bouncer.”

That caught me off guard.

“You think Preston would make a good bouncer?”

“Damn *straight*. One night he was in here, got a couple of drinks in him and told some big ol’ boy to get his ass out.” He glanced at the television. A basketball player was dribbling a ball down the court. “Looked just like that, Preston bouncin’ off the floor.” He looked at Preston. “You do that three-four times a night, I cut you in for half the bail, you’ll be a rich man.”

The one-legged man at the table spoke to the guy opposite him. “What’d he whisper to you?” His voice was gruff. The other man just stared at him. Spinster smiled behind his hand.

Preston set his package on the bar and said, “I got what I came for, Bubba, but I need to use the bathroom before we go.”

He walked off. Spinster looked at me.

“So, Bubba, Preston says you’re a scam artist.”

“No. I *scan*. You know, pictures. I scan them for people so they can put them on their computers. Photo albums without the paper.”

“Sounds sweet. I bet you do all right.”

“I get by. But I have to spend a lot of time on the road.”

“Yeah, I know how that is. I used to travel a lot.”

“Doing what?”

“Car relocation. You know, where people pay you to drive their cars from one place to another. Like maybe they fly and they want their car at the airport when they get there. Or they move to another state and they have too many cars to drive, so they’d hire me.”

“I bet you had some interesting experiences on the road.”

“Sure. Lots of them. Some good ones, but

some bad ones, too. I guess the worst was when I drove a car to Oklahoma and had a flat tire. I found a body in the trunk when I went to get the spare.”

“A *dead* body?”

“Yeah, a woman. And I just left Texas, so that meant I crossed a state line. I couldn’t even *calculate* the bail for the trouble I was in.”

The one-legged man at the table said, “Tell me what he whispered to you, damn it.” Spinster took his phone from his pocket and placed it on the bar, close at hand.

“So what’d you do?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“The body? The flat tire?”

“Oh, well, I changed the flat and went on with the trip, delivered the car, and when I did, the man I turned it over to checked the trunk.”

“And he found the body?”

“Yeah. It was his wife.”

“Jeez. What happened then?”

“He just smiled down at her and said, ‘I *told* you I’d enjoy myself in Oklahoma.’”

Preston returned from his trip to the bathroom with his shoes making a squishing sound. He said the toilet was overflowing.

“I know,” Spinster shrugged. “I’ll get it fixed when they turn the water back on.”

Preston grabbed his package and we headed for the door. We were halfway to it when the one-legged man reached down and picked up his prosthetic leg from the floor. He hit the other man on the side of the head with it. Or technically I guess he kicked him. A prosthetic toe caught the other guy where his ear lobe should have been. His chair went sideways and he fell to the floor cursing. The one-legged man cursed back and began strapping his leg on.

We reached the door just as Spinster got the police on the phone.

“Yo, dispatch. I got another two-forty in progress at The Hay Bail Bondsman. Need a patrol car over here, and slap a big Code Three on that.”

I made Preston take off his shoes and put them in the back floorboard to dry. A siren wailed in the distance as we drove away.