

Never Trust A Thief

by Foster Trecost

1.

John Dearborn wore a tailored suit. His jacket allowed an ideal amount of starched white sleeve to extend from beneath the cuff. His trousers fit just right, the fabric flowed like windblown wheat. His looks were polished like his shoes, his hair as black. No one would have guessed he made his living as a thief.

He left bank counters and convenience stores to those with more immediate needs. He had evolved, and no longer stole for himself, but was paid nicely to steal for others. The jobs were always dangerous, nothing safe but the one he cracked.

He had been accepted among more legitimate circles of wealth. Perhaps an attempt at balance, his charitable offerings exceeded most from within his station. Children were a weakness, as were the elderly. His residence reflected his worth, but only in address. Inside, a minimalist approach pervaded, with only unseen exceptions; his most precious possessions were hidden from sight.

"Good morning, Mr. Dearborn." A uniformed man opened the door.

"Morning, Sam."

The crisp morning had John looking forward to the walk, but he stopped before he set out. For a man who avoided questions, he asked one of the doorman: "Sam, how long you lived here?"

"All my life. Seventy-two years."

"Ever get tired of it? Ever want to move?"

"Not so much anymore, but when I was younger, right after the kids came." His voice trailed into nostalgic remembrances.

"Any regrets?"

Sam had many. "No, no regrets, Mr. Dearborn."

John accepted the lie and made his way through the city. Two blocks later, he bought a newspaper. One after that, coffee from a street cart. Two more and he stopped to gaze through a gallery

window. And he was convinced, as anyone who lived looking over their shoulders would be, he was being followed.

The cafe might have seemed confining, but toward the rear between the restroom and a closet was an unmarked exit. He would use it if needed. He carried his cappuccino to an empty seat, feigned interest in the paper and waited.

The wait would not last long. "Mr. Dearborn?" The voice was hushed, but not nearly hushed enough. John sipped his coffee without acknowledging the man who called his name. In such situations, he never answered his name in public.

"Mr. Dearborn," he said again, "I would like to hire you."

Without looking, John raised a finger to his lips. He did not know how they found him, only that they did, but there were rules to be followed. He drew a large swallow, exaggerated his approval, and then another, finishing the cup. He scribbled a note on a paper napkin, slid it under the empty cup, and left.

You found me once. If you wish to hire me, you can do it again. But if it's in public you'll have exhausted your final chance.

2.

John kept a small office in a mid-town building and attended at least three times a week. The sign on the door said Search Consultants International, a legitimate business. Candidates came without the call of advertisement and John sometimes wondered how they found him as well. On this day, secretary Sally had scheduled five appointments.

His intercom crackled and she announced another arrival. John was ready. "Is this a more suitable location, Mr. Dearborn?" It had been five days since the café' encounter.

"That depends," John answered, "on what you'd like to discuss."

"As I said before, I wish to hire you."

"Okay. Let's start with your name."

"My name is Vance Crawford."

Not bad, John thought, for a fake name. "What do you wish me to do?"

"Your reputation is quite good. I'm interested in your ability with safes."

It was always safes. Though he was one, John disliked most thieves - Vance Crawford proved no exception. He had no respect for rules and John did not like him at all, but still he listened. It was not necessary to like his clients. "Go on," he said.

"How good are you?"

A question not needed, John's answer came quick. "I'm the best. There's not a safe in the world I can't open."

Vance smiled at what he hoped to hear, and asked the next question. "A Strafford?"

"Yes," said John. "I can crack a Strafford."

"A Devonshire?"

"Yes," he said again, allowing his tone to reveal irritation.

"An Allenton?"

And with that, Vance had his full attention. "Yes, I can crack an Allenton." Few could.

Vance paused and then took a breath slightly deeper in preparation for the most important question of all: "Blindfolded?"

"Excuse me?" John had heard correctly, but failed to understand.

"I've no doubt each of these safes would pose not even the slightest obstacle to a man of your talent...with your eyes open. My question is can you crack them with your eyes closed?"

John deliberated in earnest, and his suspicion showed. "I realize this seems unusual," said Vance, "but I assure you, we have our reasons, and they're quite valid."

John thought for a moment more, and then addressed the safes one at a time. "The Strafford, yes. The Devonshire, yes."

Vance held his breath - the other safes were only decoys.

"The Allenton...no."

"No?"

"No. It can't be done. Not blindfolded."

Vance trembled, yet maintained composure. "I'm disappointed to hear you say that. We were willing to pay a substantial fee."

"I don't give refunds, Mr. Crawford. And while I don't know the circumstances surrounding this job, I wouldn't be able to help you. I would fail and I don't need failures on my resume. However substantial the fee, it wouldn't be worth it."

Much preparation had lead to this moment. "If you are concerned about working in the dark, I assure you it's the only way. As I said, we are willing to pay for the inconvenience."

John said nothing.

Not ready to give up, Vance placed a small card on the desk. It contained only a number. "You can leave a message here if you change your mind."

John had declined only one job. He knew the target and also liked him, and refused to steal from a friend. He needed the money then, he did not need it now, but asked anyway, "How substantial?"

"We're willing to start negotiations at two hundred and fifty thousand."

"Good day, Mr. Crawford."

3.

"Good evening, Mr. Dearborn."

"Evening, Sam." John had no time for talking. He took the elevator, and then walked the short distance to his apartment. Once inside, he strayed from his standard routine - wine was not poured nor were his clothes changed. The stereo remained silent, and he failed to light a candle. He instead walked to his bedroom and opened the top drawer of his dresser, pulling from it a navy bandana sometimes worn when jogging. He went to the wet bar in the den, custom-made, crafted in dark leather trim, and three mahogany panels; the middle one hid an Allenton Deluxe Home Security Vault. "Why would he want me to pull this job blindfolded?"

He affixed the bandana and attempted what he imagined to be impossible. Without sight, the safe appeared as any other. After three hours, numb fingers and a still locked safe proved him correct: The Allenton could not be opened without eyes the same...or could it?

4.

"I have Vance Crawford on the line, returning your call."

"Thanks, Sally." John spoke with an earned air of confidence. "I'll do it. My fee is five hundred thousand, in advance."

"I had a feeling I might hear from you today. Your reputation is quite accurate."

"If you know my reputation, then I'm sure you also expected the doubled fee."

"I did, and I'm prepared to pay it--half up-front, the remainder upon completion."

John smiled at this oft-employed bluff. "And I'll be happy to crack half the combination."

"That's a lot to put on the line. Work with me, John."

"I'll work with you for the full fee, in advance. These are my terms."

Vance paused for effect and said, "So be it. Five-hundred thousand. Up-front." John could not see that he was smiling. "But from now on, I make the rules. Everything you need to know will be conveyed to you in time. Good day, Mr. Dearborn."

"Good day to you, Mr. Crawford," John said back, smiling himself.

5.

The envelope arrived on Friday afternoon. Inside he found a piece of folded paper:

Do you like high school basketball, John? The city championship is tomorrow night. Don't miss it, and pay extra-close attention to the winner's score.

John was not amused. "A basketball game?"

The contest pitted Madison against Park, and John arrived at the half. When it was over, the final score that would somehow guide him looked like nothing more than what it was: a final score:

Madison 102, Park 76.

"What am I supposed to do with this? Madison 102, Park 76." Nothing. "Madison 102," he said again, and this time, something sounded familiar. "Madison 102!" And he understood. He rushed from the gymnasium just as Vance Crawford placed a brief case,

hidden beneath several bags of refuse on the corner of Madison Avenue and 102nd Street.

When John arrived, he knew he was where he needed to be. He also knew he was being watched. "Very clever, Vance!" he shouted. "Very clever, indeed!"

He did not open the brief case until he got home. Inside were five hundred notes, each containing three zero's. The message was brief:

Central Park West and 72nd. 6:00AM.

"Six hours away," he thought, and said again, "Very clever." Preparations had begun, but were still incomplete. He would be ready, but not without help. His phone rang. It was the reception desk. "Mr. Dearborn, I'm sorry to bother you so late, but you have a guest. Her name is Sally Anderson, and she insists you are expecting her."

"I am. Please, see her up."

6.

John walked past the cabs lined in waiting. He had not slept and hoped the hike would help keep him alert. At the instructed intersection, a limousine stopped. The door was opened from the inside and John entered. The windows were blackened, and for a moment, he could see nothing. Once his eyes adjusted, he saw three men. He only recognized one: Vance Crawford. "I hope you enjoyed the game, John."

"I didn't."

"The fact you're here tells me you found the package without problem."

John nodded. "You knew that already."

"True," said Vance. "Meet Eddie and Jim. They'll be assisting."

His questions would be answered in time, so he opted not to ask.

"Eddie will get us inside. Jim's for the alarm. And we all know why you're here." Everyone nodded. "You, John, are the star of our little show. Once we arrive, you'll have to wear these. He was handed what looked like an ordinary pair of sunglasses. They were anything but ordinary. "These fit like most, except they lock from behind, making them impossible to be removed."

John allowed his first question. "Sunglasses? You call this a blindfold?"

"Please, try them on."

He did and found they fit like any other pair. They were not very dark and he could see clearly. Vance pressed a button on a tiny remote control hidden in his hand. A light flashed from behind the lenses, brighter than anything he had seen before, and then John could see nothing. He tore the glasses from his face. "What the hell?" The other men laughed, but were quieted with a glance.

"They're completely harmless, I assure you. I'll skip the techno-talk, you wouldn't understand anyway, but this will be your blindfold and no-one will know you're wearing one. Once inside, I'll lead you to the safe. You will be given all the time you need, so relax. After it's opened, we'll be gone within five minutes. Understand?"

John nodded, asked nothing.

"You'll then be released to a neutral location."

"And if something goes wrong?" This, he had to ask. It was expected.

"As long as you open the safe, nothing will go wrong." The ominous tone did not frighten. He was sure the safe would be opened.

The limousine stopped and a knock was heard from the front. "Are we ready?"

They all nodded and John was given his glasses. He did not have to ask where they were--he would not have been answered if he had. Vance affixed the glasses so that they locked, a bright flash and John was blind. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"These are ear plugs. Trust me, it's better this way. Walk naturally. I'll guide you. John's heart pounded, but not for the job he was about to pull. Rather, for the job he would pull next.

Vance removed a plug. "We're going to wait here for a few minutes," he whispered. "Everything's fine."

John nodded. He had been instructed not to speak. The plug was replaced.

"We're in," said Eddie. Vance guided John and positioned him in front of what he was told was an Allenton. John reached gloved hands forward and nodded.

"Please, begin." John inhaled deeply through his nose. Vanilla. He definitely smelled Vanilla. And he smiled.

7.

The limousine pulled away, and John's glasses were removed.

"You were wonderful! Brilliant! And it only took forty-four minutes. I can't believe it - forty-four minutes to crack an Allenton! Blindfolded!" Vance was euphoric.

"Did you find everything you hoped?" asked John.

"Everything and more. A whole lot more."

"Perhaps I should have asked for six hundred thousand?"

The three men laughed. "And I would've paid it."

The limousine traveled much further than before. A passing hour brought another knock. "John, this concludes our agreement. You've been paid and so have we. You're free to go."

The door opened from the outside. John looked at Vance for a final time. He would not see him again. He neither thanked him nor bid farewell. He exited and watched the limousine speed away. He imagined them laughing as it did. They were.

"Very clever," John thought. It would take at least an hour by cab, once he found one, to get home, if that was where he was going. But it was not. Not today. Not ever again.

"The Plaza Hotel," he said to the driver. An hour later, he stood before the front desk attendant. "Do I have any messages?"

"Just one, Mr. Dearborn." It read:

Okay John, you're all set. I don't know what's in there, but that bag sure was heavy. Is everything okay? I'll see you next week. Sally.

John would not see her next week. He had only asked her one thing: to deliver a suitcase to the Plaza Hotel. He was being watched, or would have done it himself.

"I have a piece of luggage in the vault. Could you retrieve it?" John waited, but not nervously. Soon, the attendant lifted the heavy bag onto the counter. In his hotel room, He changed clothes, poured

a glass of wine and turned on the stereo. He then lit a vanilla candle, his favorite. Inside the suitcase lay the riches of his profession. He had opened many safes for many people, but always kept something for himself. Never trust a thief. Beneath the jewels, neatly stacked and in large bills, was five hundred thousand dollars. Beneath that were the passbooks to his many accounts. There was also a plane ticket. Europe awaited. He had grown tired of the city. He did not want to be seventy-two, wishing he had left, and once Vance realized he had stolen a cache of worthless counterfeit jewels, and five hundred thousand dollars of worthless counterfeit money, the city would not be big enough to hide.

He prepared four packages. Sally, Sam, The Children's Advocacy Center and The Elderly Relief Fund would each receive twenty-five thousand dollars by mid-week. He then thought of Vance's face, John could not resist leaving a little note. He hoped it would be found:

Nice try Vance, but did you really think you could pull this off? An ingenious idea, hiring me to crack my own safe, but next time, adjust your pricing. Half a million? You only paid so much because you knew you'd get it back. I must give you credit, not paying until midnight on Saturday ensured I wouldn't put the money anywhere but the very safe you had me open on Sunday: my safe. Very clever. Enjoy the jewels, Mr. Crawford. And don't spend the money all in one place.

P.S. I was right, an Allenton can't be cracked blindfolded. I left it unlocked.

