

## Mistrust

Albert slouched in an uncomfortable metal chair in the center of the interrogation room. He was balancing the rear legs, lifting the front off the ground. The room was dark except for the single fluorescent bulb burning above him. He was seating in front of a dirty wooden table. On it was a manilla folder opened to his mugshot and profile, being combed over by a straight laced man in a suit sitting upright across from him. There was nothing else in the room except dust.

Bob, he knew, was in a similar situation the next room over. The heist had gone without a hitch, and the money was safely buried in the woods in Nowhere, Washington. Albert had brains behind his short slick black hair. His single mistake had been taking Bob as his parter. Bob was a bruiser. Useful at times, but the days of Bonnie & Clyde or the Sundance Kid were long over. Robbing banks was a game of charisma and intelligence, two things that Bob lacked.

“Well, Bert, can I call you Bert? I have a deal for you,” the straight laced man said, still looking down at the picture.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“I’m going to lay all our cards down. We know the Carson-Darryl bank was robbed, and we know two and a half million bucks in cash is floating around somewhere out in the country where we picked you up.” He paused and looked up to see if Albert was fazed. He was still slouched, unmoving. “So here’s my deal: Big guy next door doesn’t want to talk. I’m thinking we have a chat and if you happened to mention what you and big guy next door were up, and maybe let slip where that dough ended up, we could give the bank its money back and let you walk out, no harm done, no hard feelings.”

Albert lowered the front of his chair and leaned forward, bringing his face into the light. “I don’t know anything about any money or the whats it called, Carson-Daly, bank.”

“Do you want anything Bert? Coffee? Water?”

“ I could use a coffee.”

“Cream or sugar?”

“Lotsa sugar, lotsa cream.”

“I figured you for a man who liked things sweet.” The man stood up and stretched his arms. “I’ll be right back.”

When the man had exited the room and the heavy metal lock clicked shut Albert leaned back in his chair again. *I wonder how Bob takes his coffee*, he thought.

After what seemed like an abnormally long time the man returned with a mug in each hand. A cop in the hallway opened the door for him. He placed the mugs down on the corner of the table and sat down.

“I was gettin’ lonely in here by myself.”

“Sorry for the wait, Bert.” He slid a mug towards Albert. “I had to brew a fresh pot.”

Albert took a sip. It was light and sweet. Gourmet fare, better quality than he thought the police station would have. He took a long drink then set the cup down. “So what do you want to talk about?” He asked “The weather?”

“I’m more interested in discussing finances.”

“Good, I hate small talk.” He leaned forward again, letting the metal legs thud into the ground.

“Bert, I think you’re a smart guy. I’m sure you know when best to run, and when to cut a deal.” He looked up at Albert, but didn’t see any reaction in his face. “Big guy, he don’t know when to give up. He’s been crying ‘innocent’ this whole time. Unfortunately, the justice system likes honesty. If you tell us what we want to know, it wouldn’t take long before you’re a free man again. You scratch our back we scratch yours. Let Big guy take care of himself, yeah?”

“Suppose so. Let’s chat.”

The man took a long gulp of his beverage then scooted his chair closer. After rummaging in his pockets he found a small tape recorder the size of an orange and set it on the table.

“For the record? Not much use otherwise, eh?” Albert said, keeping it light.

“Suppose not.” The room was silent for a beat while the man fiddled with the recorder. A small red light flash on. He slid it to the middle of the table.”

“Your name please...For the record.”

“Albert Nesson.”

“You previously said you waived your right to have an attorney present. Would you please state that again for the record.”

“I waive my right to have an attorney present.”

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Albert stepped out of the station wearing his tan button up shirt and silk trousers, his jacket under his arm. He looked back behind him, at the intricate victorian style facade of the building then stepped down the aged marble steps onto the sidewalk. He slicked his hair back and rolled up his sleeves then moseyed down the street, melting into the mass of pedestrians and passers-by.

An hour before noon the next day Albert arrived at a rundown brick building near the outskirts of town that rented public lockers. It was accessible any time but the box he needed to get to had a key in a safe deposit box and the bank had already closed by the time he’d left the police station. He used the time to make sure he wasn’t being followed, then he hit up his favorite bar. Now with key in hand he opened the gated door and walked in.

The box was small, only about the size of a mailbox, and nestled in the farthest corner of the building where there were no windows. The light cast the walls in a layer of shadows He pulled out his key and inserted it. The tumblers turned and clicked and the door swung open, revealing a plain white envelope, unmarked and unsealed. Inside was a small slip of paper with five numbers. On the backside was the letterhead of the Carson-Darryl bank, a large bold-C in blue, with a smaller D inside the curve. The address was printed on a single line below.

“I knew I’d find you here, Albert.”

He turned and saw a large man in prison stripes stepping forward, gun out and pointed right at him, as if accusing him of a grave sin.

“Bob,” He said calmly. Always good to stay calm in these types of situations. “I don’t suppose they let you out too?”

“Oh I’m out alright.” He stepped closer, and Albert could see red droplets blotted on his clothes and face. A broken handcuff was still around his wrist. “They wanted to take me to county jail across town. They ought to use a sturdier glass in their cars.”

“Be careful where you’re pointing that Bob. It wouldn’t be good for either of us for you to gun me down here.” He turned back towards the locker as he said it.

“Why shouldn’t I? You stab my back I stab yours. Eh partner?” He spat at the ground, a yellow ball of slime that splattered on the concrete floor. “The pigs were under the impression that I acted alone. Who gave them that idea?”

“I didn’t tell them shit, they don’t have shit on us. At least they didn’t. Did you tell them where the money was buried?”

“No. And you better hope you didn’t either.”

“Of course not. But it won’t take them that long to find it, based on where we got picked up. If you want that dough before they do you’re going to need me.” His hand reached into his front pocket, searching.

“Yeah, why’s that? I remember where we buried it.”

Albert’s hand grasped the lighter it was searching for and thrust it out. Before Bob could register what was happening Albert turned and flicked the lighter on, tipping the piece of paper towards the orange flame. Watermark facing Bob, numbers facing himself. The edge of the paper singed, then burst into flames. Albert flung the paper forward. It curled into a piece of white ash before hitting the ground. He tossed the lighter down after for dramatic effect.

“Because,” he said, his facial muscles pulling into a twisted smile. “Only I know the combination.”

Bob lowered his gun hand. He paused, thinking.

“You’re driving,”

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Albert lead the way out of the building. Bob followed, holding the gun to Albert’s back. The street was desolate.

“Where’d you park?”

“I walked.”

“So did I.”

Albert scanned the street. It was a just a side road. Warehouses and nondescript properties lined the streets. There was a lot for public buses a block down. Cars passed by a thoroughfare two streets down. The only car nearby was a red two-door coupe parked in front of a seedy law firm, its hood facing their direction.

“It’s our lucky day,” He said, pointing out the vehicle.

They approached the coupe. It was an older model, at least ten years. The paint had lost its reflection, and the fenders had a series of nicks and dents. Albert crouched down and ran his hand along the inside of the casing near the rear driver-side tire around to the other side. Nothing there, or along the other tires.

Bob pressed forward and looked through the glass of the passenger window, clumsily pointing the gun into the sky. “Keys are laying on the dash. As long as you can drive stick”

Albert mimicked Bob on the driver window and saw the key lanyard tossed on the dashboard atop a faux-leather binder. Sheepskin covers, torn and falling apart, veiled the seats. A paper coffee cup was jammed in a cup holder near the shifter.

“Guess the poor sap locked himself out, huh?” He looked across the roof at Bob. “You have a slim jim?”

Bob lifted his head up. He pulled his hand back then shot it forward, smashing the butt of the pistol into the glass, shattering it in one strike. Using his free hand he reached into the jagged hole and pinched the lock then jiggered the handle. The door swung open, flinging small beads of broken glass from the window. After raking the seat clean he scrambled in and reached over to unlock the driver-side door. Albert ducked in and slid the seat back and realigned the rearview mirror. He looked over to check the passenger mirror and saw Bob’s pistol looking back at him.

“Put the gun down, Bob. What am I going to do in here?”

Bob tucked the gun into his pants. “No funny business. Remember that.”

“Let’s just get the money so we can go our separate ways.”

“Deal.”

Albert looked back and tilted the driver-side mirror slightly up. It was smudged so he grabbed his sleeve and wiped the glass. A little better. He reached across the dash and grabbed the keys. The first key he tried, silver with an oval base, fit right into the ignition and the engine reared to life. Albert looked back out of habit despite knowing the road was clear and pulled a U-ey to head out of the city.

They drove for an hour along the interstate highway in complete silence. Once the buildings ended they were surrounded by a mass of lush, dark green pines. A few minutes out of the city they passed a gleaming blue lake but nothing else after that to break up the scenery. Mountains flanked them on all sides, covered by an endless blanket of trees. They passed a couple cars going the opposite direction. A Sysco delivery truck and a red dodge loaded with logs. No other traffic on their side.

Albert focused on the road, and Bob focused on Albert. The tense silence became uncomfortable so Albert reached down and tuned the radio to an upbeat jazz station. Bob reached and clicked the tuner off.

“Lighten up a little, huh?” Albert said. Bob didn’t respond. Albert rolled his window down and rested his elbow on the sill. “Can’t say I like you staring at me like that.”

Bob didn’t turn his head.

After what seemed like ages Albert drifted over to the rightmost lane and took an exit into a small town. It was a quaint little municipality that stretched along the right side of the highway and up the nearby hill. A sign on the exit ramp stated the population was less than a thousand. It was the kind of place that made most of its money from cheap souvenirs in the gift shop. Little more than a glorified gas station.

“What’s the idea, Al?” Bob asked, reaching for his gun.

“Relax guy, we’re running on empty. I’m just heading in for a quick fill-up.”

Albert turned into the nearest station, a greasy run-down Chevron. The chipped corporate logo above the gas prices was the only suggestion of big business in sight except the golden arches sticking above a row of trees down the road. Albert rose out of the seat and stretched his arms.

“You fill up, I’m going to pay,” he said and started for the mini-mart attached to the station. Bob climbed out his side and reached for the pump. “You want anything for the road?” He asked when he’d just reached the other side of the pump.

“No.”

The mart was a minuscule excuse for a business. There were only two aisles in the center of the floor containing a stunted yet earnest selection of junk foods. The pristine colorful wrappers looked too clean with the yellowing walls and stained uneven tile floor. Albert reached for a single sized bag of Doritos and a can of Budweiser from one on only two beverage fridges. The clerk, a middle-aged man, was propped back with his legs on the counter listening to country radio. When Albert stepped and piled the food on the counter he removed his feet and sat up in a slow, meandering in a way that suggested his plans for the day didn’t include helping a customer.

Payin’ for gas, bub?”

“I’m the red car at the first pump.” The man didn’t turn to look. The coupe was the only car in the station. He punched some keys into the register and looked back up at Albert.

“That be all for you?”

“Throw in a pack of reds, and I’d take the bathroom key if you got one.”

The man reached back and tossed the cigarettes on the counter onto the pile. “Total’s thirty-five forty-five.”

Albert handed him two twenties. The man counted his change and reached down and placed the restroom keys onto Albert’s still outstretched hand.

“Just bring it back when you’re done.”

“Wasn’t planning on keeping it,” Albert replied, already two steps away with his snacks and smokes in his arms.

Bob was leaning against the car by the fuel tank, which was still open although the cap was put in. Albert rounded the front of the car and threw his snacks onto the driver seat, pocketed the smokes, and turned back around to the bathroom, which was a separate outside door.

“Hurry your ass up, princess,” Bob called back.

The bathroom was grungy like the mart, but amplified. It smelled like a blue plastic construction toilet. The walls and floor were an ungainly grey and the single bulb in the light fixture was going out. Every footstep echoed. After draining the snake he walked up to the single sink basin. The faucet squeaked and moaned. Water came out in a series of spurts then finally in a steady stream. No soap in the dispenser. Albert killed the water and stared at his reflection in the mirror, brushing a strand of hair out of his face.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crushed brown paper bag and tipped it over. A snub-nosed revolver rolled out. Smith and Wesson .38 Bodyguard with a rich dark wooden grip. The chamber was full. He pulled the hammer back to test, then released it and stuffed the gun back into his pants. After checking there was no bulge in his shirt he walked out.

When he’d gotten back Bob was still in the same position, but the beer was open on the roof open and he was reaching into the bag of chips in his hand. Bob fished out the last chip as Albert approached and climbed in his side, crumpling the bag and tossing it onto the street on the way in. Albert opened his door and sat down.

“Want a smoke to wash that down with?”

“No, you probably laced them.”

Albert reached down and pulled the pack out. He flashed them to show they were still in plastic then pulled the shrink wrap off. A brief pat of his pockets revealed that his lighter was missing. "Check the glove box for a lighter, will ya?"

Bob opened the box and shut it without a glance, just to make the noise of the latch catching. "Nope."

"Don't ask me for a favor later." Albert opened the box between the seat but there wasn't anything but dried pens and a pocket sized yellow legal pad. There was nothing on the floor or in the change pit above the shifter either. He gave up and tossed the cigarette out his window and turned the key.

After another hour down the highway with only the engine hum for a soundtrack Albert took a pitiful inconspicuous exit onto a quiet side road. The road gradated from asphalt to gravel to dirt as it wound into the trees, which changed from pines to deciduous oaks and other species Albert couldn't name by sight. The road was old and unused and bumpy. Albert figured the trail for some old maintenance road but the only structure nearby was a water treatment facility that hadn't seen use for a decade. Nobody had bothered filling the potholes for years. He parked at a spot about six miles off the freeway. There was no shoulder so the car was tilted at an angle halfway into the roadside ditch, which was filled with wet shriveled leaves.

"What's the idea?" Bob asked. "Why'd you stop?"

Albert got out and rounded the car onto the road and paced five steps up the road

"Hey! Don't be thinking about running off," Bob called out as he climbed out of the car, pistol in hand.

"I'm checking."

"For what?"

"When we buried the cash I took this branch off before leaving." He pointed to a stub up the trunk where a branch had indeed been ripped out. "Remember?"

"Yeah, so?"

"I strung a piece of fishing line from that tree across the road. If the cops made it here first it'll be broken. No sense running into an ambush, yeah?" He bent down at the base of the wounded tree and felt around for the line. His fingertips caught it. The line was still taut but he followed it across the road to make sure.

"It's clear. They didn't make it yet," he called back and walked back to the car. "Say thanks for bureaucracy, huh?" He said after settling back into his seat.

"Just hurry up." Bob said after removing a lit cigarette from his lips. It had to have come from his own stash because Albert's pack was in his pockets.

"Where'd you find the lighter?"

Bob tilted his head up and expelled a cloud of smoke onto the car roof. "What lighter?"

Albert rolled his window down and started the car. He like the smell of his smokes and his smokes only. "You don't have to lay it on so thick, pal."

"We're not pals anymore."

"Don't worry, I know."

Their stop was another mile down the road. This time when he killed the engine and got out so did Bob. Albert glanced over and saw Bob's pistol pointed at him.

"Christ Bob. What am I going to do out here, huh?"

“Just making sure you don’t forget.”

“Forget what?”

“I’m in charge.”

“Sure you are,” Albert muttered under his breath.

“What’d you say?”

“Nothing. Now let’s go.”

Their destination was a ten minute hike into the woods, through an untamed grove of ancient gnarled trees and twisted shrubbery. The bed of the woods was a blanket of last winter’s fallen leaves. The only living being beside themselves was a porcupine that lumbered across the trees in front of them. By the time they reached where it crossed it was gone. Albert figured it had hidden down a small incline into a clump of shrubs that were too thick to see through. As he walked he kept both hands in his pockets. His left casually groped his revolver.

After cresting a small hill he stopped and waited for Bob who was a few steps behind. Bob stopped so close that Albert felt the heat from his breath on the back of his neck. The nose of Bob’s pistol jabbed into the curve of his back.

“This it?” Bob growled.

“Bottom of the hill, by that pine tree remember?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

The two of them descended the hill to the base of a large pine tree. It was the only coniferous tree lost in a sea of oaks. The ground at the base was covered with leaves which Albert brushed aside to reveal a patch that looked disturbed and unnatural. Leaning on the back of the pine was a shovel that Albert picked up and walked back around to Bob.

“I think you should dig,” Albert said.

“Why’s that?”

“We buried it chest high right? That’ll take some doing getting it out, and we only have only one shovel.”

“So? Sounds like it’s calling your name.”

“It’ll take you a lot less time to dig it out.”

“Fine,” Bob said. He tucked his pistol into his pants and took the shovel.

Albert kept watch as Bob dug. The ground was soft and overturned so the work went fast, but it still took Bob the better of two hours. By the time he struck metal he was in the hole to his waist. The sound of metal clanging on metal called Albert over and he looked into the hole.

“We got it?”

“That’d be it.”

Bob tossed a few more shovelfuls of dirt before tossing the tool aside and grasping the safe. It was a few inches smaller than a duffel bag but made from reinforced metal like a dutch oven. A stick of dynamite was about all that could blow it open, which would also burn all the cash. The money didn’t weigh that much, only about fifty pounds by itself, but the safe tripled the weight and was awkward to lift. Bob tugged at the exposed side handle and got it out of the hole. He braced it against a side of the hole and started lifting from the bottom. Albert grabbed the top and heaved. Eventually they gained enough leverage that it stayed level instead of falling back into the hole.

Bob clapped his hands to get the excess dirt off then placed his hands up and to the sides of the hole to hoist himself out. He looked up and saw Albert perched over him, snub nosed revolver in his hand. Bob shot his hand down for his gun but Albert fired first. Bob managed to pull his gun out and shoot a round off but he slumped back, blood pouring out from his mouth and three growing holes on his chest. Albert glanced down. He looked and felt fine so he tossed the revolver into the hole and pushed the pile of loose dirt back down the hole. Before fully covering Bob he jumped down and fished through Bob's pant pockets and pulled out a battered and chipped zippo in his pockets. It was marked with a seal of the city police force. After a moment of thought he reached back in and grabbed Bob's pack of cigarettes. There were six left. He took one and dumped the rest over Bob's face.

Albert hoisted himself out of the hole crouched in front of the safe and twisted the dial for each number he'd memorized. The safe swung open revealed the stacks of cash. It was all in one pile kept together with plastic, five by five rows of one hundred thousand each. He fished out the burlap bags underneath the cash. The bills were crisp, fresh from the mint. Albert took the time to wipe his hands on the sides of his pants before grabbing the piles and threw them in. The entire stack fit into a single bag.

He rose to his feet and hoisted the bag over his shoulder. After a step he faltered, almost like he tripped over a twig or rock. He looked down and saw an unmistakable line of wetness from the right of his stomach, running down his leg. He felt the wound. He'd been hit in the gut. Blood was beginning to pour from the wound, like water finding a hole in the dyke. He pressed on it with his hand and took another step forward. Bob's unlit cigarette fell out of his mouth onto the ground. He took another step, dropping the bag of cash behind him. A step and a half later he fell forward. A slight breeze billowed the burlap sack of cash. Two and a half million in one pile, equidistant from both men.