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Double Cross

written by

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Prologue

The Glock 23 felt heavy and seductively comfortable in my hand. The pearl stock, warmed by my body heat, fitted snugly against my palm. I now held McAuley's custom-made semi automatic.

A real, honest-to-God gun in my hand.

A proper killing machine.

Or was that me? Where did I stop and the gun start? I really couldn't tell any more.

Now what?

McAuley lay on the floor, the previous torrent of blood that had been gushing from his nose now reduced to a trickle. His once crisp, white designer suit and matching designer shirt lay twisted in an ungainly manner around him. The random splashes of red on McAuley's suit resembled an abstract painting. I stared into one particular bloodstain in the middle of McAuley's chest.

'It's more like a Rorschach ink blot than a painting,' I thought inanely.

It reminded me of my own face in skewed profile.

Now what?

McAuley's blond hair hung like day-old spaghetti around his face. It was streaked with random red highlights which occasionally dripped onto his shoulders. Red

highlights donated involuntarily by McAuley's last victim. The assorted blood splatters on his jacket alone would fill at least a couple of chapters in a forensic science textbook. I wondered whether the SOCO – scene-of-crime-officer – lucky enough to be assigned to McAuley's body would be an art-lover?

I glanced towards the office door. The heavy, arrhythmic banging on it was beginning to get to me. The noise vibrated straight through my head, making it hard to think. Making a slow fist with my free hand, I dug my short nails as deeply as I could into my palms. I had to resist the temptation to let the frenetic drumming on the door dictate the pace of my thinking.

Think, Tobey. Think.

There had to be a way out of this.

But even as the thought pushed its way into consciousness, I knew I was deluding myself. Turn and face the truth.

Time had run out.

'Durbridge, dig yourself a grave and crawl into it 'cause you are *dead*. D'you hear me?'

I aimed a kick between McAuley's legs and allowed myself a small, satisfied smile as the blood-spattered scumbag howled, curling up like the letter C. Small pleasures. There was nothing and no one in McAuley's office to stop me getting a few kicks in. And if I was going to die . . . The smile faded from my face as I watched McAuley writhe on the floor.

At the sound of their boss's roar of pain, McAuley's men pounded even harder on the office door. Luckily for me, McAuley's paranoia had seen to it that the door was solid,

reinforced hardwood. It would hold for a while, but even that door couldn't indefinitely withstand the kind of punishment McAuley's thugs were dishing out. I reckoned I only had a couple of minutes before it gave way completely and then the door wouldn't be the only thing in trouble.

Could I do it? Could I really go through with this?

Hell, yes.

There was a time, less than six weeks and over a lifetime ago, when I'd thought a person could only sink so low. Sooner or later, you went down just as far as you could and after that, the only direction was up. But, just as loving Callie had shown me that Heaven had no roof, hating McAuley and the Dowds had taught me that Hell had no basement.

McAuley started to laugh. Even though his hands were cupped around his groin and he was still curled up, he found this funny. Creepy McAuley, the hard man. My finger stroked at the trigger. White fire blazed through my veins instead of blood, burning away all thought, all feeling. All fear. I had a gun in my hand, like a syringe pumping one hundred per cent pure, unadulterated adrenalin straight into my heart.

The frustrated hammering on the door was growing more insistent.

'You're dead, Durbridge,' McAuley said again, 'and there's nothing you can do about it.'

I pushed the gun barrel against the older man's head, drawing small circles around his temple. McAuley froze.

'Then that makes two of us, you bastard,' I stated softly. 'That makes two of us.'

SIX WEEKS EARLIER

The Rise . . .

one. Tobey

'Tobey, I was er . . . thinking that maybe you and me could . . . er . . . you know, go to the pictures or go for a . . . er . . . you know, a meal or something this weekend?'

Godsake! Couldn't she get through one sentence, just one sentence, without sticking umpteen 'er's and 'you know's in it first?

'I can't, Misty. I'm already going out.' I turned back to my graphic novel – a humorous fantasy that was better than I had thought it would be when I'd borrowed it from the library.

'Oh? Where're you going?'

'Out.' I frowned, not bothering to look up from my book.

'For the whole weekend?'

'Yes.'

'Out where?'

I turned in my chair to look at her. Misty tossed back her brunette hair with blonde highlights in a peculiarly unnatural move that had obviously been practised to death in front of her bedroom mirror.

'Out where?' Misty asked again.

This girl was stomping on my last nerve now. She'd

been asking me out all term and I'd always found some reason to turn her down. Couldn't she take a hint? Miss I'm-too-sexy-for-myself leaned closer in to me, so close that I had to pull back or she'd've been kissing my neck.

'I'm going out with my family. We're visiting relatives,' I improvised.

I'm too nice, that's my trouble, I thought sourly. Why on earth didn't I just tell her that I wasn't interested in a date or anything else for that matter? For one thing, hugging her would be like trying to cuddle a chopstick. I liked curves. And even if I did fancy her – which I didn't – there was no way I'd ever get it on with an ex-girlfriend of my mate, Dan. That was a definite no.

'Maybe the er . . . erm . . . following Saturday, then? We could maybe . . . er . . . go out then if you'd like?' said Misty.

Rearrange this sentence: hell – freezes – over – when.

The classroom door swung open and Callie Rose strolled into the room. She stopped momentarily when she saw who was sitting in her chair. Scowling, she strode over to Misty.

'D'you mind?' Callie asked.

'I'm talking to Tobey.'

'Not from my chair, you're not,' Callie shot back.

'Er . . . can't you find somewhere else to sit until the lesson starts?' Misty wheedled.

Uh-oh! I held my breath. Callie let her rucksack slip from her hand to the floor as her eyes narrowed. She was one nanosecond away from moving up to Kick-arse Condition 1.

'Misty, you need to get up off my chair,' Callie said softly.

'I'd shift if I were you,' I advised Misty.

Much as I found the thought of a cat-fight over me appealing, I didn't fancy Callie getting into trouble and then giving me grief for what was left of the term.

Misty huffed and stood up. 'Callie, I'm going to remember this.'

'Remember it. Take a photo. Break out your camcorder. I don't give a rat's bum. Just move.' Callie stepped aside so that Misty could squeeze by, before flopping down into her now vacant seat.

'Damn cheek!' Callie carried on muttering under her breath as she dug into her bag for the history books required for our first lesson. She turned to look at Misty, who was now back in her own chair.

'If looks could kill, I'd be seriously ill,' Callie said as she turned to me, annoyance vying with amusement to colour her eyes more hazel than brown. Every time she was upset or angry, her eyes literally turned greener. It was one of the many things about her that got me going. She had the most expressive eyes I'd ever seen. Chameleon-like, they changed colour to reflect her every mood.

'Every time I want to sit down next to you or be within half a kilometre of you, I can't move without tripping over that girl first. What's up with that?'

I sucked in my cheeks in an effort not to chortle. One snicker and Callie would bite my head off. I tried for a nonchalant shrug.

'So what did Miss Foggy want this time?' Callie asked.

'Why d'you insist on calling her Miss Foggy?' I laughed.

I know it was mean, but 'Miss Foggy' really suited Misty.

'That's her name, isn't it? Besides, I'm not the one who chose to name her after a type of weather, and if the shoe fits . . .' Callie said pointedly. 'And you haven't answered my question.'

'She was inviting me out this weekend,' I replied.

I watched keenly for her reaction.

She shook her head. 'Damn! Misty's got it bad.'

'Are you jealous?' I asked hopefully.

Callie's eyebrows shot up so far and so fast, she got an instant face-lift. 'Are you kidding? I just think it's pitiful. She's been chucking herself at you all term and you haven't exactly been rushing to catch her, have you? In fact, most of the time you just fold your arms and let her drop on her face over and over again. You'd think she'd have got the message by now.'

'So you are green-eyed.' I grinned.

'Tobey, I don't know what you're taking, but you need to get yourself to rehab – quick, fast and in a hurry.'

'My girl is jealous.' My grin broadened. 'It's OK, Callie Rose. There'll never be anyone for me but you.'

'Go dip your head,' Callie told me.

'I mean it.' I crossed both my hands over my heart and adopted a ridiculously soppy expression. 'I give my heart . . . to you.' I mimed placing it carefully on the table in front of her. Glowering, Callie picked up her pen and mimed stabbing my heart on the table over and over again.

I burst out laughing, but had to smother it as Mr Lancer, the history teacher, entered the room. Callie started muttering all kinds of dire threats and promises under her

breath the way she always did when I got under her skin.

And I loved it. It was music to my ears.

Callie quickly suppressed a laugh as the buzzer sounded for the end of the lesson. I'd spent the last fifty minutes passing her silly notes and making *sotto voce* remarks about Mr Lancer's newly bald head with its deep groove down the middle. It now resembled a certain part of the male anatomy and there was no way I could let that pass without comment. Callie had been in smothered fits of the giggles throughout most of the lesson. I loved making Callie laugh. God knows, she'd done little enough of that since her nana died in the Isis Hotel bomb blast. Callie was reaching for her rucksack on the floor and I'd barely made it to my feet when we had company.

Lucas frickin' Cheshie.

Misty wasn't the only one who couldn't take a hint. OK, so I still wasn't quite sure what to call my friendship with Callie, but I knew what Lucas and Callie weren't – and that was an item. She wasn't Lucas's girlfriend any more, so why did he persist in sniffing around her? Being older than us, he wasn't even in our class. But he must've seen Callie through the classroom window – and now here he was, lingering like an eggy fart. Smarmy git.

Completely ignoring me, Lucas said softly, 'Hi, Callie Rose, how are you?'

Callie's smile faded. She was instantly wary. I was grateful for that, if nothing else.

'I'm fine, Lucas. How are you?'

'Missing you.' Lucas smiled.

Callie searched for something to say, but unable to find

anything, she merely shrugged. I glared at Lucas, but he wasn't going to give me the satisfaction of acknowledging my presence.

'Ignore me all you want, but if you think I'm leaving you alone with Callie . . .' I projected my hostility towards him through narrowed eyes.

'I'm so glad to see you smiling again, Callie Rose. I'm glad you're getting over the bereavement in your family,' said Lucas.

The light in Callie's eyes vanished, as if a great, dark cloud had swept across the face of the sun. Callie's grandmother had died two months before, but Callie wasn't over it. Sometimes I wondered if she'd ever be truly over it.

'And you were so close to your nana Jasmine, weren't you?' Lucas continued.

I glanced at Callie before turning back to Lucas. A Cyclops with a pencil in his eye could see that Callie was getting upset. Lucas would have to be stupid not to see the effect his words were having. And Lucas was a lot of things, but stupid wasn't one of them.

Callie said nothing.

'Callie Rose, if you ever need to talk about your grandmother and how she died or anything, then I'm here for you. OK?' Lucas smiled. 'I just want you to know that I'm your friend. I'll always be your friend. If you need anything from me you only have to ask.'

Dismayed, I turned to Callie again. With a few well-chosen words, Lucas had not only knocked Callie to the ground, but then danced all over her. Her face took on the haunted, hunted look she always wore when thinking

about Nana Jasmine. Her eyes glistened green with the tears she desperately tried to hold back. Callie hated for anyone to see her cry. My hands clenched into fists at my side. I had to hold myself rigid to refrain from smacking Lucas a sizeable one.

Lucas put his hand under Callie's chin to slowly raise her head. He was still ignoring me. 'Just think about what I said. I mean every word.' He smiled again, then sauntered off to join the rest of his crew waiting in the doorway for him.

Callie and I were alone in the classroom. I chewed on the inside of my bottom lip. What to say? What to do? I was so useless at this kind of thing.

'Callie . . .' I turned to her in time to see the solitary tear balanced on her lower eyelashes splash onto her cheek.

'Callie, don't listen to him. He was being a git,' I began furiously.

Puzzled, Callie turned to me, her eyes still shimmering. 'He was just trying to be kind.'

'Kind, my arse. He did that deliberately . . .'

'Tobey, what's wrong with you?' Callie whispered. 'You know what, I can't cope with this now.'

'Callie, can't you see what Lucas was up to? He was . . .'

But I was talking to myself. Callie was out the door, leaving me in the classroom.

Alone.

BOMB BLAST VICTIM IDENTIFIED AS JASMINE HADLEY

Jasmine Hadley was yesterday finally identified as one of the victims of the bomb blast at the Isis Hotel. The former wife of Kamal Hadley, ex-MP, was killed five days ago, but it has taken this long to make a positive identification. A source working for the forensic science division of the police force stated, 'The damage to her body was so severe that a combination of dental records and DNA testing had to be used to conclusively identify the victim.' One other unidentified Nought male was also killed in the hotel explosion. The police are making strenuous efforts to establish the identity of this Nought in an effort to ascertain his connection, if any, to the blast. This latest outrage is suspected to be the work of the Liberation Militia, although as yet no one has claimed responsibility. Jasmine Hadley's ex-husband, Kamal Hadley, whose party crashed so ignominiously in the general election held last week, was unavailable for comment.