

A dark blue van turned the corner of Main Street just after midnight.

As Thomas Marks watched it approach, his breath fogged heavily through his ski mask in the cold night air. The street lamps were spaced far enough apart that they didn't give the road full coverage, so the van disappeared intermittently as it faded in and out of the light on its mile-long journey to pick up its last passenger.

Thomas pulled the ski mask down to cover a small sliver of exposed skin on his neck, just as he'd been doing for the last twenty minutes. He had to buy a mask for the job, having neither been skiing nor robbed a bank before in his life. He took a bus twenty miles out of town to find one so nobody would recognize him. Direct orders from the guy pulling his strings.

It itched terribly and made breathing a little more difficult, but the night air was cold enough to make him thankful for its warmth. He kept his hands stuffed in his pockets and kicked at a loose pebble as the van drew closer. Thomas had waited in the shadows off the road until he heard the distant engine approaching, not trusting the remote location enough to stand out in the open in case things went bad and a witness somehow managed to identify him later.

He watched the lights reflect off the van's dirty windshield as it rumbled toward him. The glare made it impossible to see inside, which only slightly eased his racing mind. Thomas's heart beat quickly and his white puffs of breath rolled from his mask faster and faster.

The van slowed to a stop in front of him. Its side door slid open to reveal a deep, black hole. A warmth flowed from the opening and enveloped him in a way that under normal circumstances he would have described as welcoming. That night, however, Thomas hesitated until a man with short black hair stuck his face out and looked at him.

"Well?" the man said impatiently. "What are you waiting for, an invitation? Let's go."

He disappeared back into the van, and Thomas followed after him.

* * *

Besides the man with the short black hair, there were two others in the van.

The driver never spoke. He was short, Thomas guessed no taller than five-foot-five, and surly. His thick brow hung over his eyes so far that Thomas imagined it was nearly impossible for him to see the road. The man in the passenger seat was tall and lanky, with a boyish grin that implied he was already having a great deal of fun.

The man with the short black hair was staring at Thomas. His eyes dropped down to look at Thomas's black tennis shoes, his black pants, and finally his black long-sleeved shirt. Black Hair's eyes narrowed when he inspected the ski mask. Under the man's cool stare, Thomas realized he had forgotten to introduce himself.

"I'm—"

"No names," said the other man bluntly. "No names, no personal info. This your first job, or what?"

"I—yes, it is."

“You can take off that mask until we get there. We don’t know you from Adam and you’re the only local.”

Thomas peeled off his ski mask, relieved to breathe freely; there was a cloying heat that was starting to make him sweat. He pushed his sleeves up past his elbows. “You’ve done this kind of thing before?”

Black Hair grunted and produced a slim thermos from a duffel bag at his feet. He poured some coffee into a small cup and handed it to Thomas. “Never like this. Shorty up there,” he said, gesturing to the driver, “he’s been driving for almost five years, never seen a job like this. Ain’t that right, Shorty?”

The driver glanced up into the rear-view mirror but remained silent. His small, dark eyes hovered on Thomas’s face before drifting back down to watch the road. They turned down a street Thomas didn’t recognize, even though he could see the dim glow of downtown approaching in the distance.

Black Hair poured the other two men cups of coffee and passed them forward, then filled the lid of the thermos and sipped loudly. “Help keep you awake,” he said, his mouth cocked in a half-grin. “Gonna be a long night.”

“I don’t think I need it,” admitted Thomas. He felt wired.

“Drink it anyway.”

Thomas drank. It could have been a lot worse, and he would have preferred a little booster to spice it up. He often carried a small flask for just such an occasion, but this time he had left his pockets empty in case he needed to run. “Where’s the bank?” he asked.

“Check the map, Boy Scout,” said Black Hair. The man in the passenger seat pulled out a small folded map and shined his flashlight on a detail of downtown Junction City.

“Center of Old Downtown, four miles,” he said, returning the map to one of the many pockets on his pants. He was smiling again. “This is going to be great.”

Thomas wasn’t so sure. He hadn’t exactly been *forced* to participate, but when the mobster to whom he owed a substantial sum made it clear that the deadline for his mountainous debt would not be extended, Thomas could find no other option for such a quick pay day. The Russian boss told him where to be and when, what his responsibilities would be on-site, and to never take off his mask once they arrived at the bank.

Half of what they found in the bank vault went to Mikhail, the Russian. The other half was to be divided amongst the four thieves.

“How much do you think will be in there?” asked Boy Scout.

“This is Junction City,” said Black Hair, “not Fort Knox. We’ll be lucky to break half a mil.”

For the first time, Thomas noticed that he was the only one dressed all in black. The other men wore t-shirts and jeans; Boy Scout was wearing a light blue polo and khaki cargo pants.

“Usually, yeah, we’d all be slick like you,” said Black Hair, following Thomas’s eyes. “We don’t gotta worry about it this time, though. Better safe than sorry for you, being your first gig.”

“What about cops?” Thomas asked.

“No night patrols in Old Downtown since the end of last year. Cops don’t give a shit.”

Thomas vaguely remembered a mugging that made the evening headlines last Christmas. Local news milked that story for two weeks even though the woman had escaped unharmed. Violent crime in Junction City was rare, so whenever the possibility of a threat surfaced it saturated every local news station until something more interesting—or deadly—came along.

“I see it,” said Boy Scout.

The bank was bathed in the dull, yellow light of a street lamp and sat just on the edge of a

wooded park. Thomas thought it looked more like an old church than a bank; the architecture predated most of the other buildings in the area by a decade or more.

Shorty pulled the van off Main Street and idled to a stop a block away from the bank. He turned back to look at the others. Black Hair set his thermos aside and zipped up his duffel bag. Boy Scout grinned at Thomas.

“All right,” said Black Hair, and grabbed his ski mask. “Let’s get rich.”

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The vault was protected very thoroughly on all four of its walls by two feet of solid steel, with built-in tremor sensors to detect any explosions. Through a flaw in its design, and through the lack of criminal vision on behalf of the building’s architects, the ceiling of the vault was less than one-inch thick with no sensors whatsoever.

The roof of the bank was vaulted, which gave the four thieves ample coverage as long as they remained crouched down on the back side of the building near the park. The leafy boughs of a thick oak tree dangled lazily over the back half of the building, adding to the thieves’ coverage. Anyone driving past the bank would not see anything out of the ordinary.

After scouting the street to make sure no one was watching, Shorty parked the van against the back of the bank and cut the engine. Black Hair and Boy Scout each grabbed a duffel bag and hopped out of the van. There was one video camera with a glowing red LED at its base watching the back door of the bank. Black Hair quickly produced a can of spray paint and covered the lens with a thick coat of black. He stashed the can in his duffel and motioned to the top of the building. He and Boy Scout climbed noisily onto the roof of the van. From there, they were each tall enough to hoist themselves onto the roof of the bank.

Shorty got out of the driver’s seat carrying a heavy flashlight and scanned the park behind them. Besides the occasional gust of wind and the rustling of dead leaves, all was silent. Thomas waited in the van and realized no one had yet told him what to do. His ski mask was pulled down snugly over his face and it was starting to itch again.

There was a loud scraping sound coming from the roof of the bank, followed by a sharp crunch.

Thomas got out of the van and stood next to Shorty. His eyes followed the flashlight as the short man played its beam over the dark shadows in the park. Thomas glanced up to the roof just as a large chunk of shingles slipped over the side and fell to the ground. There was more scraping from above. Thomas walked to the debris and lifted one side. The cheap rectangle of thin roofing broke apart in his hands.

“What are they doing?” he whispered to Shorty. The stout driver glanced at him briefly before resuming his robotic scanning.

Black Hair’s masked face popped out over the edge of the roof. He whistled sharply at Thomas and gestured for him to climb up. Thomas hoisted himself onto the van. He had to jump a little to grab the edge of the building, but once he had a firm grip he was able to pull his body over the ledge.

He walked over to where the other two men were working. They had peeled off a five-by-five foot square of shingles, exposing a thick layer of wooden board beneath.

“He doesn’t speak English,” said Boy Scout, gesturing in Shorty’s direction. “Plausible deniability, I call it.” Thomas could tell he was smiling behind his mask.

“Here,” said Black Hair, reaching into his duffel bag. He pulled out a flashlight and handed it

to Thomas. "Just keep it in the center." Thomas turned the light on and opened the beam to a wider dispersion, then aimed it at the blank piece of wood on the roof. In the light, he noticed that what at first appeared to be a single, solid piece of wood was actually many smaller pieces of boarding tacked to the building's frame.

The other two men each had a crowbar and a hammer and set to work.

After each board was pulled up, they would hand it over to Thomas to be set aside. He stacked them neatly out of the way.

"Hey, *light*, goddammit."

"Sorry," said Thomas, quickly repositioning the beam. "I feel sort of useless."

Black Hair smirked. "Whatever Boss says, Boss gets. This time he says bring you along, so here you are. Splittin' this haul four ways is still gonna set each of us up for a long time. Except you, of course. Yours is all goin' back to the Big Man."

Thomas took some relief from that reminder, even though it meant he was unlikely to see a dime from this endeavor. He wondered if the money inside the vault was insured and would be refunded to the customers, or if he was essentially stealing some poor old man's retirement fund. He bet on the former and quickly pushed the thought from his mind.

In about fifteen minutes they had a hole large enough for one of them to climb through.

"Good," said Black Hair, and walked to the edge of the roof. He whistled down to Shorty and nodded. Thomas saw the driver pull a long water hose from the back of the van and run off into the park. A moment later he reappeared pinching one end of the hose, the other trailing off into the darkness behind him.

He pulled a black tarp off of a small machine and wheeled it out of the van. It looked to Thomas like a mini cement mixer. Shorty screwed the hose into a small nozzle on the side and opened a valve. There was a loud gurgling noise as a reservoir atop the machine filled with water. Shorty unrolled two long hoses that were attached to the bottom of the device and fed them up to Black Hair.

Boy Scout hopped down into the hole and landed on metal. When he shined the light into the hole, Thomas saw that the entire surface under Boy Scout's feet was steel.

"Just keep that light on the water," said Black Hair before he jumped into the hole. Thomas crouched down at the edge and waited.

Black Hair handed Boy Scout the thinner of the two hoses. His own had a chunky metal gun attached to the end. There was a large trigger and the whole contraption focused down to a tiny, gleaming point.

He looked up at Thomas. "Tell him to go."

"Go!" Thomas whispered loudly over his shoulder. Shorty heard him, for a moment later a gas-powered generator kicked on down by the van.

Black Hair knelt on the steel floor and aimed the gun directly at the center, keeping it just barely off the surface. When he pulled the trigger, a jet-stream of water shot out of the tip. The initial burst pushed his hand away from the steel. He steadied himself quickly and lowered the nozzle. Water shot past the diamond tip of the chunky gun in Black Hair's hand and slowly etched a deep groove in the steel. Boy Scout knelt beside him and held his hose a couple of inches away from the water runoff. The majority of the excess water leaving the metal nozzle was getting sucked up instantly by the vacuum hose.

"The noise..." said Boy Scout loudly.

"We'll be fine," said Black Hair, focusing on his work. "Just work fast and stop talking."

* * *

It took just over two hours to cut a three-foot circular hole in the roof of the vault. Thomas checked his watch: half past three. He wondered when the first of the nearby store owners would show up. Boy Scout had told him that none of the businesses opened until eight in the morning, but one never knew when an over-eager employee was going to come in early.

At night, Old Downtown in Junction City was dead to the world. The nearest residential zone was a mile away, out past the green parks that surrounded the inner hub. Years ago, unable to expand its borders due to the parks, the small central district had ceded its power to the vertically-growing metropolis across the river and existed now as a scenic little drive-through village populated with antique shops and small delicatessens.

There had only been two people that walked past the bank the whole time they were cutting through the roof. One was drunk and ignored them completely, and the other stared up at the roof as he walked by. They had cut off the machine the instant Shorty warned them that the pedestrian had turned onto Main Street three blocks away. He lingered momentarily in front of the bank before wandering off into the night.

Black Hair stood up on the steel. With one solid kick to the middle of the three-foot cutout, it dropped and landed flatly on the floor of the vault with a tremendous *THOOM*. Black Hair grabbed his duffel and jumped down through the hole.

Boy Scout kicked his own duffel into the hole but didn't follow. Instead he climbed back onto the roof, walked past Thomas, and hopped onto the van.

"Give me the small hose," said Black Hair from the vault. Thomas grabbed hold of the hose without the ornate attachment and fed it down into the hole. "Light." Standing in the wide swath of light, Black Hair pulled a larger empty bag out of his duffel. He produced another from Boy Scout's bag.

He worked quickly, unzipping each bag and setting them on the floor next to each other. He looped the end of the hose through one strap of his duffel bag and set it aside to be hauled up later. There was a small vault built into the wall of the larger, and Thomas followed Black Hair with the flashlight as he walked toward it. He punched a quick series of numbers on a glowing red keypad next to the smaller vault and stepped back. After a long mechanical whir and a loud *click*, the door popped open. "Thanks, boss," said Black Hair with a smile.

Inside were neatly stacked towers of bills that filled the smaller vault from wall to wall, front to back.

Thomas stared at the money in disbelief; he had no idea there would be that much.

Apparently, neither did Black Hair. "Gee-zus," he said, his eyes wide. Then he laughed and started scooping the money into the bags.

* * *

The police officer showed up as they were wheeling the water-cutter back into the van. They had already loaded the money and rolled up the hoses. Shorty shouted something in what Thomas thought was Italian when the cruiser rolled up silently behind the bank. He dropped the machine onto Thomas's foot and ran around the front of the van. Boy Scout was still on the roof, about to climb down, when the officer jumped out of his car. He used his door as cover and drew his revolver.

“Don’t move!” he shouted. He jerked the gun back and forth between Thomas and Boy Scout, not sure where to focus. “Where’s the others?!” Through the front windshield, Thomas saw Shorty crouched by the van. Black Hair was nowhere in sight.

Boy Scout stood up at that moment and the police officer turned toward him and fired. The bullet sank into the tall man’s abdomen just above his left hip. He grabbed at the wound and fell off the roof. His body landed heavily on the ground.

“I said don’t move! Backup’s on the way!” said the officer. He was clearly upset he had needed to shoot someone. Thomas thought the guy looked too young to be a cop. Maybe this was his first real call.

“Calm down,” said Thomas. “Just take it easy.” He slowly placed his hands behind his head and faced the cop. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Run, said a voice in Thomas’s head. *Leave the money and get the hell out.*

The cop hovered his gun at Thomas. Sweat shimmered across his pale forehead.

Shorty walked around from the front of the van, his hands also clasped behind his head. He started talking in Italian. It struck Thomas as very conversational, matter-of-fact dialogue. He was talking to the cop in a low, soothing murmur. Occasionally he would shrug his shoulders or smile genially in accordance with whatever he was talking about, but he kept his constant, slow pace toward the officer.

It wasn’t until Shorty had covered half the distance between himself and the cop that Thomas noticed the dark figure sneaking up behind the patrol cruiser. The officer was too involved with Shorty’s gibbering to notice Black Hair creep up behind him and swing a crowbar into his skull.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Black Hair as he walked over to the van and tossed the wet crowbar into the back. Shorty mumbled an agreement and hustled to close the doors.

“What about him?” asked Thomas, pointing to Boy Scout. The injured man was groaning softly as he lay on the ground, a small pool of blood forming under his body.

“What *about* him?” repeated Black Hair. “One less share, more for us.” Shorty was nodding vigorously. “In fact, now that I think about it...”

Thomas barely had time to register Black Hair’s fist as it rocketed straight toward his temple. He fell to the ground and slipped into unconsciousness, certain beyond doubt that the other men were laughing.