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Written by

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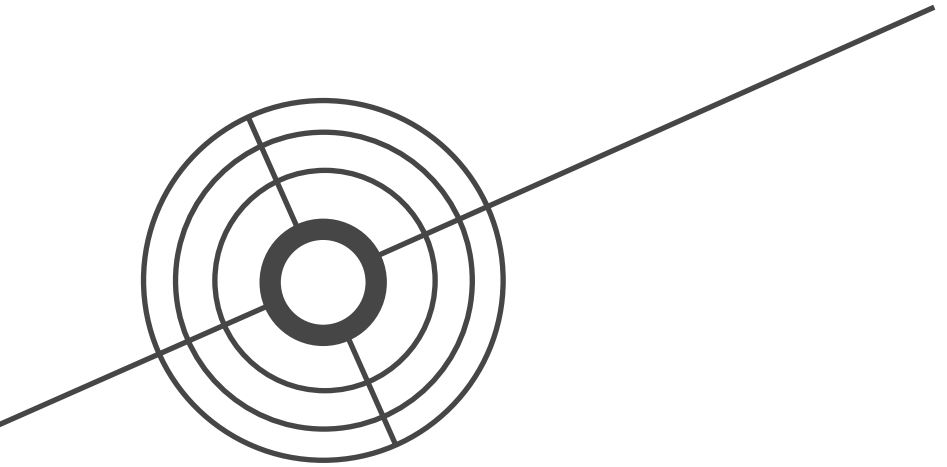
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You Asked for It

Someone's messed up, now someone's gonna pay.

It stood to reason. That was why Mac Reagan was hunched down on the asphalt roof of the Timberfoot Packing Company on Fifth Street.

He wished he'd brought a drink along with the tools of his trade – or a coat, at least. It was lousy weather for May; a big storm was blowing in off the Pacific, and no one knew how hard it would hit. The bulked-up clouds looked set to fall on downtown Los Angeles and its maze of tenements and warehouses. Night was stepping up fast.

And with it, the kill.

Mac's nerves amplified the noise of the city: the dejected rattle of the Venice Line streetcars heading south along Hill Street; the roar of traffic and clatter of road repairs ripping up the peace outside the swanky Biltmore Hotel; striking workers in Pershing Square chanting amid bamboo and

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banana trees. The darkening sky lent strength to the neon hoardings as they hummed awake.

Mac looked down at the machine he cradled in his hands. He wiped a grimy thumb over the hard plastic magazine; it was loaded. His finger curled around the trigger without him even thinking.

Mac shuddered, remembering other rooftops, other jobs.

He was ready to start shooting.

'So. You made it.'

Mac jumped at the voice behind him. It was the Kid – and right behind him, some older guy Mac didn't recognize, big and broad. They had crept up onto the roof behind him without a sound. But the Kid didn't normally show in person . . .

He knows. Mac stiffened. *He's here because he knows what I did*.

'You seem nervous, Mac,' the Kid went on quietly.

'No, sir.' The words crumbled from Mac's dry mouth. *Stay cool*, he told himself. 'Sure, I made it. Like always.' He took his finger off the trigger of his Parvo movie camera and double-checked the 135-millimetre lens was in place. 'Here I am, all set to shoot the action up close.'

The Kid nodded, but the big guy just stared, eyes like stones wedged into his craggy face, hands holding something behind his back.

'You're the hitman,' Mac murmured, 'right?'

The guy's face barely twitched. 'I'm a whole lot of things.'

Mac pulled a Lucky Strike from a crumpled pack in his pocket, lit up and looked across to the three-storey block opposite. A young woman was at the wide-open window, staring out. He peered at her through the Parvo's fold-out eyepiece: her face was flawless ivory, and looked just as hard.

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Long blonde hair hung down to the fake pearls around her neck.

Mac checked the focus. 'Is she the target?'

'No. The target is the man who's coming to see her.' The Kid tutted quietly. 'I know her kind. Another starry-eyed sob story who dreamed she could cut it in movies. I hate girls like that. Don't you hate girls like that, Mac?'

Mac grunted, shivering as the wind began to build. He'd filmed plenty of girls like her when he'd worked for the movie studios, even dated a couple . . . Funny how fast the last one had walked when the studio closed and the money dried up.

The memories crackled like the smoke in his lungs. No job, no cash, Mac had washed up with some bad-news characters from the LA underworld. They'd put his talents with a camera to new uses. Plenty of rich people were being naughty in the City of Angels, and if Mac caught them on film, well . . . They would hand the mob a whole lot of cash to get hold of that footage. Mac took two per cent of the payout, and the film was filed under 'Forgotten' . . . at least until the next time. It was easy work.

Only when a new gang from the Midwest breezed in and took charge did things turn sour; only this last year, when the Kid showed up.

From that point, the stuff Mac was paid to shoot had moved beyond simple blackmail. Stuff that could turn the hardest guts. How many times had Mac had been forced to relive the violence frame by frame at the print lab downtown, making movie prints from the negatives . . .

Through the viewfinder, Mac watched the girl turn to greet a man who'd just walked up behind her – and felt a

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rush of nausea. The cigarette fell from his slack lips.

'That's Louie.' He turned to the Kid and the big guy, who was holding a rifle now, a Browning automatic. 'Louie Weiss. He's a good buddy of mine—'

'I know,' said the Kid, smiling now. 'Such a good buddy, you let him work your shift in the print lab two days ago. The bad news is, the day he does, a whole lot of film reels go missing.'

'I don't know a thing about—'

'Shut up.' The Kid pointed to the camera. 'Get shooting.'

'But—'

'*Now*.'

Mac's heart smacked a sick beat against his ribs as his fingers curled around the leather handle of the Parvo. The magazine rattled and whirled as he turned the crank handle, feeding out the film at sixteen frames per second. Louie stood square in the camera's eyepiece, pin-sharp at the window beside his new girl; he'd told Mac he was seeing someone new, sounded real up about it . . .

'All right, I asked Louie to cover me.' Mac's grip on the camera was tight and sweaty. 'I was sick, see? I was sick real bad.' He was willing Louie to look up and see the Browning's barrel zeroing in, to get the hell away. 'Please . . .'

Louie *did* look up, right at Mac with his camera. The frown on his face froze as a gunshot cracked out. A hole blew open in Louie's lined forehead and he jerked backwards, lost from sight. The girl opened her mouth to shriek – as a second blast from the Browning tore through flesh and fake pearls. The girl was blown sideways, clutching her gory neck as she fell.

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Numb as he gazed on through the eyepiece, Mac realized at last that he was still filming. He slammed the Parvo down on the rooftop, turned angrily towards the Kid.

Straight into the swing of a baseball bat.

With a sickening smack, Mac's nose broke open. The world spun. In a blink Mac was laid out on the roof, choking on his own blood. The big guy loomed over him, the rifle in one hand, Mac's camera clamped in the other. Then the Kid stepped forward.

'There was a whole pile of movies due to be printed and sent out that day.' The Kid was still wielding the bat; something else he must've snuck up here. 'Guess what, Mac? The wrong film cans went to the wrong addresses. And one extra-sensitive reel of film is nowhere to be found.'

'Sensitive?' His head splitting, Mac struggled to his feet, dabbed uselessly at his pouring nose. 'You mean, the one that was s'posed to go to the private mailbox?'

'What happened to it?'

'I . . . I don't know.'

'Did you and Louie think you could blackmail us?'

'No! I swear it. Look, Louie doesn't read so well – maybe he . . .' Still grappling with the sickening rush of events, Mac turned back to the gloomy apartment across the street and the grisly figures sprawled inside. 'I guess Louie messed up.'

'I guess you both did.' The big guy was holding the movie camera in both hands now, ready to start rolling. 'I think Mac is telling us the truth, Kid. Which means that little movie could've been sent out to any one of God knows how many addresses . . .'

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'Let me go,' Mac pleaded. 'Come on, I won't squeal.'

'You won't squeal, huh, Mac?' The Kid raised his baseball bat, motioned to the big guy, and the camera's whirr rose again into the night. 'But maybe you'll scream . . . ?'

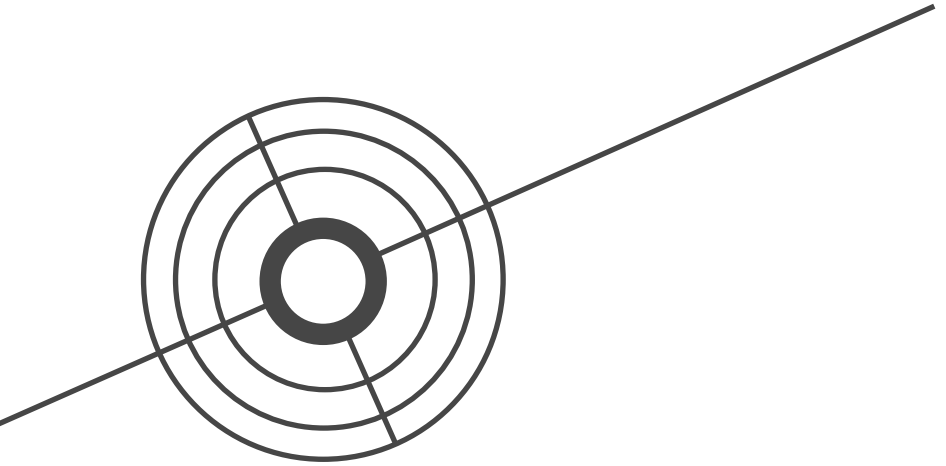
Mac turned but had nowhere to run. He heard the hard whistle of the bat as it swung into his ribs, felt the snapping deep inside. He couldn't breathe – so he couldn't even shout out as a further blow pulverized his left kneecap. Reeling, Mac teetered on the roof edge. For a second he caught sight of the Kid's smiling face, and the neon gleam on the Parvo's lens.

Then he was flying from the third storey. Straight down.

When Mac opened his eyes he'd hit the sidewalk. Paralysed, broken in a spreading puddle of blood, he heard sirens wail like the city's last salute.

Should've brought a coat, Mac thought again as the first specks of rain bounced off his eyeballs. *Should've brought the drink. Such lousy goddamn weather for May.*

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1

Do as You're Told

'Are you James Bond?' The girl in the trouser suit ran across the old courtyard, flushed and smiling. 'The new starter, just arrived from Paddington?'

'Afraid so.' Taken aback, James looked into her dark, striking eyes. She was about his age, and almost as tall, with bobbed black hair. 'Yes, I'm Bond. And you?'

'My name's Beatrice Judge. I've been waiting for you to arrive. Welcome to Dartington Hall.'

With a grunt of anger, she punched him in the stomach.

Caught unprepared, James staggered back. A ragtag of girls and boys descended and grabbed his arms. They slammed him up against an ivy-clad wall and stood in a tight semi-circle, blocking his way.

James didn't struggle, more bemused than concerned. Dartington Hall was supposed to be a progressive school – a no-uniforms, co-ed, anything-goes kind of place. But he

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supposed it would have its traditions, just like anywhere else, and maybe ragging the new boy was one of them.

The girl pushed through the little scrum, her handsome face hardened, trying to intimidate, James supposed.

'Listen, Beatrice.' He smiled briefly and coldly. 'The train to Totnes took hours, the cab from the station broke down on the way, and now I'm supposed to have an entrance interview in the school office. Whatever joke you're playing—'

He broke off as she pulled a knife from her jacket pocket and waved it in his face – once a table knife, it had been filed to a murderous point. 'Does this look like a joke, Bond?'

James nodded past her. 'Perhaps you should try asking that teacher?'

The lie was hardly inspired, but it was enough to distract. As his attackers glanced behind, James knocked Beatrice's arm aside and shoved her backwards. She fell against her friends, while James turned to the wall and grabbed thick handfuls of ivy. He scaled the brickwork in seconds; the old, gnarled branches gave excellent footholds and the vines would've held his weight twice over.

Or three times, it seemed, as Beatrice Judge and two of the burlier boys from her rabble were climbing after him.

What was their problem with him being here?

It couldn't be greater than my own, he reflected.

It was the third week of June, and James was due to start the next school year at Fettes College in Edinburgh in September. Fettes sounded a lot like Eton, his last boarding school, and held for him neither fear nor a good deal of interest. In James's book, school was somewhere you did well enough to get by until you were old enough to get the hell

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out. Now he'd been slung out of Eton, forced to start over. And after all he had been through, James had hoped to have the whole summer to relax before making for Scotland. But Aunt Charmian, his guardian, had business in Mexico and had arranged for him to board here at Dartington in the meantime. She knew someone high up at the school, and hinted heavily that a deal had been struck of which James would approve.

Much as he loved Aunt Charmian, right now he wasn't holding his breath.

James hauled himself onto the roof and crossed the rain-slicked slates, working out his next move. On the far side of the building the wall was clear of ivy, but a drainpipe offered a quick route to the ground.

He waited, taking in the wider view. The school comprised a large quadrangle set amid acres of rolling Devon countryside. The entrance tower was smart and whitewashed, but many of the buildings on the grounds were as mouldering and creeper-clad as any stately home. Clearly 'progressive' here did not mean modern.

A scuffling at the rooftop edge alerted James to the arrival of Beatrice and her backup. He straightened, turned to face them. 'Care to tell me what this is about?'

'Care about this, you Eton reject.' Flanked by her friends, Beatrice advanced steadily. 'I'm not going to let you just waltz in here and take my place.'

'Your place?' James held his ground. 'I'm only here for a fortnight. I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Of course you don't.'

James didn't resist as the two boys gripped his arms, biding

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his time. They were strong, but he could sense their unease.

'I was down as one of the four,' Beatrice went on. 'I don't board here like the rest of them, see? Different class – I live local, in Totnes. That's what marked me out. Then we're told you're coming here and suddenly I'm dropped. The chance of a lifetime and it goes to you. Like the good stuff *always* goes to people like you.'

At that, James almost laughed out loud.

'So . . . I want you to tell the school you won't go.'

James raised an eyebrow, felt it brush against the curl of dark hair that hung down as always over his forehead. 'Go where?'

Beatrice nodded to the boys, who started dragging James back to the edge of the roof. 'If you refuse to take the trip, I'll be back in.'

'In your nice padded cell, you mean?' James shook his head. 'I think you should know, I don't like being told what to do.'

'Be reasonable, Bond.' Beatrice followed him to the precipice. 'A fall from here won't kill you, but it'll break plenty. You won't be fit to travel, and I'll be back on the trip.'

'What trip, for heaven's sake?' The crowd had dispersed; James was staring down at bare flagstones twenty feet below. 'You think the school will let you do anything after you've tried to cripple me?'

'It's your word against ours.' The knife was back in Beatrice's hand. 'We'll say you were showing off up here to impress us, and you slipped.'

'Well, it *is* slippery up here . . .' Suddenly James jerked his right shoulder forward, pivoting on his left foot as he tore his

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arms free. The rapid turn caused both boys to lose their footing. James booted one up the backside and sent him sprawling into the other; the pair collapsed perilously close to the roof edge. Beatrice swiped at him with the knife but James dodged and kicked her feet from under her. As she went down, he turned and sprinted for the other side of the roof. He had no idea what Beatrice was talking about, but he wasn't about to humour her a moment longer.

'How's this for showing off?' James swung himself over the ledge, caught hold of the drainpipe and shinned down it, dropping the last six feet. He landed lightly with a crunch of gravel, then ran for the cover of the nearest building, more engaged than afraid: challenge, fight and flight, and he had barely been in this stupid school five minutes! A mystery too, just to add some unexpected spice. What was this trip Beatrice was so concerned with?

Curious, James peered out from behind the wall. No sign of Beatrice and friends still on the roof. Were they waiting for him to sidle back for his entrance interview at the office?

Perhaps a tour of the grounds first, James decided.

As he walked the length of the building, he saw that it contained a number of classrooms. The pupils inside were dressed casually, and James thought briefly of the miserable starched collars and top hat he'd had to wear at Eton. He paused at the end of the block, peering in; there were at least four teachers working with different groups, though James's attention was fixed mainly on the girls. To see so many here was a strange and arresting sight after years of boys-only boarding. A blonde was looking at him now with some interest. She was cool, with haughty good looks and long

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hair, a little older than him – maybe sixteen.

She gave him a smile. James didn't return it. For all he knew, every girl in the school was out to break his limbs on the flimsiest of excuses.

'There he is!' Beatrice and the boys were back.

James gave a cheery wave he hoped was infuriating and ran across a yard towards a cluster of old buildings. The largest bragged a portico, an open-fronted gallery supported by columns on the outer wall.

'Shall we see if you have more luck pushing me from this roof?' he called recklessly. As he gripped the nearest column and shinned up onto the portico, he wondered if the blonde girl in the classroom was still watching him.

'Who cares?' he muttered.

Without a backward glance, James scrambled across onto the flat roof of the neighbouring building; it smelled of horses. He ran lightly across the old planking – then gasped as rotten wood splintered underfoot and he plunged through it into darkness.

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