

The Venetian Haul

The Venetian Haul

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Deep in the canals of Venice lies a decades old secret. You can tell its value by the number of people who have been killed trying to uncover it.

Published on
Booksie

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Table of Contents

The Venetian Haul Chapter 1

The Venetian Haul : Chapter 1

1/2

PROLOGUE

It was just after midnight when the lock finally opened on the door to the pawn shop, allowing the two elderly burglars access. 1/2 There had been a great deal of grumbling about the length of time it had taken and the deterioration of one's skills and such talk didn't stop once they were inside.

"You never could open a door on time, not in all the years I've known you," Harry Foster complained. 1/2 He removed his gloves and crossed to the glass partition, aiming his diamond tipped saw just near the edge. 1/2 Harry was sixty-eight and in good shape for his age, which was remarkable considering he'd spent a large part of his life abusing his body with a mixture of alcohol, tobacco and women.

"Fine. 1/2 Next time you try opening the door," Benny shot back. 1/2 "We'll be there until Christmas." 1/2 Benny Jamison had been Harry's partner for almost forty years now. 1/2 He was older than Harry in all ways except chronologically. 1/2 His vision was blurry, his reflexes were slower, his hearing impaired. 1/2 He had been bald for the past fifteen years and wore a toupee which Harry never lost an occasion to mock. 1/2 Still, Harry never had a closer friend. 1/2 1/2

Benny sat down as Harry continued cutting the glass. 1/2 He stared out at the dark sky through the window. 1/2 He checked his hands. 1/2 Sure enough, they were shaking. 1/2 Again.

"This is it for me, Harry," he said.

Harry didn't look up from what he was doing. 1/2 "What's 'it' for you?"

"This is my last job. 1/2 I'm too old, too slow and too damn tired. 1/2 We'll do this, get whatever we can from it, then I'm out."

Harry grunted non-committedly. 1/2 He knew Benny was right, he'd known it for some time. 1/2 He'd almost suggested it himself but would never hurt Benny's pride like that. 1/2 It had just been dumb luck that Benny hadn't been caught on the past two jobs. 1/2 They both knew you didn't get too many chances in this business.

"Let's talk about it later," Harry said. 1/2 "Maybe it's time we both took a break."

"You're as good as you ever were. 1/2 In some ways better. 1/2 You're smarter, more cautious. 1/2 Me, I'm just old. 1/2 I'm not complaining, though. 1/2 We had a hell of a run. 1/2 Made more money than I ever dreamed of. 1/2 Bought that house on the lake with cash. 1/2 Man, did Emma's eyes light up when she saw that."

"Well, we're not going to buy any house on a lake with this lot," Harry said ruefully. 1/2 "Looks like they only keep one or two pieces worth anything out here, the rest is back in the safe, no doubt. 1/2 And I'm not in the mood to take on a safe at this hour. 1/2 We'll just grab what's here and call it a day. 1/2 Just a few more..."

"Shit!" Benny exclaimed as the flashing red lights turned into the parking lot. Both men dove behind the counter as quickly as they could, Harry gathering up his tools and putting them in his back pocket.

"I thought you said they had no alarm!" Harry whispered.

"That's what the guy told me," Benny shot back. "He swore on a stack of Bibles."

"Jesus on a stick," Harry muttered and peered through a mirror on the wall. A flashlight was shining inside the store window, searching. The doorknob was being turned. Harry wondered whether or not Benny had been smart enough to relock the door after their entrance. The door creaked open and Harry had his answer. Benny shrugged apologetically.

The flashlight shone throughout the store. A hand pressed against the wall, searching for a light switch. They were in luck there at least, Harry thought. The lone fluorescent bulb overhead had a cord reaching down the side of the wall which most likely would be hard to see unless one was looking for it. With any luck whoever it was would go check out the back room where the safe was, allowing them to escape. That seemed to be the case as the light shone towards the back corridor and the footsteps moved away from the two burglars.

Benny slowly raised himself up and started making his way quietly to the front door. His eyes were fixed on the man with the flashlight. In his younger days he might have noticed the small step stool in front of him used to reach high objects on the wall but this was far from his younger days and since the step stool was black it might not have mattered even then. He stumbled over it, losing his balance. The ensuing crash told Harry that their luck had finally run out.

"Freeze!" yelled the voice in the dark. Benny tried to stand but his feet were caught in the stepstool. He lunged forward, throwing his hands out to try and break his fall, his fist coming into contact with a case of metal bracelets, flinging them to the floor with a loud clatter. A shot rang out, then a second. Benny felt the first bullet enter his stomach and the second one below his shoulder. Benny grabbed hold of the closest item near him and in desperation flung it at his assailant. One more shot rang out, followed by a loud gurgling noise. Harry fell to the floor and covered himself up, waiting for it to be over.

A loud siren pierced the night air as two additional police cars roared into the parking lot of the pawn shop. Harry rose, his arms lifted high above his head. "Don't shoot!" he yelled out.

"Get your fucking hands up in the air!" a deep voice boomed out, ignoring the fact that Harry's hands were indeed already stretched as far as they could go. Harry waited while two police officers entered the store, both their flashlights covering him. One of them obviously knew the layout of the pawn shop and made his way over to the wall where the cord hung off the fluorescent bulb. He pulled on the string and the light turned on, blinding them all temporarily. When Harry's eyes finally adjusted, he almost wished they hadn't. Benny was slumped down on the floor, three bullet holes in him, the last one directly through the front of his head. On the other side of the room was a young police officer sitting down, his eyes staring straight ahead, vacant. Harry's diamond tipped saw was lodged in his throat. Blood poured down the front of the young officer's shirt.

The older of the two policemen went to examine the young man. He clucked his tongue a few times and shook his head sadly at Harry.

"Boy, you don't know what you just done," he said in a thick Cajun accent. "This here's the Mayor's nephew. You just went and killed royalty."

Harry looked over to Benny and sighed. 'Hell and damnation, Benny,' he thought morosely to himself. 'Why couldn't you have retired one day earlier?'

CHAPTER ONE

Louisiana State Penitentiary, or Angola Prison as it was more commonly known, was built in 1836 and had the distinction of being the largest maximum security prison in the country. For more than a hundred years it operated pretty much as it wanted to, outside of public scrutiny. It had its own law and handed out its own justice, treating inmates in illegal and barbarous fashion, even by Louisiana standards. In 1961 Wilbert Rideau arrived at Angola. Rideau was a black man convicted in three successive trials of murdering bank teller Julia Ferguson. His three trials had several things in common, most notably the fact that in all three cases he was pronounced guilty by a team of all male, all white jurors. In 2005 he was retried, this time in front of a mixed jury consisting of ten women and two men, who lessened his charge substantially. The years he had already served were taken into account and he was freed immediately. While still in prison he wrote about the practice at Angola of treating some of the weaker inmates as slaves and sexual cattle, a practice not only condoned by but often initiated by prison guards. The ensuing publicity forced Angola to reform its policies and ensured at least somewhat better treatment of its prisoners, the latest of who was Harry Foster.

Jack Dodger drove his rental car up to the prison's parking lot and parked it in the visitor's section. He turned off the air conditioner and was immediately hit with the wall of heat which was typical of Baton Rouge in the summer. The weather man on the radio cheerfully announced it was 110 degrees outside, expected to rise to 115 by mid afternoon. Not for the first time Jack decided that people who lived there were clearly insane. Instinctively he locked the car before realizing where he was. If there was one place in all of Louisiana which was safe from car theft it was probably Angola Prison.

Jack was thirty-six years old with dark black hair and an athlete's body which, unlike Harry, he worked hard to maintain. It wasn't vanity which sent him to the gym five times a week but rather the knowledge that his specialized line of work required one to be at the top of their game, mentally and physically. Both Jack and his brother Bobby had been top athletes at their schools, and although it had been ten years since he had picked up a basketball he felt he could still handle himself fairly well on the hardwood if he needed to.

He was required to show his identification three times before finally gaining admittance to the interior. At the last checkpoint a burly guard who looked as if he'd been there all his life scrutinized

Jack's driver's license carefully before handing it back to him.

"Relation to the prisoner?" he asked.

"He's my uncle," Jack replied.

The guard looked at him closely as if trying to decide whether or not Jack was pulling his leg, then apparently decided he couldn't care less and waved Jack through. Jack smiled what he hoped was a non-threatening smile and proceeded. He moved towards the waiting room of the immense prison complex, surrounded by armed policemen. He felt claustrophobic and wondered if Angola had this effect on most people or just those who...like him...made a living by breaking the law.

He sat waiting for nearly ten minutes behind the glass partition and watched while other prisoners talked to their visitors. A striking blonde in her late twenties sat next to him arguing quietly with a man who appeared to be her boyfriend. She wore a low cut yellow blouse and short black skirt which rode up on her extremely well formed legs. Jack took her to be either an exotic dancer or cocktail waitress. He tried hard not to listen in to their conversation but the blonde's voice rose dramatically as she tried to assure the man of her fidelity. He kept shaking his head and scowling, unconvinced.

Harry finally appeared. It had only been three days since the night of the pawn store break-in but Jack was shocked at the change. Harry looked fifteen pounds thinner than when he'd last seen him and his hair had gone from an elegant grey to almost totally white.

"Jesus," Jack swore. "You look like hell."

"If you think I look bad you should see Benny," Harry replied as he sat down. He stretched his arms out over his head as though testing to see if they still worked.

Jack nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry about that. I liked Benny. He was always there when you needed him. A solid guy."

"Well, when I see him again...which, according to the state of Louisiana should be any day now...I'll give him your good wishes."

"How bad?" Jack asked.

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't get any worse. Murder of a cop during a felony. Just my luck the kid who died was a relative of the current mayor of Baton Rouge, a guy so right wing that even the NRA considers him extreme. The governor's no help. He already holds the record for state executions. With mine he'll get a set of steak knives, I imagine."

"Did you kill the cop?" Jack said.

"No, but only three people know that and two of them are in the morgue."

Jack exhaled slowly. "Christ, Harry, you need a miracle."

"Tell me something I don't know."

The Venetian Haul

The blonde suddenly rose from her seat next to Jack and stormed out of the waiting room. Her boyfriend slammed his fists up against the glass partition, startling the others in the room and capturing the attention of the guards. Sullenly, he put his head down and strode out of the visitor's quarters. Harry shrugged.

"My next door neighbor," he said. "He's in here for life, no chance of parole and he expects her to be waiting when he gets out. And I thought I had problems. Hey, where's Bobby?"

"Flying in from Los Angeles. His cell phone was turned off for the past two days, I just got word to him this morning. He'll be here tomorrow morning."

Harry nodded gratefully. "You're good kids. The two of you. Best thing my sister ever did. I sometimes wish you never followed me in my line of work. You've got brains, you could have been a CEO or something. Living in New York, vacationing in Hawaii, dating super models. Hell, you could have even taken after your father, just become a carpenter."

"Our father was only a carpenter when he was sober, which wasn't often."

"Lord knows that's true."

Jack hesitated a second before he spoke. "Harry, look. Bobby and I were talking. Throwing out options. There is one possible way out of this, you know."

Harry sat back and folded his arms, looking bemused. "Now, this I gotta hear. But if you're thinking of baking a cake and sticking a file in it, forget it. I'm diabetic."

"The Venetian Haul."

There was a long silence as the two men stared at each other. A minute passed by. Then another. Finally, Harry started to get out of his chair. "It was nice seeing you, Jack. Really. Take care of yourself."

"It could work."

"No!" Harry shot back. "As a matter of fact, it can't work. As a matter of more specific fact, it's suicide. I appreciate the thought, but do me a huge favor and forget the Venetian Haul, forget I ever told you about it."

"You don't have much of a choice," Jack said.

Harry moved in close to the glass, his voice lowered. "If that's what you consider a choice, you're crazy. Let me remind you that everyone who has ever gone after the Venetian Haul has wound up dead. Or worse."

"Except you," Jack said.

"That was thirty years ago and I was damn lucky. Benny and I lasted as long as we did because we never even considered going back after it. It's not just cursed, it's the goddamn Michael Jordan of curses. Now look. I've lived a good life, had some laughs. My time has come. I can accept that. What I can't accept is you and your brother throwing your lives away on a pipe dream; on something that can't be done. You're getting killed is not going to make my final days any easier."

"Harry, it's two hundred million dollars. Oddly enough, we don't see it as throwing our lives away."

Harry's finger shot out. "Two hundred million dollars means nothing to a dead man. No. That's my final decision. It's far too dangerous. Go home, Jack. Go home and get it out of your mind."

With that, Harry signaled for the guard. He stood and followed the guard out of the chambers, never looking back.

Jack walked out the front door of Angola Prison and towards his car. Standing outside the gate, an unlit cigarette in her hands was the blonde who'd been sitting next to him. She called out to him as he passed by. "Hey. Got a light?"

Jack shook his head. "Sorry. I don't smoke."

"Neither do I," the blonde said and crushed the cigarette underfoot. "I just use it as a conversation starter. So, are you heading into town?"

Jack nodded. "I am. You need a lift?"

Her face broke into a big smile. "That'd be great. I took a cab ride out here and now they tell me it'll be a half hour before they can send another one. If I don't get to work on time I'll be fired."

Jack opened the passenger door. "Hop in."

The blonde quickly moved to the side of the car and sat in her seat. Her dress rose even higher on her legs and she did nothing to correct it.

Jack got in the driver's seat and put the car into reverse. The air conditioner felt great as it blasted over the two of them.

"By the way, my name's Glory," she said as they pulled away from Angola. Her hand had moved in between them, almost touching his leg.

Jack glanced down at her perfectly manicured hand before making a right on to the road. "I'm Jack."

"Are you married, Jack?"

Jack saw no reason to lie. "No. I was engaged at one point but she passed away."

Glory looked horrified. "Oh, my God. Are you serious?"

"It's fine. It was a long time ago."

"Still, I'm so sorry. Was that your father you were visiting?"

"No. My uncle."

She nodded her head sympathetically. "It's nice that you were there for him. So many of them have no one they can talk to. I'm a big believer in loyalty."

"I could tell," Jack said. "Was that your husband?"

Glory laughed out loud. "God, no. Just someone I used to date. I feel sorry for him on account of he's there because of me. A jerk was hitting on me at work and he came and rescued me. Kind of messed the guy up pretty bad. The guy might have died, even. I'm not really sure. So I visit him every now and then."

"Out of loyalty," Jack said.

Her eyes twinkled. "That's right."

Glory's hand inched closer now until it was actually resting on Jack's leg, squeezing it slightly. He looked over to her.

"So what kind of work do you do?" he asked.

"I'm a dancer. A performer, actually. I do the late shift at the Red Rooster Pussycat Lounge. It's a gentlemen's club. Are you a gentleman?"

"Not always," Jack smiled. "The late shift? It's only four o'clock. I thought you had to get to work."

"Oh, I do, eventually," she said, grinning. "But I don't work until tomorrow night. If you make a right at the next exit we can probably make it to bed in less than ten minutes."

The Venetian Haul

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