

Fallen Apple

He waited in a pub in Brighton. On the table in front of him were a drink and a mobile. He checked the time just as someone took the seat next to him.

The newcomer smiled. 'Hello, Dad. Long time no see.'

He didn't smile back. 'I thought I told you if I ever saw you again I'd kill you.'

The other person nodded at the mobile. 'Waiting for a text to say your truck's arrived in Dover? Well, I'm afraid there's been a change of plan.' The newcomer motioned to the window.

Travis lent forward and saw the white rental truck parked across the street. Perched atop the truck was a solitary seagull, surveying the surroundings as if on guard. Bit late now, thought Travis. 'You got here fast,' he sighed.

'Guess I couldn't wait to see your face.'

Travis toyed with his mobile, trying not to show his anxiety. He placed it face down on the table and took a measured sip of his scotch to settle his nerves.

'So, you gonna make good on your threat?' His son crossed his arms and reclined in his chair.

Travis took a moment to savour the scotch's warmth upon his dry lips. 'Nah,' he said eventually. 'See, I know the value of family. It's something I thought I'd taught you a long time ago.'

'Must be thinking of your other son. So how is Rob these days?'

'Getting by.'

Mason snorted with contempt. 'Sounds about right. Never exactly Mister Ambitious, was he?' Mason took a long pull on his beer and looked out the window. 'Christ, I've always hated Brighton. Bloody miserable place.'

Travis glanced out the window at the pier where his dad had taken him so many times to play the slot machines on their regular holidays here. The young Travis preferred the honest simplicity of the push-penny machines, though. The rewards were small, but the anticipation of whether the coin he had dropped would be the one to cause the metallic avalanche could not be beaten. Thirty-odd years later, his youngest, Rob, had inherited the same fondness for the simple game, whilst Mason, like his grandfather, had favoured the promise of fortune and glory only the high-stakes fruit machines could offer. Suppose that was the blueprint for their lives to come, reflected Travis with a heavy heart.

'Everywhere looks miserable in the rain,' said Travis surveying the damp, grey day outside. Funny, he thought, but none of his memories of this town when he was a kid were blighted by rain. Back then, the sun was as constant as the pebble beach and the sweet smell of candy floss and fried onions in the stifling salt air. 'And anyway,' he added, 'you never complained when you were younger.'

'Wouldn't have done much good if I had. You and mum still would've dragged us here every year.'

'I seem to remember you crying whenever we had to go back home.'

'That's because home sucked more than here.'

'Sorry about that. Didn't realise you had such an unhappy childhood.'

'No, because you were too busy working every damn hour God sent to notice.'

'Yes, for you and Rob and your mother.'

'Did you ever stop to think your presence was more important than your income?'

Travis stared into his glass. The amber eye staring back at him offered no salvation.

‘You know what really twists my head?’ sneered Mason. ‘All those hours you pulled, the days and nights away from us, and in the end you had to resort to robbery. I mean, seriously, where did it all go wrong?’

Travis felt his grip on the glass tighten as he recalled the day he’d messed up. ‘I had a moment of weakness,’ he mumbled.

‘Excuse me?’ laughed Mason incredulously. ‘A moment of weakness? *That’s* the reason I found fifty grand of marked bills hidden in the boot of your car, because you had a *moment of weakness*?’

‘I’m only human.’ Travis drained his glass and took a deep breath to compose himself. ‘So, you gonna read me my rights?’

Mason sipped his beer and smiled. ‘Who said I was here to arrest you?’

‘Come again?’

‘I want half of what you’re gonna make from this deal. Otherwise I’m gonna make you drive the truck to the station and turn yourself in.’

Outside, the seagull guarding the truck took flight, as if it knew its services were no longer required. ‘Suppose its pleasing to see that the apple didn’t fall too far from the tree,’ groaned Travis.

‘Far enough, thankfully. I aint making a habit of this.’

‘So why are you doing it now? And don’t give me any of that rubbish about falling behind on the bills. Your Sarah earns enough to keep both of you and the kids in the lap of luxury.’

With a bitten fingernail, Mason picked at the label on his beer bottle. ‘With all due respect, *Dad*, you’re the last person I have to justify myself to.’

Touché, thought Travis grimly. ‘Problem is, though, the money I’m gonna make’s already been spent.’

‘Don’t give me that.’

‘Private health care aint cheap.’

‘What the hell’re you talking about?’

‘Your mother. She’s sick.’ Travis explained to his son about the terminal bone cancer that had been eating his mother away for the past ten months, and the costly treatment involved to see her dying days out in relative comfort. When he’d finished, his son had turned as ashen as the tumbling waves outside. ‘So take half if you really have to, but by doing so, you’ll be halving your mum’s chance of a peaceful and dignified farewell.’

‘You’re lying.’

Travis turned and faced his son for the first time. He’d lost an unhealthy amount of weight, especially in the face and across the shoulders. The look aged him considerably, and Travis had to take a miserable second to recall his actual age. Thirty-six? Looked more like fifty-six. Looked more like his old man than ever, thought Travis. ‘Here...’ Travis pushed his mobile across the table. ‘Ask her yourself.’

Mason’s hand hovered above the mobile, fingers twitching.

‘What,’ pushed Travis. ‘Aint got the guts?’

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘Oh, let me think. Maybe because the last time we spoke, you were handcuffing my wrists behind my back.’

‘I was doing my job.’

'You smile every time you arrest someone?'

'You were a good collar for me.'

'Glad I was good for something,' hissed Travis. 'Since when was a career more important than family?'

'Since you missed my first school football match because you had to work, apparently.'

Travis cringed at his own hypocrisy. 'So what's it to be? Your financial problems more pressing than your mother's life?'

'Yes. My terms still stand.'

Travis startled at the speed and decisiveness of his eldest son's answer. 'I was afraid you'd say that.' Travis turned the mobile over so as Mason could see the lit screen and the name of the person to which the line was connected.

'What the hell's going on?' gasped Mason.

'Your unit has had their suspicions about you for a while now. Told me you were gambling a lot and suspected you may be deep over your head with some undesirable and highly connected types. The type who can afford not to fear the law.' Travis arched an eyebrow at his pallid son. 'They also suspected you might be on the take to dig yourself out of the hole. After all, like father like son, right?'

Mason loosened his tie against the pulsing vein in his neck.

'They came to me with the idea,' said Travis.

'And I bet you just bit their hand off, didn't you?' spat Mason as from out of nowhere three members of Mason's Independent Police Complaints Commission team appeared at the table.

Travis greeted the head of the team with a solemn nod. No handshakes were proffered, for Travis knew what they all thought of a disgraced ex-copper like himself. 'By the way,' he said to his son as Mason's arms were being forced behind his back. 'Your mother's fine. Not that you give a damn.'

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He didn't smile back. 'I thought I told you to text me when the truck arrived.'

'Ran out of credit, sorry. Everything sorted?'

Travis nodded. 'Your end?'

'All good. Decoy worked a treat. Mum'll be chuffed. Pity about my big bruv, though?'

Yeah, thought Travis recalling the ease in which Mason was willing to sacrifice his own mother to save his own sorry skin. Guess his eldest had fallen further from the tree than he'd thought.

The End