

Hardware

March 17, 2024

11:00 a.m.

Chicago, Illinois

“He works at a hardware store?” asked Daniel.

“Clive Cotton,” said Calvin. “That’s him.”

They watched the man walk through the front doors of the establishment. He wore a white t-shirt, khakis, and a red apron.

Daniel squirmed in his seat, causing the huge pickup truck to rock back and forth. “He looks like a nerd.”

Calvin sighed. He’d been trying to explain the process by which these men had been altered. He’d even shown Daniel the news articles detailing how ordinary men were disappearing and showing up in different parts of the country. Despite this, Daniel struggled to comprehend it. “That’s the point,” said Calvin. “They’re choosing people who don’t look the part. Remember the schoolteacher you dismembered? He was an ordinary guy before these terrorists got their hands on him. They want people who look like average Joes.”

“I threw him from a balcony,” said Daniel.

“Huh?”

“The teacher. I didn’t dismember him. That was the butcher.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Calvin. “I’m mixing up my murders. The butcher thing was ironic, though. Nice touch.”

Daniel shrugged. “He had lots of knives. It was handy.”

“The point is,” said Calvin, “you can’t tell by their profession.”

“Clive works at Buddy’s Hardware, though,” said Daniel, clearly not getting it.

Calvin, despite his frustration, understood Daniel’s confusion. It was difficult for Calvin to grasp at first, too. At one point, these men were devoted fathers and husbands who’d never shown a hint of dissatisfaction with their lives. It was hard to believe a group of terrorists had recruited and altered them, especially when there was no evidence of the once-missing men being organized. However, Taylor, Calvin’s long-time friend, had convinced him it was true.

Each of the men had a tattoo, or something similar, on their right forearms, identifying them with the terrorists who enlisted them. It was a cluster of seven Xs that Taylor explained to be more like a birthmark. Calvin had seen this pattern on the other men they’d been pursuing for the past two months, and Clive bore it too.

The markings weren’t the only thing that convinced Calvin. The schoolteacher, for instance, when confronted, had proven to be a formidable foe. Even Daniel had been surprised

by the level of aggression and strength the man possessed. The marked men were rumored to be genetically enhanced, and all evidence they'd seen supported this claim.

"I don't understand why they're doing this," said Daniel.

"I don't think they have a choice."

Daniel's other source of cognitive dissonance was having to accept that these men had killed his boss, Benito Marcini, along with most of the employees present at his mansion, during a vicious attack. Among those murdered was Benito's daughter, Layla, whom Daniel loved. The slaughter of his best friend had sent him into a murderous rage, but the attackers had nearly killed him during their assault too. Daniel recovered from the attack and wanted revenge against everyone involved, but it wasn't so easy. The exact perpetrators were unknown, so all he could do was strike back at the ones who bore the same markings on their forearms.

"What are we going to do?" asked Daniel. "I could go inside and introduce myself."

"How about no? Remember, you're a wanted man. You don't exactly blend in with the rest of society."

Daniel stood seven and a half foot tall and tipped the scale at well over four hundred pounds. Calvin nearly wetted himself when he first saw the giant, and even after months of being his ally, he still cringed when he considered how easily Daniel could squash him. Add to that the rage Calvin had witnessed, and it was a recipe for genuine fear.

"You want me to be patient and wait until he finishes his shift?" asked Daniel.

"That would be nice, yes."

"Let us fulfill your hardware needs," said Daniel.

"Come again?"

"The sign," said Daniel, pointing to the slogan displayed on the storefront. "It's cheesy."

Despite his fear of Daniel, Calvin had grown to like him over the course of their unlikely partnership. The colossal man had a pleasant sense of humor, and when he wasn't ripping people to shreds, he was a nice guy. However, Calvin valued him most because of the protection he offered. Calvin was trying to break free from his mafia ties, especially from his relationship with Dean Talbert, who was likely looking under every rock in Chicago for him at that very moment.

Taylor had approached Calvin on behalf of a group of unknown people who had a vested interest in Daniel. Taylor's associates promised Calvin protection if he befriended Daniel and kept him out of jail and alive. This was a tricky bargain, but so far it had gone as promised. Taylor kept feeding Calvin the names and locations of certain marked individuals, and he continued providing Daniel with these targets to appease his appetite for revenge. Calvin was certain Taylor and his employers, whoever they were, picked isolated marks to protect Daniel from rampaging on his own, but he tried not to question the methods. Calvin preferred the way things were going but was afraid someday the random, seemingly meaningless targets would eventually grow old to his giant friend.

Daniel drummed the steering wheel and stared at the building. His jaw was set angrily, and Calvin could feel the tension oozing from the other side of the cab. He knew they wouldn't be waiting until Clive clocked out to go home.

"He has to go on break at some point," said Calvin, hoping to stall a little longer.

Daniel never took his eyes off the store. "Buckle up."

Calvin thought the statement was a metaphor until he felt the truck lurch forward, throwing his head against the seat. He screeched in surprise as the vehicle darted forward, barreling toward

the brick wall of the building. He fumbled with the seatbelt until he clicked it in place, and by that time they were nearing impact.

The store wasn't busy this time of day, but there were at least a few shoppers. Most of the cars in the lot belonged to hardware professionals who were just doing their jobs inside, as evidenced by their vehicles in the designated parking area.

Calvin's first and most reasonable worry as the truck slammed into the hard barrier was how many people Daniel's dangerous stunt would kill or injure. His second concerned whether they would survive the crash.

The truck's diamond-plated grill penetrated the brick wall with ease and sent a cloud of masonry dust into the air. The barrier collapsed inward, causing the vehicle to careen out of control as it rolled over rubble. Through the haze, Calvin saw patrons rushing to get out of the way, ditching their carts and baskets as they scrambled to flee the disaster headed toward them. The truck mowed over displays and knocked down aisle shelves as it slowed to a stop.

The airbags deployed and crushed Calvin's head against the seat. Daniel handled the wreck like a champ, and as the dust settled, he climbed out and disappeared into the fog while Calvin tried to orient himself. He could hear shouting through the open driver's side door, which also allowed dust to penetrate the vehicle. Calvin squinted through the haze and opened his door.

He heard Daniel rummaging in the distance in search of Clive. There was shouting from the employees and shoppers, but it was softer, likely because most had fled the store.

Calvin walked through the wreckage, high-stepping over debris, hoping to find Daniel and get out before the police arrived. The aisles in front of him were intact, unlike the ones they'd just driven through. Various tools and equipment lay scattered about, but he navigated the mess carefully. He kept imagining himself stepping on the business end of a rake and getting smacked with the handle. Daniel would never let him live down such a cartoonish error.

Calvin heard a scuffle behind him. When he turned, he expected to see Daniel lumbering toward him, but it was Clive, and the man looked anything but nerdy. He stared intensely at Calvin with a look that promised severe damage. Dust covered his bushy red hair and his uniform, but he looked excited by the chaos.

"Daniel," shouted Calvin. "A little help here." He tried to stay calm, knowing his friend was in the vicinity, even though the store itself was large. Daniel had to have heard him, so now all Calvin needed to do was avoid the angry-looking fellow until backup arrived.

Clive shot forward, forcing Calvin into a backpedal to keep his distance. When the employee ran, Calvin spun around and sprinted. He could hear debris being kicked behind him, and it was getting louder. When he reached the end of the aisle, he grabbed a shelf and propelled himself into the next lane, trying to move closer to where he last heard Daniel moving.

Calvin was not a fighter; it was in his best interest to avoid combat. He also wasn't in optimal running condition, so it was no surprise when he felt Clive's hand clutch his shirt collar halfway down the aisle. The grip was powerful, and it nearly halted Calvin's forward momentum, but he kept pushing. Instinctively, he stopped suddenly and crouched down, which caused Clive's momentum to carry him forward and collide with Calvin's ducked frame. Clive

did a somersault and landed on his back, but before Calvin could celebrate, his foe sprang to his feet.

“You’re kidding me,” said Calvin, deflated.

Clive grinned as he approached again, causing Calvin to retreat until he pressed against a shelf. Instinctively, he began grabbing items in his reach, hoping to find something to ward off his attacker. All he felt were plastic packages filled with fasteners like screws and staples, but he tossed them at Clive anyway. Predictably, the harmless projectiles didn’t have much of an effect. He kept feeling around until he gripped a handle of some kind, which he excitedly aimed at Clive. Only then did he realize it was a staple gun.

As his attacker prepared to throw a punch at him, Calvin panicked and pressed the tool against Clive’s chest. He heard the telltale click, but nothing else happened. His opponent never even flinched as he continued with the motion of his attack, hitting Calvin right between the eyes. The blow was quick and powerful, and it sent Calvin reeling backward to land on his backside. His face burned, and he was disoriented, but still aware enough to try to scoot away from Clive. The man came at him again, and foolish as it was, Calvin again raised the stapler in a futile attempt at a defense.

Clive bent down to grab Calvin, and as he did, Daniel’s enormous frame emerged to hover above the redhead. His friend wore a look of satisfaction Calvin had only seen when the giant dismantled his other victims. There was no doubt he was furious, but there appeared to be a childlike joy that gripped him.

While Clive was already at a disadvantage because he was unaware of Daniel behind him, he also had another, even bigger problem. Daniel was holding a sledgehammer.

The gigantic man grinned and swung the club like a toy, striking Clive in the middle of his back. The man screeched in pain and fell forward, landing on top of Calvin’s legs. After a few excruciating moments, Clive stopped moving, but Daniel wasn’t satisfied. The behemoth dropped his sledgehammer, stood over his victim, and pulled him up by his hair. The battered man squirmed and groaned as Daniel lifted him to his feet, but he couldn’t stand on his own, which forced Daniel to suspend Clive off the floor.

These displays of violence had become typical, but they still bothered Calvin. There was no doubt the men Daniel killed weren’t good people, and they may in fact be terrorists, but it was still hard for Calvin to digest. These weren’t standard assassinations; rather they were brutal slayings driven by an intense thirst for vengeance. What was even scarier was Daniel had seemed to grow so accustomed to it, he now celebrated the murders with glee. *He likes this too much.*

Daniel slammed Clive’s face into a nearby aisle with such force that it snapped the shelf and caused the entire structure to buckle inward. Tools began sliding to the center, landing on top of Clive and burying him. When Daniel retrieved the sledgehammer to finish the job, Calvin turned his head, refusing to watch.

Daniel’s nonchalance was disturbing on many levels. It was borderline psychotic, but the broader implications bothered Calvin the most. Not only did he fear his giant partner would end up getting them killed, but he also risked them being caught by the police. Calvin had been a petty criminal most of his life, but he’d never been an accessory to murder until he met Daniel.

Despite refusing to look at the carnage, Calvin couldn't escape the vicious sound of the fatal beating. Thankfully, it didn't last long, and a minute later he heard Daniel shuffle over to him.

"A stapler?" asked Daniel. "That was your weapon of choice?"

Calvin forgot he was still clutching the device. He glanced at Daniel, who was smiling. "He didn't give me a chance to be picky."

"I'm surprised you didn't take him down with that. That's the industrial type you're wielding."

"Shut up," said Calvin as he dropped the tool. "Can we just leave before the cops arrive?"

Almost on cue, Calvin heard sirens approaching. Daniel helped him to his feet, and they sprinted to the truck, but it didn't look operational. The impact had folded the hood back, and the front tires were flat.

"We'll have to walk," said Daniel, like it wasn't a big deal.

"Okay. And you think we won't look suspicious? You're ten feet tall. And are you bringing that with you?"

Daniel looked down at his sledgehammer and smiled. "I'm not leaving this."

"Great."

"Can you hot-wire a car?"

Calvin nodded. "Let's take Clive's." He rushed to the parking lot with Daniel following until they reached the vehicle. Calvin tugged on the handle. It was locked, so Daniel smashed the window with the hammer.

"All yours," said Daniel.

Calvin climbed behind the wheel and unlocked the back door. "Get in and lie down."

Not only were cops approaching, but the other hardware employees were across the street, watching their every move. Calvin had a surging feeling of dread, but he blocked out the distractions and got busy.

His years of thievery were finally serving him positively. Two minutes later, Calvin was peeling out of the parking lot in the opposite direction of the sirens. In his rear-view, he saw the first patrol car pulling up to the scene, and the store workers rushed up to the cop, pointing in their direction. Calvin made a sharp right turn and slammed the gas, hoping he could weave his way to freedom.

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Calvin collapsed on the couch, exhausted. They'd had to abandon Clive's car a few blocks away and walk the rest of the way home, which was a less than appealing scenario, especially with Daniel toting the sledgehammer. Luckily, they were in one of the seedier parts of the city, which meant the other residents didn't seem bothered by the sight. It was the first time Calvin had appreciated where they were staying; most times he hated the neighborhood.

Daniel walked to the back of the house toward his bedroom without a word. *Just another day at the office for the big guy*, thought Calvin. He waited a few minutes to make sure Daniel wasn't coming back out before calling Taylor to update him.

"Another one is dead," he said in a deadpan voice. "This time he crashed through a hardware store. It's getting out of hand."

Taylor laughed on the other end. "That dude is crazy. Did anyone see you two?"

“Sure. Every employee did. We barely made it out of there before the police arrived. Oh, and we left his truck there, inside the store. It’ll have our fingerprints all over.”

“Damn,” said Taylor. “Is he trying to end up on the most-wanted list? How’d you get away then?”

“I hot-wired Clive’s car,” said Calvin. “We dumped it already, don’t worry.”

“I’m not. You know what you’re doing.”

It didn’t feel like it, but he appreciated the vote of confidence. “We’ll need another vehicle.”

“Where’s yours?” asked Taylor.

“It’s been sitting somewhere for months. I was afraid Talbert would see it. It’s too far away to walk to it.”

“Okay,” said Taylor. “I’ll have one delivered to you this afternoon. There’s something else.”

Calvin sighed, wondering if Taylor was about to give Daniel another target so soon. “What now?”

“Remember Jim? You met Daniel at his house.”

“Yes,” said Calvin.

“He’s dead, and his wife and two kids are missing.”

Calvin sat up. “What? Who?”

“I think you know,” said Taylor. “Word on the street is Talbert has the Rippers looking for you.”

Taylor had a lot of contacts in Chicago, so a rumor from him was as reliable as they came. Taylor had also worked for Talbert in the past and knew what the mob boss was capable of. Talbert deployed Edgar Ripley and his siblings when he wanted someone to die horribly. This wasn’t good news.

“How’d Talbert know I was at Jim’s?” asked Calvin.

“That I don’t know,” said Taylor. “But Daniel can’t hear about this. He’d fly off the handle.”

“What happens now?” asked Calvin. “Talbert won’t stop. It’s just a matter of time before he finds me.”

“I’ll see what my people can do,” said Taylor. For now, sit tight.”

“And when Daniel demands another target?”

“Stall him.”

Calvin laughed. “Okay. That should do it.”

“I’m sorry, buddy,” said Taylor. “I’ll do everything in my power. Give me a few days.”

“Do you have photos of the Ripleys?”

“I can get them,” said Taylor. “I’ll text them to you.”

Calvin hung up and fell back against the couch. He knew Taylor meant well, but his friend was also at the mercy of the mysterious people he worked for. There was no doubt the Ripleys would find him, and if they knew about Daniel, it would make their task even easier. In this neighborhood alone, people had witnessed him carrying a huge sledgehammer. They wouldn’t soon forget that sight.

Calvin wandered down the hallway and knocked on Daniel’s door. His friend groaned permission for him to enter. The giant lay stretched out on the bed but wasn’t asleep, so Calvin took a seat on the edge. “You hungry?”

“Starved,” said Daniel.

“I’ll make some hot pockets. You want your usual dozen?”

Instead of answering, Daniel stared at the ceiling. “I loved Layla,” he said. Calvin knew this already, but he’d never heard him admit it. Daniel didn’t issue the statement with joy, but with a deep, sincere pain. Calvin sometimes had to remind himself of what the man had been through.

“You know why I’m doing this, right?” he said. “I can’t stop until I get these guys.”

Calvin wondered if he’d overheard his conversation with Taylor. It seemed unlikely, but rarely did he see Daniel so vulnerable. “I get it, man. It’s why I’m helping you.”

“You shouldn’t be involved in this,” said Daniel. “It’s not your fight.”

Calvin agreed, but he also knew he stood no chance on his own against Talbert and his goons without Daniel’s protection. However, Daniel’s words resonated with him because he meant them. If it came down to it, he would risk his life to save Calvin, and that meant a lot.

Jim, thought Calvin. Guilt overcame him as he thought of what Daniel would do if he knew, or if he discovered Calvin didn’t tell him. It was unfair to withhold this information from him, despite Taylor’s orders. “Jim’s dead,” he said before he could talk himself out of it.

Daniel’s head shot up, and his eyes were big. “What?”

“It was Talbert,” said Calvin. “Namely, one of his enforcers.”

Daniel was on his feet now. “How did they link you to Jim?”

“I’m not sure,” said Calvin.

“What about his family?”

“They’re missing.”

Daniel’s face morphed into the familiar beast Calvin was so used to seeing.

“You’re sure it’s Talbert?”

“Yes,” said Calvin. “He’s put out a hit on me.”

“Let’s go,” said Daniel, putting on his shoes.

“We don’t have a car,” said Calvin. “Someone is dropping one off later. We’ll have to wait.”

“Damn,” said Daniel, but then his expression changed to excitement. “Your car. That’s how they found you.”

“Huh?” asked Calvin.

“They’ve been tracking your movements. It’s the only explanation.”

Calvin palmed his forehead. “You’re right. That’s gotta be it.”

“So we go to your car,” said Daniel.

“I’m not walking there, big fella.”

“Call your people and tell them to get a move on,” said Daniel. “We need to act.”

“Have patience,” said Calvin. “You realize Talbert will have guys waiting for us when we show up to get my car, right?”

Daniel gripped the sledgehammer. “I know.”