

FOOL ME TWICE

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For my father and best friend. You were the best of the best.

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PROLOGUE

I was running out of time.

With only fifty feet to go before I was safely out of the building, my legs and lungs were already past the point of exhaustion. I made it out of the bank pushing forward with a huge canvas duffel bag slung over my back. Believe me, 1.5 million in cash is no easy load.

Thankfully, just outside those double doors, was Mac, my get-away driver. If he'd followed my instructions, the engine would be running and he'd be ready and waiting.

After years of meticulous preparation, my plan had gone off without a hitch. It had to work. I had no other choice, no backup plans for my life. This was it. The last crime I would ever commit. One final score...

As I exited those doors into the sweltering Houston heat, my heart almost stopped. My get-away car was nowhere in sight. Please, God, no!

It was happening to me all over again. Just like before, fifteen years ago. But when I heard a horn honk, I turned to see Mac, waving at me with a goofy grin on his face. The son of a bitch had changed parking places on me, nearly giving me a heart attack.

Of course, I couldn't get mad at him. There wasn't time. Already sirens and helicopters announced their advancement in the distance.

Besides, how could I possibly blame Mac? The guy was clueless. He hadn't the slightest idea he was driving the get-away car in a million-dollar bank heist. He was just an Uber driver. Some schmuck I'd duped into the job. A patsy.

I had him park a block away from the bank, so he'd have no idea what I was up to. Then I lied and told him I was picking up a shipment of "mass-marketing flyers" from my employer's office building.

Up until now, Mac had fully cooperated, in a manner of speaking. Everything had worked out spectacularly. With sweat pouring down my face and my bag now stuffed with 1.5 million marketing mailers, I limped the final few yards to Mac's car.

But, as I passed the driver's side, he rolled down the window. "All cargo goes in the trunk," he yelled.

What the fuck was this? When I'd mentioned picking up my mailers earlier, he hadn't said a fucking word about it going in the trunk.

"But Mac, I already told you..."

"All cargo goes in the trunk! That's my policy. I Scotchguard my seats, and I plan on keeping them like new," exclaimed Mac.

Scotchguard? Was this guy serious? It simply wasn't going to work. I had to be able to access the money as we drove away in order to check it for any GPS tracking devices the bank teller may have stashed along with the money when filling my bag. If it was locked in the trunk, I'd be unable to take that crucial precaution. So, I ignored him.

But, as I walked around to my side of the car, I heard a click. The son of a bitch had locked the doors from the inside.

"Mac!!!" I screamed, "My bag's not dirty! Now open the damn door!"

I could have easily settled the matter since I had a loaded '45 strapped to my ankle, but that would've involved setting the bag down and taking my pistol out. Like I said, there wasn't time for that. The sirens grew louder by the second. I also wanted to avoid, if possible, brandishing a weapon. The last thing I wanted was a panicked get-away driver on my hands. I caved in to this sissy with his Scotchguarded seats.

"All right, all right!" I yelled. "Pop the damn trunk, asshole!"

When the lid popped open, I dropped the money in the trunk, then slammed it shut. It was probably the dumbest thing I'd ever

done. But hey, panic can make you do stupid things. Not to mention I was physically and emotionally exhausted from the morning's events. If you've ever won a big jackpot playing cards, or hit it big at the racetrack, you know what I mean. There's no bigger adrenaline rush than scoring a million and a half dollars in a half-hour's work.

The second I slammed the trunk closed Mac put the car in gear and drove away. My brain refused to process what my eyes were seeing. When the initial realization hit, I exploded. I ran alongside his car yelling and banging my fist on the roof. But it was too late. As he drove off, I stood there in tears, watching, as fifteen years of meticulous planning turned to ashes before my eyes. In a matter of seconds all my hopes, dreams, and plans had blown away in the wind.

I had no backup plans for my life. For years, everything hinged on this. I'd soon be forty-five, and needless to say, too damn old for this shit.

This was to be my last job.

After all those years in prison, I wasn't really good for much of anything anymore. I had a job, sure. But I'd have to work at it until I was eighty-five just to make the amount of money I'd lost in the last five minutes.

This was all I had.

My last chance.

Just one final score.

And wouldn't you know it?

I'd blown it.

But how was I to know?

My driver had given me no indication he was on to me.

Or had he?

Looking back on the hour that had passed since first meeting Mac, I realized something. Maybe I *had* missed a red flag.

Or two.

CHAPTER 13

Within three or four minutes, we were both soaked in sweat. A few hundred yards down the trail, we came to a large concrete drainage ditch that separated the housing subdivision on one side, from the woods on the other. On the side opposite of the Stop N Go, a well-worn path intersected the drainage ditch.

I followed behind Mac as he made his way down the embankment. But halfway down the slope, while attempting to use the shovel for a brake, Mac slipped and fell on the slick concrete. I laughed out loud as he slid the last few feet on his ass, then got up to reveal a large, spreading wet stain on the back of his pants.

His face reddened. “Oh, that’s reeeaaal funny, ain’t it?”

His annoyance made me laugh that much harder.

“No, Mac, it’s not funny. It’s hilarious!”

He turned to glare at me.

“Hey,” I said, “I laughing *with* you, not *at* you!”

“In case you didn’t notice, Paddy, I’m not laughing.”

“You would be if you could see the back of your pants.”

Finally, he cracked a smile. “Fuck you, Paddy.”

After another half-mile of walking, the concrete ditch intersected a creek, which we then followed for another quarter-mile. Next to a large, corrugated metal culvert that was draining water into the creek, we veered left onto a wooded trail and soon found ourselves in the middle of a swamp.

A forest of ancient moss-draped oak trees abruptly blotted out the morning sun, providing a welcome respite from the oppressive heat. As we walked along, Mac was carefully observing the trail on

our right, looking—I assumed—for a marker of some kind. At a trail crossing, we stopped to deliberate.

“I think we already passed it,” Mac said, scratching his head.

“Passed what?”

“A tree.”

I grunted. “Mac, we’ve passed a lot more than one tree.”

“Yeah I know, but this one has a broken branch.”

“Really, Mac? At three in the morning, you’re on your way to your own murder, and you notice a tree with a broken branch in the dark?”

I was beginning to get more than a bit annoyed. I was already hot, tired, and skeptical of Mac’s claims. The last thing I wanted to do on a day like this was go on a wild goose chase. When he stopped once more, I suggested we turn around and retrace our steps, which we did.

“So, tell me,” I said, “exactly what shape branch are we looking for?”

He held his hands up like a cheerleader making a Y. “It’s a giant oak tree, and the branch sticks out sideways.”

“And you noticed all this at night?” I was still a little incredulous at his level of observance in such a stressful moment.

“Stop being so cynical. I already told you I did!”

I wiped a puddle of sweat off my forehead. “I’m *not* being cynical! It’s just so fucking hot out here!”

Fifteen minutes later, I was ready to throw in the towel. But I agreed to try a third and final time.

And would you believe it?

On the third try, we found the spot. *Hallelujah!*

Apparently, the broken branch had been blown down in a fierce thunderstorm. It was now laying a few feet off the trail, partially hidden under a blanket of debris.

Mac positively reveled in picking up the branch and waving it in my face, even though it was nearly as big as he was.

“You see! You see there! I told you!” I kept waiting for him to stick out his tongue and say, “*nah, nah nah-nah-nah!*”

I patted him on the back. “Good, girl, Lassie! Good girl!”

“Fuck you, Paddy.”

“Seriously, Mac, I *am* proud of you. And to show my appreciation, when this is all over I'm going to buy us a case of ice-cold beer!”

At the broken branch, we went right, and directly into a dense thicket of vines and thorn bushes. There was now no sign whatsoever of a path or trail.

How he found it, I'll never know.

“Mac, old boy, you must be part hound dog.”

He looked up at the sky and brayed like an old hound.

As we stumbled through the undergrowth, we managed to disturb a tiny village of several trillion insects, many of whom welcomed us with sharpened teeth and/or stingers. We found ourselves in the midst of a wide-open clearing, accompanied by a chorus of humming and buzzing insects—tiny midges and gnats—who began dive-bombing our noses and mouths and nostrils, searching, it seemed, for a more hospitable environment than the one they currently inhabited.

Something else caught my attention. “Mac, you smell that?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Boy, *do*! We're *here* then! We're most definitely here.”

He dropped the shovel where he stood, then took off his shirt, and wrapped it around his face to ward off the smell. Looking around the clearing, I *still* couldn't make out any signs of recently disturbed earth.

I gave Mac a questioning look.

“Really? You *still* don't see it? Look in front of your face!”

There was a huge, rotted-out log lying on the ground that stretched from one end of the clearing to the other.

Motioning towards it, Mac said, “Give me a hand here, would ya?”

I picked up the shovel and—using it as a lever—began rolling aside the dead tree-trunk. The thing must've been eight feet in circumference. As soon as we rolled the log aside, a writhing colony of beetles and earthworms slithered and scattered in all directions.

“Oh, God!” Mac groaned, holding the shirt to his nose to stave off the aroma of fresh, black loam mingled with the stench of rotting flesh.

“C’mon, Mac, it’s not *that* bad, is it? You just have to tune it out, Buddy.”

That was easy for me to say. I had yet to catch a real whiff of Louie. Suddenly though, I did. And let me tell you, there was no tuning *that* out.

We took turns shoveling for the next half hour. Between the heat, the stench, and the swarming bugs, it was pure torture. After stopping to wring the sweat from his shirt, Mac went on digging. With every scoop of dirt, the smell grew worse, until soon, both of us were literally gagging.

I figured it wouldn’t be long now.

Seconds later, we heard the smack of the shovel against plastic.

“What was that?” I asked, stepping back a few feet to take a seat on the dead tree.

“A plastic tarp. Louie brought it out here.” Mac giggled. “Said we were gonna wrap the money up in it. Can you believe that? He must’ve thought I was a complete dumbass. I showed *his* ass, though, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did, Buddy. Yes you did.”

I stayed on the log to maintain a safe distance from the smell. I certainly didn’t care to get a close-up look at Louie. Not after all that time.

Mac abruptly dropped the shovel, then crouched down on his haunches with a funny look on his face.

“Mac? What is it? What do you see?”

I raised my head just enough to catch a glimpse of a bare foot sticking from the dirt, the flesh mottled and purple. I was thankful that the dirt covered most everything else. When Mac looked up at me, I knew immediately that something was wrong.

“C’mon, Mac. What is it? You’re making me nervous here.”

He got down on his knees without acknowledging me. With the whites of his eyes shining in the middle of his dirt-smearred face, he reached down, grabbed the tarp, and pulled.

Every pull on the blue plastic tarp made the stench grow even stronger. Our eyes were even watering. And when Mac had finally

finished tugging, nothing *but* tarp remained in his hands. There certainly wasn't any sign of my money.

Fighting an overpowering urge to throw up, I stepped over to the hole. I didn't *want* to look, but I was *compelled* to.

But nothing remained.

Nothing, that is, except for Louie, who was now facedown in the dirt. I looked back at Mac, searching his face for clues as he stared into the hole. I saw nothing in the man's eyes but madness.

After making a strange groaning noise, he continued digging with his bare hands, like a rabid dog searching for a long-lost bone.

It was a pitiful sight, and I had to wonder.

Was it all just an act?

If it was, it was a good one. Perhaps he *had* studied acting at Yale.

"Someone must've seen us!" he said, tears streaming down his face. "I mean, shit, how else..?"

Something in my expression stopped him.

"C'mon, Paddy! You've gotta believe me! Please, for fuck's sake!"

I looked away. "Sorry, Mac. I *want* to believe you. But this just isn't making sense anymore. None of this makes sense."

"That's the only thing that could've happened, Paddy! Someone had to have seen us! Unless—"

I waved my hand at him. "I'm done, Mac. Sorry."

He held out his hands in supplication. "Paddy! I'm telling you the God's-honest truth!" He crawled from the hole on his hands and knees and began pulling on my pant leg, blubbering and whining.

In the blink of an eye I pulled out my pistol and fired a shot just inches from him, causing him to jump back in surprise. "Please, Paddy! Don't! Holy shit, I'll..."

I fired another round into the dirt in front of him, "Get your ass back in that hole!"

He started to stand. But when I fired another shot, he quickly complied with my order, but stopped just short of climbing all the way into the grave with Louie.

"Paddy, don't do, this!"

"I *said*, get... back... in the hole, *now*!"

My words had their intended effect, and he slowly eased back into the ground.

I absolutely hated what I was about to do. Indeed, it was completely out of character for me. But frankly, he'd left me no other choice.

When you've had the rug pulled from under you as much as I had, sooner or later something had to give.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You probably think I'm one of those nut cases who get their jollies out of making other people suffer. They're called sociopaths, or psychopaths. And although I've met plenty of them in prison, I'm not one of them.

Never have been.

Psychopaths will freely admit to enjoying nothing more than torturing cute, furry little animals just for shits and giggles.

But me?

I *have* a heart.

I just wanted to be sure Mac was telling me the truth. That he wasn't playing me for a fool again.

As he got down on his knees, I slowly eased the hammer back on my pistol.

"All right, Mac. This is your final chance." I pointed the gun at his face. "Where is my money?"

With trembling hands, he wiped the dirt and sweat from his eyes, pleading with me to change my mind.

"Paddy, look, I don't know where it is. But I *swear* it! We'll find out! If we can just—"

"No, Mac" I said, shaking my head. "I'm sorry. There's no more *we*. It's just me now. You're through."

"Think about what your about to do, Paddy."

I tightened my grip on the trigger, "I already have, Mac. Believe me. I already have."

And as my finger closed around the trigger, Mac cringed and closed his eyes.

I pulled the trigger.

And before the shot even finished echoing through the surrounding woods, a small trickle of blood began coursing a path down Mac's dirt-smeared face.

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