

HOW LONG CAN YOU STAND THE HEAT?



# THE AGREEMENT



a short story

J. A. KONRATH

author of Last Call

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J.A. KONRATH

## AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

My name is Joe Konrath, and I write thrillers.

This particular story is mentioned in my tenth Jack Daniels novel, [LAST CALL](#). One of the villains in that book has read the story, and tries what is described.

A word of warning: this is a mean one.

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# THE AGREEMENT

*I wrote this in college, and never tried to publish it because I considered it too violent. But after selling several stories to Ellery Queen, I still couldn't crack its sister publication, Alfred Hitchcock. After a handful of rejections, I sent them this, and they bought it. I liked the last line so much I've reused it a few times in other stories.*

Hutson closed his eyes and swallowed hard, trying to stop sweating. On the table, in the pot, thirty thousand dollars worth of chips formed a haphazard pyramid. Half of those chips were his. The other half belonged to the quirky little mobster in the pink suit that sat across from him.

“I'll see it.”

The mobster pushed more chips into the pile. He went by the street nick Little Louie. Hutson didn't know his last name, and had no real desire to learn it. The only thing he cared about was winning this hand. He cared about it a great deal, because Bernard Hutson did not have the money to cover the bet. Seven hours ago he was up eighteen grand, but since then he'd been steadily losing and extending his credit and losing and extending his credit. If he won this pot, he'd break even.

If he didn't, he owed thirty thousand dollars that he didn't have to a man who had zero tolerance for welchers.

Little Louie always brought two large bodyguards with him when he gambled. These bodyguards worked according to a unique payment plan. They would hurt a welcher in relation to what he owed. An unpaid debt of one hundred dollars would break a finger. A thousand would break a leg.

Thirty thousand defied the imagination.

Hutson wiped his forehead on his sleeve and stared at his hand, praying it would be good enough.

Little Louie dealt them each one more card. When the game began, all six chairs had been full. Now, at almost five in the morning, the only two combatants left were Hutson and the mobster. Both stank of sweat and cigarettes. They sat at a greasy wooden card table in somebody's kitchen, cramped and red-eyed and exhausted.

One of Louie's thugs sat on a chair in the corner, snoring with a deep bumble-bee buzz. The other was looking out of the grimy eighth story window, the fire escape blocking his view of the city. Each man had more scars on their knuckles than Hutson had on his entire body.

Scary guys.

Hutson picked up the card and said a silent prayer before looking at it.

A five.

That gave him a full house, fives over threes. A good hand. A very good hand.

“Your bet,” Little Louie barked. The man in the pink suit boasted tiny, cherubic features and black rat eyes. He didn’t stand over five four, and a pathetic little blonde mustache sat on his upper lip like a bug. Hutson had joined the game on suggestion of his friend Ray. Ray had left hours ago, when Hutson was still ahead. Hutson should have left with him. He hadn’t. And now, he found himself throwing his last two hundred dollars worth of chips into the pile, hoping Little Louie wouldn’t raise him.

Little Louie raised him.

“I’m out of chips,” Hutson said.

“But you’re good for it, right? You are good for it?”

The question was moot. The mobster had made crystal clear, when he extended the first loan, that if Hutson couldn’t pay it back, he would hurt him.

“I’m very particular when it comes to debts. When the game ends, I want all debts paid within an hour. In cash. If not, my boys will have to damage you according to what you owe. That’s the agreement, and you’re obliged to follow it, to the letter.”

“I’m good for it.”

Hutson borrowed another five hundred and asked for the cards to be shown.

Little Louie had four sevens. That beat a full house.

Hutson threw up on the table.

“I take it I won,” grinned Little Louie, his cheeks brightening like a maniacal elf.

Hutson wiped his mouth and stared off to the left of the room, avoiding Little Louie’s gaze.

“I’ll get the money,” Hutson mumbled, knowing full well that he couldn’t.

“Go ahead and make your call.” Little Louie stood up, stretched. “Rocko, bring this man a phone.”

Rocko lifted his snoring head in a moment of confusion. “What boss?”

“Bring this guy a phone, so he can get the money he owes me.”

Rocko heaved himself out of his chair and went to the kitchen counter, grabbing Little Louie’s cellular and bringing it to Hutson.

Hutson looked over at Little Louie, then at Rocko, then at Little Louie again.

“What do you mean?” he finally asked.

“What do you mean?” mimicked Little Louie in a high, whiny voice. Both Rocko and the other thug broke up at this, giggling like school girls. “You don’t think I’m going to let you walk out of here, do you?”

“You said...”

“I said you have an hour to get the money. I didn’t say you could leave to get it. I’m still following the agreement to the letter. So call somebody up and get them to bring it here.”

Hutson felt sick again.

“You don’t look so good.” Little Louie furrowed his brow in mock-concern. “Want an antacid?”

The thugs giggled again.

"I...I don't have anyone I can call," Hutson stammered.

"Call your buddy, Ray. Or maybe your mommy can bring the money."

"Mommy." Rocko snickered. "You ought to be a comedian, boss. You'd kill 'em."

Little Louie puffed out his fat little chest and belched.

"Better get to it, Mr. Hutson. You only have fifty-five minutes left."

Hutson took the phone in a trembling hand, and called Ray. It rang fifteen times, twenty, twenty-five.

Little Louie walked over, patted Hutson's shoulder. "I don't think they're home. Maybe you should try someone else."

Hutson fought nausea, wiped the sweat off of his neck, and dialed another number. His ex-girlfriend, Dolores. They broke up last month. Badly.

A man answered.

"Can I speak to Dolores?"

"Who the hell is this?"

"It's Hutson."

"What the hell do you want?"

"Please let me speak to Dolores, it's real important."

Little Louie watched, apparently drinking in the scene. Hutson had a feeling the mobster didn't care about the money, that he'd rather watch his men inflict some major pain.

"Dolores, this is Hutson."

"What do you want?"

"I need some money. I owe a gambling debt and..."

She hung up on him before he got any farther.

Hutson squeezed his eyes shut. Thirty thousand dollars worth of pain. What would they start with? His knees? His teeth? Jesus, his eyes?

Hutson tried his parents. They picked up on the sixth ring.

"Mom?" This brought uncontrollable laughter from the trio. "I need some money, fast. A gambling debt. They're going to hurt me."

"How much money?"

"Thirty grand. And it need it in forty-five minutes."

There was a lengthy pause.

"When are you going to grow up, Bernard?"

"Mom..."

"You can't keep expecting me and your father to pick up after you all the time. You're a grown man Bernard."

Hutson mopped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Mom, I'll pay you back, I swear to God. I'll never gamble again."

An eternity of silence passed.

"Maybe you'll learn a lesson from this, son. A lesson your father and I obviously never taught

you.”

“Mom, for God’s sake! They’re going to hurt me!”

“I’m sorry. You got yourself into this, you’ll have to get yourself out.”

“Mom! Please!”

The phone went dead.

“Yeah, parents can be tough.” Little Louie rolled his head around on his chubby neck, making a sound like a crackling cellophane bag. “That’s why I killed mine.”

Hutson cradled his face in his hands and tried to fight back a sob. He lost. He was going to be hurt. He was going to be very badly hurt, over a long period of time. And no one was going to help him.

“Please,” he said, in a voice he didn’t recognize. “Just give me a day or two. I’ll get the money.”

Little Louie shook his head. “That ain’t the deal. You agreed to the terms, and those terms were to the letter. You still have half an hour. See who else you can call.”

Hutson brushed away his tears and stared at the phone, praying for a miracle. Then he had an idea.

He called the police.

He dialed 911, then four more numbers so it looked like it was a normal call. A female officer answered.

“Chicago Police Department.”

“This is Hutson. This is a matter of life and death. Bring 30,000 dollars over to 1357 Ontario, apartment 506.”

“Sir, crank calls on the emergency number is a crime, punishable by a fine of five hundred dollars and up to thirty days in prison.”

“Listen to me. Please. They want to kill me.”

“Who does, sir?”

“These guys. It’s a gambling debt. They’re going to hurt me. Get over here.”

“Sir, having already explained the penalty for crank calls...”

The phone was ripped from Hutson’s hands by Rocko and handed to Little Louie.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” Little Louie hung up and wagged a finger at Hutson. “I’m very disappointed in you, Mr. Hutson. After all, you had agreed to my terms.”

Hutson began to cry. He cried like a first grader with a skinned knee. He cried for a long time, before finally getting himself under control.

“It’s time.” Little Louie glanced at his watch and smiled. “Start with his fingers.”

“Please don’t hurt me...”

Rocko and the other thug moved in. Hutson dodged them and got on his knees in front of Little Louie.

“I’ll do anything,” he pleaded. “Anything at all. Name it. Just name it. But please don’t hurt me.”

“Hold it boys.” Little Louie raised his palm. “I have an idea.”

A small ray of hope penetrated Hutson.

“Anything. I’ll do anything.”

Little Louie took out a long, thin cigarillo and nipped off the end, swallowing it.

“There was a guy, about six years ago, who was in the same situation you’re in now.”

He put the end of the cigar in his mouth and rolled it around on his fat, gray tongue.

“This guy also said he would do anything, just so I didn’t hurt him. Remember that fellas?”

Both bodyguards nodded.

“He finally said, what he would do, is put his hand on a stove burner for ten seconds. He said he would hold his own hand on the burner, for ten whole seconds.”

Little Louie produced a gold Dunhill and lit the cigar, rolling it between his chubby fingers while drawing hard.

“He only lasted seven, and we had to hurt him anyway.” Little Louie sucked on the stogie, and blew out a perfect smoke ring. “But I am curious to see if it could be done. The whole ten seconds.”

Little Louie looked at Hutson, who was still kneeling before him.

“If you can hold your right hand on a stove burner for ten seconds, Mr. Hutson, I’ll relieve you of your debt and you can leave without anyone hurting you.”

Hutson blinked several times. How hot did a stove burner get? How seriously would he be hurt?

Not nearly as much as having thirty thousand dollars worth of damage inflicted upon him.

But a stove burner? Could he force himself to keep his hand on it for that long?

Did he have any other choice?

“I’ll do it.”

Little Louie smiled held out a hand to help Hutson to his feet.

“Of course, if you don’t do it, the boys will still have to work you over. You understand.”

Hutson nodded, allowing himself to be led into the kitchen.

The stove was off-white, a greasy Kenmore, with four electric burners. The heating elements were each six inches in diameter, coiled into spirals like a whirlpool swirl. They were black, but Hutson knew when he turned one on it would glow orange.

Little Louie and his bodyguards stepped behind him to get a better look.

“It’s electric,” noted Rocko.

Little Louie frowned. “The other guy used a gas stove. His sleeve caught on fire. Remember that?”

The thugs giggled. Hutson picked the lower left hand burner and turned it on the lowest setting.

Little Louie wasn’t impressed.

“Hey, switch it up higher than that.”

“You didn’t say how high it had to be when we made the agreement.” Hutson spoke fast, relying on the mobster’s warped sense of fairness. “Just that I had to keep it on for ten seconds.”

“It was inferred it would be on the hottest.”

“I can put it on low and still follow the deal to the letter.”

Little Louie considered this, then nodded.

“You’re right. You’re still following it to the letter. Leave it on low then.”

It didn’t matter, because already the burner was firey orange. Rocko leaned over and spat on it, and

the saliva didn't even have a chance to drip through the coils before sizzling away and evaporating.

"It think it's hot," Rocko said.

Hutson stared at the glowing burner. He held his trembling hand two inches above it. The heat was excruciating. Hutson's palm began to sweat and the hair above his knuckles curled and he fought the little voice in his brain that screamed get your hand away!

"Well, go ahead." Little Louie held up a gold pocket watch. "I'll start when you do. Ten whole seconds."

"Sweet Jesus in heaven help me," thought Hutson.

He bit his lip and slapped his hand down on to the burner.

There was an immediate frying sound, like bacon in a pan. The pain was instant and searing. Hutson screamed and screamed, the coils burning away the skin on his palm, burning into the flesh, blistering and bubbling, melting the muscle and fat, Hutson screaming louder now, smoke starting to rise, Little Louie sounding off the seconds, a smell like pork chops filling Hutson's nostrils, pain beyond intense, screaming so high there wasn't any sound, can't keep it there anymore, Jesus no more no more and...

Hutson yanked his hand from the burner, trembling, feeling faint, clutching his right hand at the wrist and stumbling to the sink, turning on the cold water, putting his charred hand under it, losing consciousness, everything going black.

He woke up lying on the floor, the pain in his hand a living thing, his mouth bleeding from biting his lower lip. His face contorted and he yelled from the anguish.

Little Louie stood over him, holding the pocket watch. "That was only seven seconds."

Hutson's scream could have woken the dead. It was full of heart-wrenching agony and fear and disgust and pity. It was the scream of the man being interrogated by the Gestapo. The scream of the woman having a Caesarean without anesthetic. The scream of a father in a burning, wrecked car turning to see his baby on fire.

The scream of a man without hope.

"Don't get upset." Little Louie offered him a big grin. "I'll let you try it again."

The thugs hauled Hutson to his feet, and he whimpered and passed out. He woke up on the floor again, choking. Water had been thrown in his face.

Little Louie shook his head, sadly. "Come on Mr. Hutson. I haven't got all day. I'm a busy man. If you want to back out, the boys can do their job. I want to warn you though, a thirty grand job means we'll put your face on one of these burners, and that would just be the beginning. Make your decision."

Hutson got to his feet, knees barely able to support him, breath shallow, hand hurting worse than any pain he had ever felt. He didn't want to look at it, found himself doing it anyway, and stared at the black, inflamed flesh in a circular pattern on his palm. Hardly any blood. Just raw, exposed, gooey cooked muscle where the skin had fried away.

Hutson bent over and threw up.

“Come on, Mr. Hutson. You can do it. You came so close, I’d hate to have to cripple you permanently.”

Hutson tried to stagger to the door to get away, but was held back before he took two steps.

“The stove is over here, Mr. Hutson.” Little Louie’s black rat eyes sparkled like polished onyx.

Rocko steered Hutson back to the stove. Hutson stared down at the orange glowing burner, blackened in several places where parts of his palm had stuck and cooked to cinder. The pain was pounding. He was dazed and on the verge of passing out again. He lifted his left hand over the burner.

“Nope. Sorry Mr. Hutson. I specifically said it had to be your right hand. You have to use your right hand, please.”

Could he put his right hand on that burner again? Hutson didn’t think he could, in his muddled, agony-spiked brain. He was sweating and cold at the same time, and the air swam around him. His body shook and trembled. If he were familiar with the symptoms, Hutson might have known he was going into shock. But he wasn’t a doctor, and he couldn’t think straight anyway, and the pain, oh jesus, the awful pain, and he remembered being five years old and afraid of dogs, and his grandfather had a dog and made him pet it, and he was scared, so scared that it would bite, and his grandfather grabbed his hand and put it toward the dog’s head...

Hutson put his hand back on the burner.

“One.....two.....”

Hutson screamed again, searing pain bringing him out of shock. His hand reflexively grabbed the burner, pushing down harder, muscles squeezing, the old burns set aflame again, blistering, popping...

“.....three.....”

Take it off! Take it off! Screaming, eyes squeezed tight, shaking his head like a hound with a fox in his teeth, sounds of cracking skin and sizzling meat...

“.....four.....five.....”

Black smoke, rising, a burning smell, that’s me cooking, muscle melting and searing away, nerves exposed, screaming even louder, pull it away!, using the other hand to hold it down...

“.....six.....seven.....”

Agony so exquisite, so absolute, unending, entire arm shaking, falling to knees, keeping hand on burner, opening eyes and seeing it sear at eye level, turning grey like a well-done steak, meat charring...

“Smells pretty good,” says one of the thugs.

“Like a hamburger.”

“A hand-burger.”

Laughter.

“.....eight.....nine.....”

No flesh left, orange burner searing bone, scorching, blood pumping onto heating coils, beading and evaporating like fat on a griddle, veins and arteries searing...

“.....ten!”

Take it off! Take it off!

It's stuck.

“Look boss, he's stuck!”

Air whistled out of Hutson's lungs like a horse whimpering. His hand continued to fry away. He pulled feebly, pain at a peak, all nerves exposed—pull dammit! —blacking out, everything fading...

Hutson awoke on the floor, shaking, with more water in his face.

“Nice job Mr. Hutson.” Little Louie stared down at him. “You followed the agreement. To the letter. You're off the hook.”

Hutson squinted up at the mobster. The little man seemed very far away.

“Since you've been such a sport, I've even called an ambulance for you. They're on their way. Unfortunately, the boys and I won't be here when it arrives.”

Hutson tried to say something. His mouth wouldn't form words.

“I hope we can gamble again soon, Mr. Hutson. Maybe we could play a hand or two. Get it? A hand?”

The thugs tittered. Little Louie bent down, close enough for Hutson to smell his cigar breath.

“Oh, there's one more thing, Mr. Hutson. Looking back on our agreement, I said you had to hold your right hand on the burner for ten seconds. I said you had to follow that request to the letter. But, you know what? I just realized something pretty funny. I never said you had to turn the burner on.”

Little Louie left, followed by his body guards, and Bernard Hutson screamed and screamed and just couldn't stop.

The following is an excerpt from

**LAST CALL – A Jack Daniels Thriller**

**SOMEWHERE IN MEXICO**

He called it the *throne room*.

The walls were stone. K had wanted gray, like a medieval castle, but nothing in this country was gray. He'd settled for light brown adobe, with a sloppy coat of light charcoal paint the cartel had splashed around with the finesse of men who sold drugs for a living.

There was a single window, squarish and barely big enough to stick your head through, overlooking the fighting arena two floors below. At night, the only light came courtesy greasy oil lamps hanging from chains, yellow and sickly and not much brighter than candles. Electric light was impossible; when K converted the room he'd bricked over the electrical outlets and fixtures. Every time Lucy entered the room it took a few seconds for her eye to adjust to the darkness.

K preferred darkness. He wrapped himself in it like a vampire in a cape.

Lucy didn't knock before entering the throne room; she couldn't because there was no door, only an arched entryway. She was the only one K allowed inside, and every single time she found him in the same position. Seated at a ratty, stained, purple throne leftover from some second-rate, 1970s theater production of *King Lear*. It was a huge, with a high back, and K was always slumped in it, perfectly still, looking small, eyes wide and staring at nothing, his labored, keening wheeze the only proof he was still alive.

The cartel called him El Rey. Lucy had taken to calling him K, and he hadn't objected.

Others knew him as Luther Kite.

She walked up the scrap of maroon runner to the foot of his throne, bowed as deeply as her wrecked back could bend, and then searched his eyes to see if he'd noticed her arrival.

His gaze remained vacant. Lucy couldn't tell if it was the Tussin, or something else. K's pale countenance hadn't darkened a bit in the Mexicali weather; if anything it had become more translucent. The hair he had left was patchy, graying. Looking at him, Lucy sometimes felt like she was staring at an old black and white film.

"I've been thinking," he said, surprising her. "About pain."

It was a subject they both knew intimately well. On the giving end, and as captive recipients.

"What about it, K?"

She leaned in, smelling lemon candy on his breath; a habit he'd been unable to break even though the part of his tongue that tasted sour had been long ago sliced off.

"The end to our pain is coming, Lucy. Soon."

"How?"

"Why not death rather than living torment?"

Lucy hated when he talked like that. Quoting old, cryptic shit.

“Death? That’s the end of our pain?”

“Death is the end of everything. And it closes in on us.”

“Are you ill, K?”

K’s eyes snapped into focus and pinned her. “No more than usual. He’s mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf.”

Lucy sighed, overly dramatic. “More Shakespeare? I hate that guy.”

“When I was captive, sometimes he let me read. Shakespeare. Old mystery magazines, with pages ripped out so I never knew how the stories ended. Once, because it amused him, an Italian crime novel. That was my sole entertainment for an entire year. I can’t speak Italian, but I read every word. I read the Shakespeare, too. It made about as much sense than the Italian. But sometimes, those wretched lines get stuck.” He poked a boney finger at his temple. “The Bard is lucky he died four hundred years ago, because I would love to cut him into tiny bits and make him eat himself, piece by piece.”

Lucy allowed the image to worm itself into her brain. What to cut first. How big the slices should be. “Sounds fun. We should try something like that.”

“Maybe. I have another idea. From something I read.”

The warmth she was feeling dissipated, and Lucy suppressed a groan. “Let me guess. Shakespeare.”

“No. Hitchcock. Let’s go to the playroom.”

“Now you’re talkin’, K.”

K pulled himself up to his feet, using his scepter as a cane. The skull atop the staff wasn’t real; a tourist souvenir, made of ceramic to sell on Día de Muertos. The gold shaft was also fake, the metallic paint flaking off, the colored jewels adorning the color made of glass. But the hair atop the skull, dark and matted and glued there like a fright wig, was a real human scalp.

Lucy knew it was real, because she and K had taken it from its previous owner as he begged for mercy they didn’t have.

The duo walked into the hallway, and the faux castle motif continued, albeit sloppily. The walls weren’t actually adobe, but rather stucco painted to look like stone. There were electric lights, hanging on the low ceiling—original fixtures dating from when the building had been converted into a hotel in the 1950s. K had replaced the bulbs with the kind that flickered like orange candles.

They took the stairs slow, using the railings. Lucy hated stairs. It was painful enough getting around on level surfaces, but something about up-and-down movement ignited her raw nerve endings like cattle-prod shocks to her spine. She clenched the teeth she had left and weathered the pain. When they reached the bottom, some cartel asshole was sitting on the last three steps, smoking a cigarette, his earbuds spitting out tinny *ranchero* music. He didn’t notice they were above him until K poked him with his scepter.

The chollo turned, his expression morphing from irritated to spooked in half a heartbeat. It reminded Lucy of a cartoon character, eyes popping out in surprise.

“Lo siento, El Rey,” he sputtered, quickly getting out of the way and hurrying down the corridor.

On the first floor, the décor was no longer Halloween/medieval, and instead reflected what the building actually was; a renovated mission, built in the 1800s. K stopped at his room, and like the majority of rooms in the crumbling hotel it was cramped, hot, and stank of age. Perched on K's bed was a medium-sized cardboard box. He handed Lucy his scepter and picked it up.

“Dropped off this morning,” K said. “A new toy to play with.”

Lucy noted that the box was labeled Amazon, and her hopes dimmed. Even though Amazon claimed to be *The Everything Store*, she doubted they sold torture paraphernalia, rare weapons, or interrogation equipment. Whatever K had planned for the playroom was probably going to be lame.

As with any other addiction, it was possible to develop a tolerance to sadism. When [Lucy had first met K](#), she'd been a teenager and had just killed her first man. At the time, K collected antique surgical tools, and each terrible instrument they'd tried upped the level of excitement. Lithotomes, scarificators, tonsil guillotines. Artificial leeches. A vintage speculum made of wrought iron that could be heated on a stovetop until it glowed. Artificial leeches.

To get the same high as the old days, Lucy needed things to be uglier. Messier. More extreme.

But what was the worst thing that could be in an Amazon box? Some overpriced hardcover books and a lint roller?

She eyed the package again. No bigger than a breadbox.

Shit, maybe it *was* a breadbox. Lucy wouldn't be surprised. Lately, K had been...

*Slipping* was the wrong word. Fading? Losing interest?

Going mad?

When they'd first arrived at the compound, over a year ago, Lucy had felt like a dysfunctional kid in a candy store. She'd always been a nomad, and took her fix on the road when she could find it. That meant passing up a lot of potential opportunities for safety's sake. Killing in public required a certain situational awareness. She could never truly lose herself in a messy death while worrying if the cops were around the next corner. And in a day and age where everyone had a cell phone with a high resolution camera, it had become almost impossible to indulge in her particular tastes while remaining invisible.

South of Mexicali, there had been no such worries. Lucy could take her time, really enjoy the moment. Not only were they safe, but they were being protected *and* getting paid for their skills.

Those early times in the compound had been fun. She and K had done everything—imaginable and unimaginable—to cause human beings pain. Highlights included:

Building a working iron maiden.

Frying a mother, father, and their two children in a giant pot of lard.

Ling Chi, also known as the death of a thousand cuts (actually, it took a thousand two hundred and four.)

A pair of iron boots that could be locked onto feet, with holes for molten lead to be poured inside.

Strappado, mazzatello, flaying, even a blood eagle (the back slashed open, ribs broken off the spine, and the lungs pulled out to resemble bird wings.)

And her all-time favorite; the blowtorch toilet, which worked pretty much like it sounded.

Those were in the playroom. In the arena, they'd come up with many other wicked forms of execution that paying spectators could wager on.

Drawn and quartered by cars, betting on which limb would detach first.

Crucifixions.

Impalings on long, steel rods.

The living necklace (four men with a thick rope threaded through their bellies, playing tug of war.)

A naked footrace over hot coals.

It had been glorious.

Lately, things hadn't been so glorious. K's last attempt at a spectacular death was a man locked in a cage with a hundred rats. In that case, the crowd had almost died... of boredom. The rats had ignored the man, and he eventually died of exposure or thirst or something equally boring.

And K's current method of punishing the cartel's enemies was a Sicilian necktie; slitting the throat and pulling the tongue out of the hole. Not very bloody, not very painful, and over much too quickly.

Luther Kite used to terrify Lucy, with his nature and with his legend.

But the man she called K...

K was a crippled, pale image of his former self.

Where was the bloodlust? Where was the creativity?

Lucy remembered when D...

*D.*

Donaldson.

There was a serial murderer who died at the top of his game. A killer's killer. D kept his edge to the very end.

Lucy had been born without the ability to care about anything other than herself. But sometimes she found herself missing the old fella. They'd been through a lot together. And they'd shared a bond closer than anything she'd ever shared with Luther.

Lucy could hear someone wailing in pain; they were nearing the playroom. But it didn't excite her like it should have.

She was too bust thinking about D. Maybe, someday, she'd see him again.

But only if hell really existed.

**Buy [LAST CALL](#) by J.A. Konrath**

# LAST CALL

A retired cop past her prime...

A kidnapped bank robber fighting for his life...

A former mob enforcer with a blood debt...

A government assassin on the run...

A wisecracking private eye with only one hand...

A homicide sergeant with one week left on the job...

And three of the worst serial killers, ever.

This is where it all ends. An epic showdown in the desert, where good and evil will clash one last time.

His name is Luther Kite, and his specialty is murdering people in ways too horrible to imagine. He's gone south, where he's found a new, spectacular way to kill. And if you have enough money, you can bet on who dies first.

Legendary Chicago cop Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels has retired. She's no longer chasing bad guys, content to stay out of the public eye and raise her new daughter. But when her daughter's father, Phin Troutt, is kidnapped, she's forced to strap on her gun one last time.

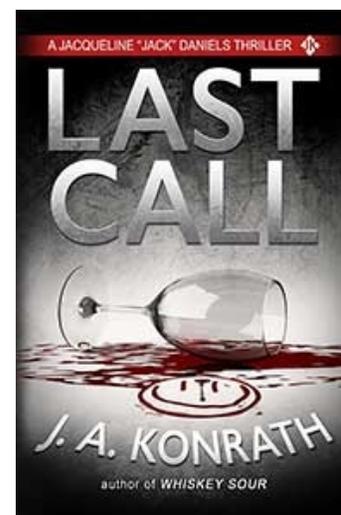
Since being separated from his psychotic soulmate, the prolific serial killer known as Donaldson has been desperately searching for her. Now he thinks he's found out where his beloved, insane Lucy has been hiding. He's going to find her, no matter how many people are slaughtered in the process.

All three will converge in same place. La Juntita, Mexico. Where a bloodthirsty cartel is enslaving people and forcing them to fight to the death in insane, gladiator-style games.

Join Jack and Phin, Donaldson and Lucy, and Luther, for the very last act in their twisted, perverse saga.

Along for the ride are Jack's friends; Harry and Herb, as well as a mob enforcer named Tequila, and a covert operative named Chandler.

There will be blood. And death. So much death...



[LAST CALL](#) by J.A. Konrath

The conclusion to the Jack Daniels/Luther Kite epic

# RUM RUNNER

Twenty years ago, a young cop named Jacqueline “Jack” Daniels arrested one of the most sadistic killers she’d ever encountered. She has since retired from the Chicago Police Department in order to raise her toddler daughter.

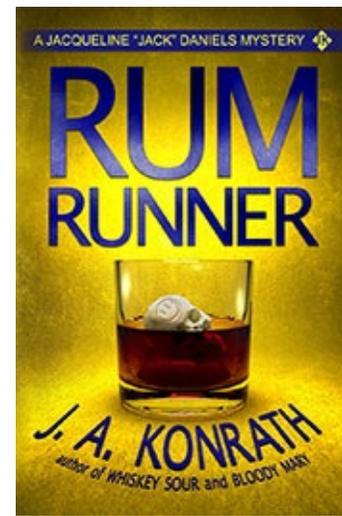
While on vacation in the Wisconsin north woods, Jack learns—too late—that her old adversary is out of prison. He has revenge on his mind. And he’s bringing an army with him.

Outnumbered, outgunned, and cut off from the outside world, Jack Daniels is about to learn the meaning of last stand.

This is the 9th Jack Daniels novel, after *STIRRED*. More than 1 million Jack Daniels novels have been sold worldwide.

[RUM RUNNER](#) by J.A. Konrath

That which does not kill you, keeps trying...



# WEBCAM

Someone is stalking webcam models.

He lurks in the untouchable recesses of the black web.

He's watching you. Right now.

When watching is no longer enough, he comes calling.

He's the last thing you'll ever see before the blood gets in your eyes.

Chicago Homicide Detective Tom Mankowski (THE LIST, HAUNTED HOUSE) is no stranger to homicidal maniacs. But this one is the worst he's ever chased, with an agenda that will make even the most diehard horror reader turn on all their lights, and switch off all Internet, WiFi, computers, and electronic devices.

Jack Kilborn reaches down into the depths of depravity and drags the terror novel kicking and cyber-screaming into the 21st century.

[WEBCAM](#)

I'm texting you from inside your closet. Wanna play? :-)



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