

## **Jogger's Match**

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The cold night air pulled the scent of pine needles out of the trees to drift under his nose. The jogger watched in the dark as the stars faded and grew again after each passing car. He stood waiting for the swerving vehicle that was bound to pass. The jogging suit was stained red for extra shock value.

He watched the cars slow down to make the uphill turn. If timed right, he could dash out and glance off the hood. It had worked before and he needed it to work now. If he found the right one, one like before, the driver would get out of the car in the shock of the moment, and a moment was all he needed.

His bowels twitched and he knew the heroine was wearing thin. If that driver didn't arrive soon, he didn't know if he could manage this. His fingers were already starting to jump. The suit was sticking to his back, the sweat beginning to pour. He checked the revolver for the 23<sup>rd</sup> time, still loaded. *One car, the right car. It always comes, just steady*, he assured himself.

The moon slowly climbed the trees across the road, and it wasn't until it had finally jumped from the top of the largest pine that he found who he was looking for. A distant car rounded the far turn, sliding over the yellow line as it came. Round headlights drew nearer. *An import, maybe a Jag. This'll turn the trick.* The trade on a car like that would set him up for maybe a month, maybe more. *Plenty of time to get back to a steady income. Work it right and we'll trim this shit. A month of smack to ease us off and we'll be back to regular business.*

Somewhere in the back of his mind the sentence rang familiar, like a train running down the same rail. The jogger ignored it, slid it off at the next switch. *A good regiment of easy hits. That would cure all before we hit rock-bottom.*

His adrenaline drove the sweat cold. His body shuddered once and stilled as his heart tripled its beats. He waited for the brake lights to shine and the car to slow into the next turn. The pines behind the car glowed red and he dashed over the ditch, out into the road. The white jogging stripes flashed in the headlights. Rubber melted and stuck to the pavement like thick paint as the car tried screeching to a halt. He loosened his muscles for the impact, jumped to save his knees from the bumper and ricocheted off the hood. The windshield caught him and the smack sounded like a fastball in the catcher's mitt. He bounced off as the car halted, back down into the lights pooled across the curve of the road. The yellow lines leapt in and out of his vision as he rolled.

His hands went to his ribs and he began to moan, part of the show, but maybe a rib had cracked this time. His lungs pulled in the cool air for a louder cry and his chest caught. *Yah, I snapped something*, he thought. It didn't matter. The moment was coming, should be coming but the driver hadn't moved. He began to rock a little more. Still no one stirred. *What's he waiting for?*

The door clicked open.

"Fucking slow on the game, aren't yah," he whispered. A head peered out at him, hesitating as if not sure what to do. *Come on, we're almost there*, he thought, and moaned a little louder. The door clicked shut.

"For fuck's sake, what are you doing?" he said, and lifted his head to see.

The car lurched forward. He tried to roll away as the engine whined up in first, but it seemed the night had turned to a lead curtain pressing down, turning the sky so dark. He settled on his back and watched the moon mist over to a dull red glow.

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As far as the driver was concerned, his life might as well be over. They had wiped their slate clean and left his gouged and marred. He had given them twenty years and one hundred times that in client files. He had brought them from that little fucking shop in the West Bottoms to the downtown high-rise. They could turn on him? He had carried them all on his fucking back more times than he could count. Had he lost any of their money? The clients hadn't lost a single cent. Hadn't he twisted and turned, juked and jived like a pro fucking running back, and made a fortune? Did he deserve it? Hell, yes.

"Damn fuckers. You're lucky I didn't keep all of it. I could have. Goddamn, I should have," he yelled and pounded the wheel with the palm of his hand.

He had ranted the bullshit through his mind all evening and it was peaking now, between the bar and the house. His Jaguar wove over the centerline, more yellow than black under the tires, as it flew down the road. He was beginning to sober a little and wondered if he had any bourbon at home.

"What home," he yelled. "You probably packed up everything this afternoon, but you damn well better have left what was mine." *Especially the bourbon*, the little voice added from the back of his mind.

His fucking partners, they were bad enough, but her backing out on him? He yelled out all the curses tallied up since middle school, and caught the wheel as it edged

onto the soft shoulder. “No, go ahead. Take the goddamn house, your goddamn shit, and your fucking 50 percent,” he screamed, pounding a black bruise further into his palm.

He saw the curve, almost too late, and turned hard into it. The tires slid, but he held it on the asphalt. A yellow sign flashed by, prompting another turn. He slowed the car down, deciding to take the next one at a manageable pace.

Suddenly, the white outlines of the asphalt seemed to rise, pulling inward to choke off the black road. His eyes blurred trying to focus on the swimming stripes. His feet shoved down on the brakes, almost lifting him out of his seat, but still he hit it. The hood ornament snapped free. It stood out crisp and clear, like a frame stuck in the projector, as the metal caught between the windshield and the body. The jogger bounced out in front of the car, the white stripes of his suit flashing as he rolled before the headlights. The driver watched the small chrome cat slide down the glass and wedge under the wiper.

His body was rock hard, his feet still pushing the brakes down into the carpet, even though he was stopped. The driver peered over the steering wheel, his eyes now focused on the jogger, clutching his ribs across the yellow line. His thoughts exploded into a sprint, racing down the event and its directions like a spider stretching a thousand strands of web.

*Is everyone my fucking enemy?* He heard a faint moan penetrating through the windshield.

“I have to help him,” said some sobered voice. He opened the door and started to get out.

*Won't this bring the rest of your life down,* countered the little voice in the back of his head. *If the cops come now and this guy takes you for all the money left...?*

“He’ll spend it while I rot away.”

He slid back in the car and shut the door. The anger came burning back, driving the fear aside. His eyes drew back to the cat, and he stomped on the gas. The car jumped forward.

The driver stopped and opened the door. The jogger wasn’t moving. He got out and walked over to him, watching the shuddering breath, the man staring into the sky. He spoke, spilling it out, nothing prepared.

“Sorry, but I, uh, can’t afford trouble. If they find out...I hope you didn’t feel that too much.”

“This is trouble...for you? I’m dying...you’re just standing there...you fuck,” said the jogger.

“Yah,” he replied, and couldn’t think of anything else. He turned back to the car, climbed in, and shut the door. He sat for a few seconds, reviewing his options, then shifted the car into reverse.

The jogger saw a terrifying white exit the brake lights and he struggled to get up. His broken back snatched his breath away and his head lolled over to catch sight of black asphalt meeting black rubber and then blackness.

Thump. The car bounced. The driver shifted back into drive, the little voice in the back of his head deciding that a good regiment of bourbon would solve everything. *That would cure all.*