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# Misplaced Trust

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Category: Fiction

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I checked my leg, it was still bleeding and the pain was getting worse.

“Don’t worry about it,” said my fellow escapee, Tom. “We’ll make it to the cabin soon.”

“I hope so.”

If I kept losing blood at this rate I’d be dead before I’d ever enjoy the free world again. Tearing a strip from my shirt, I tied it tightly over the wound. Nine months in the penitentiary had not been easy for me. I tried to put the injury out of my mind, but hurtling through the woods in pitch-blackness was only going to cause me more problems.

“Ow,” I cried, as I fell over yet another rock in this black hole obstacle course. “Tom, how much farther?”

“Shut up, fool! We’ve only gone about a mile so far; that cabin I told you about is at least three miles. If we don’t make it before daybreak, my girl ain’t gonna wait.”

Rita, his girlfriend, was to wait for us only until dawn. If we hadn’t arrived by then, she was to leave. By that time the guards will have conducted the morning head count and realized that we were missing.

“I’ll try, Tom, but you’ve got to slow down, man, I’m hurtin’ big-time here.”

“Yeah, well tough it out, before I show you what hurtin’ really feels like.”

I got the point. Except for ripping a deep hole in my leg on the razor wire on top of the wall, everything else had gone according to plan. But Tom hadn’t shared everything with me about his escape plan, arguing that all I needed to know was that he could guarantee a foolproof method for escape. He needed another body to make it work; he chose me because he knew I was desperate to get out of that hell-hole before someone

killed me. At thirty seven years of age my twenty year sentence may as well been a life term. I may see the light of day at age fifty—that is if I lived.

My lawyer had assured me that my appeal was sound. “Be patient and you’ll be free,” he promised. Nine months later I barely had any communication with him, and I had suffered two severe attacks that led me to believe I may not live to see another trial. I wasn’t your typical inmate. I was a white-collar criminal—hell, in my mind I wasn’t even a criminal. Sure I had embezzled money from my company’s pension plan, but does that warrant the type of punishment I was being dealt? Why not a fine and probation?

The guys in prison were animals. They had their own code and cliques—white, black, and Hispanic gangs—every prisoner had to belong to a group. They roamed the yard like packs of rabid dogs; a wrong look or accidental bump sent them into a rage that cried out for retaliation. Word was that Tom had killed two people during a robbery. He’s the one that deserved to be behind bars, not me. I couldn’t spend twenty years in that cesspool; I had to get out!

“Are we getting close?”

“That stream we crossed a while back was just over the halfway mark,” he whispered. “We’re makin’ good time, now quit yer bitchin’.”

I had to trust him; I had no other choice. I hoped the tales he told me about his days spent hunting in these woods as a child were true. He claimed to know these parts like the back of his hand. Anyway it was too late to doubt him now. I was in the middle of a nightmare that I wanted to end.

“Stay down!” Tom whispered. He pointed to an opening in the woods; I barely made out the shapes of a vehicle and what looked to be an old cabin.

“Is that the cabin?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then let’s go so I can get this leg taken care of.”

“Stay put, dammit... I wanna make sure she’s alone before we go showin’ ourselves around here.”

He took off in a slow, crouched walk. He went directly to the car, looked around, then got inside. I heard the engine start. *Finally, now I can get this leg taken care of.* As I came out of the tree line the car began to drive off.

“Hey...wait!” In seconds it was out of sight. I stood there in shock, realizing that I had been used—*conned by a con.*

Now I knew why Tom was reluctant to share the *whole* plan with me—I was to be left at the cabin while he and his girl took off. Not knowing where they were headed, I couldn’t give the police any clues about their destination.

*Okay, they’re gone; now I need my own plan to avoid being captured.* That meant shedding my prison garb. I entered the cabin with remnants of my prison shirt around my hand to prevent leaving any prints. Complete silence... I quickly realized the cabin had been vacant for a long time. No running water, no electricity, and not much in the way of anything useful for my survival.

Moving to a shed behind it, I rummaged around and found a couple of rags, good for my compress, rope, and a pair of mechanic’s overalls. But my richest find was a small john boat leaning against the woodpile next to the shed.

*There has to be a body of water close by....* I walked directly from the shed toward an opening in the woods and found a lake not forty feet away. Gathering up my meager supplies, I dragged the tiny boat to the water's edge. Knowing that dawn was quickly approaching, I loaded my vessel and crawled aboard. *Damn! Only one paddle, where's the other one?* No time to search.

Not knowing where I was or where I was going, I paddled for as long as my weary arms would work. As dawn was about to break, I spotted a stand of trees that sheltered a small inlet near the shore. This would be my refuge during the daylight hours, as well as a place to catch some sleep. I had not felt this exhausted in a long time. I guided the boat under the ample emerald canopy and fell asleep instantly.

I later awoke to the sound of a small plane overhead. Checking my position, I was satisfied that I couldn't be spotted from above. This beautiful natural overhang would serve me well as both a sanctuary from those who were searching for me and a shield from the hot sun. Seeing the entire vista for the first time, I saw the expanse of water was huge. I could barely see the shoreline beyond the breadth of blue. It was quiet and pristine; too bad I was in survival mode instead of on vacation.

As the sun reached its zenith, the heat and bugs made their presence known. The overalls were both a blessing and a curse—they kept most of the bugs off me, but even laying still was hot and uncomfortable.

The next problem was the growling in my stomach. One thing that had been tolerable in prison was the food. Most of it was bland, but there was plenty of it. I became accustomed to eating three large meals per day. Now having missed two of them, my body was starting to react. This was a dilemma; I'd never hunted or lived off

the land. I didn't know a berry from a nut, couldn't tell what was edible or not. I was a city-boy, unable to even identify poison ivy.

One thing was certain—I had to lay low until the intensity of the search died down. The unknown factor was whether I could survive in the woods on my own for days or weeks, but I had no choice except to give it a try.

Daybreak on the third day found me famished. My stomach sounded like a pit bull growling at an intruder. I was getting light headed when I stood up. Gathering some plants that looked similar to salad greens, I began to chew on them. Not much taste but it passed for food. Hopefully they weren't poisonous but I couldn't exactly call for a takeout.

Shortly after the noonday sun began making life unbearable, clouds moved in and brought a cooling rain. It reminded me that I had not had anything to drink since being on the run, so I turned the john boat over to catch some water. After what seemed to be about an hour, the boat had accumulated enough water for me to tip it and form a puddle at one end. I eagerly scooped the thirst quenching liquid into the palm of my hand and savored two mouthfuls of the glorious elixir.

**What?** I was startled by movement in the brush behind me. Jumping up to face what I presumed would be my captors, I was greeted instead by a beautiful golden retriever. The dog immediately came to me, wagging its tail and jumping up to lick me like a long lost member of the family. I hugged and petted him for several minutes. More noise immediately to my left. Before I had a chance to react, an elderly woman appeared.

“Well, I guess you found out that Buddy wouldn't hurt a flea; he loves attention.”

She looked to be in her late sixties, small in stature, but surprisingly strong and robust appearing.

“We walk these woods several times a week. We don’t head home until Buddy says so. I never know how long he’ll keep me out, but his enthusiasm is what keeps me healthy.”

Quickly trying to come up with a plausible explanation as to why I was here, I blurted out, “I was fishing when a storm came up so I sought shelter here under the trees.”

As soon as I got the words out, I realized how absurd it sounded. Who fishes a big lake like this in a john boat with one paddle and no fishing gear?

“Oh, any luck?” she asked.

“Well, I...”

“You look rather worn out; I’m just a few minutes away. Can I interest you in some dinner?”

*Should I trust this woman...?*

“Uh...sure...why not?”

About ten minutes later we came to a clearing that held a picture book Victorian-style home. The front porch wrapped around both sides of the house, and countless plants sat on the deck and railings. The surrounding garden and lawn were manicured to perfection.

“Well, here we are,” she proclaimed.

“It’s beautiful, almost looks like a postcard.”

“My husband, John, and I moved here years ago. It was our dream to find a place ‘away from it all’ where we could enjoy nature and live our lives at a slower pace. It’s a lot to take care of; I’m not getting any younger. And, we’re at least forty miles from town; it takes all day to shop.”

She led me into a grand foyer highlighted by a magnificent crystal chandelier. A beautiful canvas painting of the woman and her husband hung on one wall; the opposite was decorated with assorted French Impressionist works.

“John and I visited Paris for our tenth wedding anniversary and fell in love with the art galleries. I’ve even sold several of my pieces there. Over the years we’ve acquired some of our favorites by well-known artists. It’s a good reason to return over and over again.”

“They’re beautiful.” Glancing at the portrait I remarked, “You look very much in love.”

“Yes, there is no one else for me,” she sighed. “Anyway, dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes. Go upstairs to the guest room on the right. If you’d like to freshen up, some of my husband’s clothes are in the bureau; you may wear them after you shower.”

“Thanks, ma’am...by the way, may I ask your name?”

“You’re welcome; my name is Ann Howard. Take your time and holler if you need anything else.”

“Thanks, Ann, my name is Richard.”

“Well, Richard, Buddy and I are pleased to meet you.”

This was unbelievable; finally some good luck had come my way. I showered and changed. The smells coming from the kitchen were driving me insane, causing my mouth to water like a dog watching its owner prepare table scraps from the family dinner. I could hardly wait to taste real food again. Feeling more relaxed and cleaner than I had ever been in a long time, I walked down to the kitchen.

Ann greeted me with a cup of coffee.

“Would you like cream and sugar?”

“No, this is perfect.” Sipping the delicious brew caused my dormant taste buds to come alive.

“Come; sit down, everything’s ready. I baked this bread this morning; I hope you like bread with your meal.”

“Mmmm...this bread could be the meal.”

“Whoa, slow down. I have apple butter to spread on it if you’d like.”

“Ann, you’re remarkable.” *Almost too much so...*

As she picked at her food, daintily chewing miniscule portions, I must have looked like a human trash disposal.

“Richard, you may eat as much as you want, but please slow down or you’ll get sick.”

“Sorry, Ann, but I haven’t eaten in a while.”

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about, Richard? Is anything bothering you?”

*Wow that was a loaded question.* But upon quick introspection, I wondered if I wouldn’t be better off explaining my predicament.

“I’ve got a problem, Ann.”

“Oh...?”

“Have you listened to the news the past couple days?” I asked.

“I haven’t watched TV in ages, our reception isn’t the best. We do have one radio channel, but I save that for Sundays after I’ve read the paper. Tomorrow’s the day I go into town for the paper and groceries—my once a week journey. Most news doesn’t really interest me anyway. By the time I complete all of my chores around here, it’s off to bed.”

“Well, I got into some trouble....”

“Oh...?”

“I stole some money, actually embezzled it, and was sent to prison.”

“Hmmm...that’s not good. But the fact that your crime wasn’t a violent one, leads me to believe that you’re basically a good man.”

“Thanks, Ann; I’ve never hurt anyone, not even in prison.”

“I believe you. Is that why you’re here, were you just released?”

“Kind of... the problem is I can’t go home. I lost my house trying to finance my defense. My only family is my father, but he’s an alcoholic and we haven’t had a relationship the last five years.”

“I know how that feels, Richard. I have a relative who is devious and good-for-nothing. He tried to fleece me while I was settling an estate. When I found out what he was trying to do, I told him never to speak to me again.”

“No wife or children?”

“No, I guess I never met the right woman.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“What about you, Ann. You look like the grandmotherly type that should have a dozen grandkids running around your house. No children?”

“Sadly, no. I guess the good Lord had other plans for us.”

“Richard...”

“What?”

“This may sound like a radical idea, but I want to propose something to you. I’m a seventy year old woman. My life is dull and rather meaningless—every day is the same. You may have come into my life for a reason; maybe you’re here to give me a purpose.”

“What about your husband?”

“He’s gone more than he’s home.”

“Oh...? So what’s the proposal?”

“I’d like you to stay here for awhile.”

“What?”

“You see how isolated this place is; you could stay here until you know where it is you’d like to go. Besides, you’d be a big help to me with keeping this place up. Not only could you lighten my workload, but it sure would be nice to have someone young and strong to do some of the needed repairs around here.”

*This would be sweet.* “I don’t know what to say, Ann.”

“Well, it’s a bit altruistic on my part, but we’d both benefit from the arrangement, and I think that Buddy would enjoy someone with a little more energy than I have.”

“Thank you. You won’t be sorry, and I’ll leave as soon as I can.”

“There’s no hurry for you to leave, Richard. By the way, I noticed your pant leg had a bloodstain on it. Let’s take a look at that, I’ll go and get the first aid kit.”

As she walked out of the room, I noticed a photo on the wall. It was of a man seated behind a desk—the nameplate read: ***Warden John Howard.***

As I struggled to sort things out I heard footsteps on the front porch...the door knob began to slowly turn....