

MISDIRECTION

Casey crouched in tangled brush under the hedge across the road and admired the property's layout. Oaks, maples and pines surrounded the house like sentinels, guarding its borders and protecting its secrets. The branches above rustled in the late afternoon breeze as lengthening shadows danced over patchy dry grass. Lots of trees meant plenty of cover.

"We've only got an hour before curfew," he told Eryn. "So it's now or never."

"Are you absolutely sure about this," she said, shifting her weight, trying to ease the pain in her aching knees. "It seems like such a big risk. What if there's nothing there? How do you know for sure she's out? What if someone else is home?" Eryn paused. "What if you get caught?"

"Don't chicken out on me now," Casey said, trying not to snap as he transitioned from a crouch to his knees. He offered Eryn a reassuring smile.

"She's an old lady. We both saw her leave for work. We both know she lives alone. If Stevie Dickinson says she's hoarding a fortune in her basement, then who am I to believe otherwise? He told me he knows her, and he's been in her house, so it's got to be true. And you know what Stevie's like--best I get in there first before he does anything about it.

"Look at me," he said, brushing a straggling lock of blond hair back with his hand. Casey looked younger than fourteen, but was becoming increasingly aware of how to use his innocent countenance. "You know why I'm doing this."

Eryn looked at her feet, her cheeks flushing red. "I know, your Mom and everything. It's just that...I don't know."

"What?"

"Did you ever think it's not much of a house for someone supposedly so rich?"

"She's hoarding it, that's all. You're worrying too much, Eryn."

"Old ladies are paranoid. What if there's an alarm?"

"We've been over this," he said, resisting an urge to roll his eyes, which he knew Eryn hated. "I told you yesterday I know

how to get in through the back window. There is no alarm. This is the easiest money we'll ever make. You were fine with this yesterday."

Eryn leant forward with her arms on the ground, taking more pressure from her knees. She was a solid girl without being overweight, most of her strength in the legs. As Bellfield High's varsity sprint champ, Eryn's athletic ability might come in handy in the unlikely event things did end up going south.

"I know, but yesterday was just a practice run, and all you did was trespass, rather than commit felony breaking and entering."

"You watch way too much Law and Order," he said, laughing. "Relax, you have the easiest job. Risk free."

"Yeah, as long as she doesn't show up," Eryn said, poking out her tongue.

Casey smiled and exhaled a long slow breath.

"If the old woman does come back--which she won't--just ring the door bell and go with the fun run story. That'll give me plenty of time to exit stage left. Okay?"

Eryn nodded.

"Okay?" Casey repeated.

She smiled. "Sure, James Bond. Easy money."

Casey checked his watch.

"God, I hate this six pm curfew. All in the interests of safety--what bull. I swear everyone under eighteen in this town is living in a police state."

Eryn rolled her eyes.

"Oh! I can't believe you did that. Now I owe you an eye roll," he said, making a mental note to stop complaining about the stupid curfew.

He eased his head out from the hedge. Applenut Lane was deserted. The abandoned house to the left of the old woman's property was in a profound state of decay, its weathered clapboards rotting at a pace similar to Bellfield's economy. Casey gave it only a cursory glance before turning his attention to the house on the right. Its window shades were drawn and the driveway empty.

The breeze had died, leaving only the rumble of distant traffic from Summerfield Road. Casey frowned, thinking the silence of the neighborhood was both convenient and unsettling. For some reason, the bizarre notion entered his head that everyone in Bellfield had received advance notice of his plan, and all activity had ceased in anticipation of watching him fail. He shook off the idea trying to convince himself the empty streets simply meant people were getting home early, ahead of the curfew.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," she replied, and added, "Two for luck," before kissing Casey once on each cheek.

"Call me Bond, Casey Bond."

"Go, you fool," she said, smiling.

Casey crawled out from the hedge and walked across the road at a brisk pace. He constantly glanced left and right, but saw no signs of any activity. He pinched the fleshy webbing of his left hand between his thumb and index finger, a trick he learned in debate class. Mr. Evans' theory was based on a simple form of misdirection--the mind's focus temporarily shifted to the pain rather than the task at hand.

The old woman's property was fenced on three sides, but open to the road. A concrete walkway led from the sidewalk to the nondescript brown front door. Two towering pines either side of the path marked the entrance. Casey took a few steps down the path and then ducked behind the tree on the right. He lurked in its shadow, facing the house, but almost completely invisible from the road. He poked his head around and waited until Eryn gave him the all-clear signal with her thumb. The house was set back from the road, but the property's ample trees offered Casey good cover all the way to the rear. He thought of Eryn's words and stifled a giggle. *Let's see James Bond move like that.*

Once in the small, dark backyard, Casey could move around more freely as the high wooden fence and surrounding trees offered more privacy. An old wooden gate with rusted hinges opened to parkland behind the house, but Casey suspected it hadn't been opened in years. He didn't bother with the back door, moving straight to the adjacent window. He peered into the gloom just making out a small kitchen table surrounded by rickety, old chairs.

The window was unlatched, just as he'd found it yesterday afternoon. But unlike yesterday, this time he opened the window and climbed inside.

His first impression was the smell, something strong, like bleach. He pulled a pen light from his pants pocket and switched it on. The thin beam showed nothing out of the ordinary.

"Definitely neat and tidy," he whispered. "You can come and clean our place anytime, old lady." He put his hand to his mouth fighting back another urge to laugh.

Concentrate! Remember the curfew.

An entryway to the right led to a modest living room, but Casey was more interested in the door to the left. He opened it and shined the flashlight down wooden stairs. There was no switch so he descended slowly, and after just a few steps down his light was strong enough to illuminate the concrete floor

below. The basement was spotless, and the smell of bleach much stronger. Casey set the timer on his watch to ten minutes.

He started at the back of the basement and progressively worked his way forward, looking into every box, cupboard, and storage shelf. He even inspected the walls and ceiling, but could find no trace of a hiding place, or anything he considered even remotely valuable.

Think! What would Bond do?

Casey didn't know. Had Stevie been wrong? His friend had seemed so confident, almost bordering on desperate as he outlined his 'perfect' plan, but it hadn't taken long into his search for Casey to realize that while Stevie had been long on enthusiasm, he'd been short on details.

"Jesus Christ," he said, more loudly than intended and sat on the floor next to a storage crate. Casey thought of his mother, who'd either be in bed, or sitting in front of the TV, the inevitable empty bottle of Smirnoff lying nearby.

He picked up an old wicker picnic basket from on top of a crate and hurled it against the wall. The impact made a hollow sound and left a dent in the plaster. She's probably got a secret room in there, he thought, but time was up, and this was going nowhere.

Casey went back up the stairs to the kitchen, but instead of heading to the window, he turned right and entered the living room. A quick scan revealed nothing worth stealing so he walked through an open door into the old woman's bedroom. He checked his watch. *Better make this quick.* The boxes on top of the dresser held nothing but cheap jewelry, or so it looked to Casey's untrained eyes. He opened the top drawer having already made up his mind to leave straight away if it came up empty. Nothing but old woman's underwear! Casey's roll was officially over.

With one finger, he lifted what looked like an oversized satin version of tighty whities, and then froze.

"Holy shit," he muttered.

Underneath the underwear were rows and rows of tightly bound bundles of cash.

"Holy shit!" he barked, then immediately lowered his head and instinctively rechecked the room to make sure he was alone.

"Why didn't I bring a bag?" he whispered into the dresser mirror, his face flushing crimson as an unwelcome vision of Daniel Craig in a tuxedo floated by.

Okay. Time's up. Get moving.

He stuffed his pockets and then used the woman's oversized underwear as a makeshift bag, filling it until it stretched to breaking point.

Eat your heart out, Bond, he thought as he turned around laughing, and then froze.

The old woman stood facing him in the doorway.

She said nothing, casually leaning against the door frame, both hands behind her back. She could have been waiting for the bathroom. A dark veil covered her face, like she'd just come from a funeral. *Could that be why she came back so soon?*

The woman took up most of the open doorway and Casey was surprised at how solid she looked up close and personal. Her attire could only be described as old fashioned. A laced top and cardigan over abundant breasts, and a drab beige skirt wrapped around oversized hips.

"What you got there, young Casey?" she said in a high pitched, warbling voice.

He placed the underwear stuffed with cash on top of the dresser. The veil concealed most of the woman's facial features, but Casey had a suspicion she was younger than she appeared.

His eyes darted around the room. A curtained window to the left. No options on the right. Straight ahead was going to be pretty tough as he'd have to get past her and didn't know how he

could do that without hurting her. James Bond would most likely jump through the window and into safety, but the prospect of bleeding out on the front lawn was not exactly Casey's preferred course of action. Then another option occurred to him.

"I'm so very sorry, Miss. I don't know what came over me. I'm so ashamed. Please don't call the police. It'd kill my mother if she knew." He cupped his hands to his face.

The woman made a grunting noise, which could have been a laugh.

"Casey Armfield, eighth grade Bellfield High, resides at 524 Bennett Street with mother, Beryl Armfield. Step father, Lorne Driscoll," she paused, and then whispered, "Deceased."

Casey's head shot up, his eyes wide. She knew all about him and his family. He didn't even know her name.

"How do you know...? Have we met?"

"You live two streets away, young man. I make it my business to know my own neighborhood, and I know you."

Casey tried to see through the veil. The woman appeared to be smiling, but he couldn't be sure.

"You've broken into my house with the intention of robbing an old lady of her valuables. Why on earth should I *not* call the police? Give me something, Casey. Give me a reason not to."

Casey pinched the webbing of his left hand between thumb and forefinger.

"Please, if you let me go I promise I'll never do anything like this again. I'll come back and apologize every day for a week. I'll...I'll do anything you want." He began removing the wads of cash from his pockets and placing them on top of the filled underwear.

"My mother," Casey continued, "has not been the same since Lorne went. She's given up. I don't know what to do. I'm at my wit's end. That's why I did this. That's the only reason. You've got to believe me."

The woman looked down at her feet as if considering Casey's plea. She stayed still for a few moments and then lifted her veiled head.

"You're not very good at this are you? I can't see too many thespian awards for you in the near future, I'm afraid. I know all about your alkie mother, Casey, spending all the grocery money on Russia's finest. And I know all about Lorne, how he had a seizure while clearing weeping willow roots from your septic. He drowned in shit, Casey, and you're doing exactly the same. You need to listen to me very carefully, young man. If you want to avoid the police, if you want to save you mother, not to

mention your schooling record, college, hell, your *future*, then you need to give me something. Do you understand me?"

Casey was beginning to consider the possibility that the woman was unhinged. He risked a quick glance toward the window.

No. A short, sharp punch in the stomach, wind her, and then be out the back door before she's got her first breath back.

The woman tilted her head to the right like she was cracking her neck, and then slowly brought her left hand around from behind her back. She had large hands, like a man's, and all white from the latex glove, but Casey was far more interested in what she held: a long, shiny carving knife. She rested it flat against her leg running all the way from her hip to just short of her knee.

"I can see you're struggling to understand what I'm asking. That's okay. I'll tell you what, young Casey, how about I give you something first, and then it will be your turn. How does that sound? Make things easier?"

Casey tried to speak, but found his mouth drier than Arizona. He sent his tongue in search of saliva and finally managed to squeak out a timid, "Okay," in reply.

The woman began tapping the long blade against her leg.

"What if I were to tell you that I'm responsible for the police curfew?"

Casey bent forward suddenly feeling nauseous, and wrapped both hands around his midriff. Pinching his hand was not going to cut it this time.

The woman made another grunt. This time, Casey had little doubt interpreting the sound--she was laughing.

"I see I now have your full attention. Right then, let's suppose that I am responsible for all those pesky little children disappearing around here. Wouldn't that be something," she warbled.

Casey knew that even if she wasn't telling the truth, she was still clearly a psycho. An armed psycho. Of all the houses to rob, how the hell did he end up in this one? Then he remembered. If and when he ever got out of this mess, Casey decided he was going to have a little chat with Stevie Dickinson. Maybe a long chat.

"My question to you remains, young Casey Armfield. What can you give me? What are you willing to sacrifice for your freedom?"

The woman pointed the knife toward the window. "What about that floosey-accomplice you have hiding in the hedge across the road? Are you willing to give her up?"

Casey's head was spinning. This woman knew everything. How was that even possible?

The woman resumed tapping the blade on her leg. "I'm guessing she's on hand in case I came home. What was she? A diversion? Some misdirection while you made your escape?"

Casey said nothing.

The woman took one step forward, but Casey still couldn't make out her face through the veil.

"Here's my question to you, Casey. Are you willing to give her up for your freedom?"

"What," Casey croaked, before clearing his throat. "What do you mean 'give her up'? What will you do to her? Call the police?"

"You are a slow one, aren't you? Not what I was expecting at all. It's so hard these days to find anyone that can function properly under even a little bit of pressure. I would have thought someone with your grades would know exactly what you were 'giving up.' Listen, I know you like her, but there'll be plenty more where she came from."

"Christ," muttered Casey, longing to be home listening to his mother's snoring, and smelling the traces of vomit he'd been unable to clean from the sofa cushions. His eyes went to the cash on the dresser. One of the notes on top had been displaced. He picked up the wad, and then another. In all the bundles, only

the very top note was a neatly ironed twenty. The rest were blank.

The woman grunted.

"So now you know about the cash. Not the riches you had in mind, are they?" She grunted again. "Just say the word, Casey. I'll draw open the curtains and young Eryn will come bounding up to the front door like the good and faithful little stooge she is. I'll have her, and you'll be free. What do you want to do?"

Casey fought off another bout of nausea as he tried to think of a way out. An attack now appeared unlikely given the length of the blade. She may be an old lady, but he had no idea how fast she could move, or how strong. The window option was getting more appealing, but he'd still rather take his chances with the knife than face the prospect of being shredded alive by broken glass. He heard Eryn's teasing voice once again and his eyes glistened with moisture. James Bond would have disabled the old woman in an instant. Casey on the other hand was a crying, indecisive mess. Best bet was to play along and see what opportunities might arise. He simply couldn't think of anything else.

"Okay," he said, barely above a whisper.

The woman took a step closer. Casey backed up as far as he could against the bedroom wall.

"Okay, you will give her to me?" asked the old woman.

"Yes."

"That's a good decision, Casey. I'm proud of you. You're a good boy."

Casey didn't feel anything remotely like a good boy.

The woman turned sideways, and with her eyes on Casey the whole time, she reached behind her and pushed the bedroom door closed.

"Just stay where you are, Casey," she said, moving toward the bedroom window. She drew the curtains on both sides of the picture window. Casey noticed bars on the windows for the first time although couldn't fathom why she'd only have this window protected and no others. Just as well the window option stayed just that--an option.

"All right, Casey, let's move to the living room. Nice and slow, nothing sudden. I'm old and prone to get nervous if I sense you're thinking of misbehaving."

When Casey stood a few feet from the front door, he heard the old woman move in closer behind him. Casey could only hope Eryn had missed the curtains, that she was looking elsewhere, or checking her phone. Maybe she'd gone home, bored.

The door bell chimed.

"Open the door," said the woman.

Casey took a deep breath and obliged.

Eryn, peered into the dark room. Casey knew she couldn't see much as she began her spiel.

"Hello, Ma'am, I'm participating in the Boys and Girls Club ten mile fun run this weekend and I'm looking for sponsors. Do you think--"

"Run! As fast as you can! Get out now!" screamed Casey.

Eryn stood there frozen.

Casey drew breath to yell again, but arched backwards as blinding pain erupted in his midsection. The knife had entered just above his kidney. He was vaguely aware of warm liquid gushing down his right leg. The knife twisted and he screamed, doubling over and then falling to his knees. His vision blurred as he looked up at Eryn.

"Run," he pleaded.

Eryn turned around, but took only one short step before her head ran into Stevie Dickinson's chest. He extended his arms out like he was herding children at a birthday party, ushering Eryn into the woman's living room. He slammed the door shut with his leg and wrapped his left arm around Eryn, squeezing her close. He used his right hand to clamp over her mouth.

Casey groaned.

"Very good, Stevie. That could not have gone any better. You've done very well," the woman crooned.

Stevie said nothing. He stared straight ahead, his face impassive, but both cheeks glistened wet with tears.

Casey tried to focus on the carpet floor, but his vision was getting worse. He gritted his teeth.

"Casey, Casey, Casey," said the woman. "You're making quite a mess on my carpet. I don't usually conduct my business up here, but not to worry. You'll be alive a little while longer so you'll get to see my room downstairs. The one you didn't find earlier. And so will Eryn. Ah, lovely Eryn."

It took some time for Casey to register that the old woman's voice had suddenly become much deeper. Through a mist, he saw a dark veil fall to the floor. In a slow Texan drawl, the man in the drab beige skirt said, "I can't wait to see who you're gonna bring me next time, Stevie."