

Accidental Savior

Sam knew this day was coming. The eviction notice gave him until April 1st, which brought a wry smile, to pay up or move out.

“Damn it, Damital,” he said, looking at his thin ten-year-old cat, clearly impatient with breakfast service. Sam had contemplated eating the cheap canned tuna that Damital loved but he wasn’t quite there yet. The cat strutted around his dish, clueless to the impact of his master’s deteriorating situation.

*Thanks a lot for the Great Recession, you greedy bankers and corporations.* He’d feed Damital as long as he could before looking for a caring home. Whenever he dwelled on a life without his cat, a headache would begin simmering.

“Damital, I should have been a banker, not an expendable PI.” Lately, he had begun talking a lot more to his cat. Sam opened the top can of tuna on the last stack. The cat, its patience exhausted, meowed incessantly.

He had downgraded from mochas, through lattes, Americanos, landing at McDonalds. There, he could get a Senior Coffee for 35 cents. Not bad either. The coins came out of an ancient pint mayo jar, into which he used to empty his pocket change.

Thirty minutes later, after less than a mile walk to Mickey D’s, he was sitting alone sipping black coffee and reading an abandoned morning newspaper when two attractive middle-aged women sat down, diagonally across the aisle. Stealing a long glance, he deduced their world was much different from his. Turning back to the paper,

he back-burnered their conversation until it turned to money. Sam's eyes were still on the paper but their new topic had his ears.

“You have the \$1240 in that bag?” Sam heard the brunette say.

“Double that, with the matching fund,” responded the redhead. “Oh, I forgot to write out the deposit slip. I'll do that right now and slip it into the bag.” The redhead fished a checkbook from her bulging purse, torn out a deposit slip and began writing.

Now and then, he'd steal a quick glance in their direction, always moving his head to avoid being a conspicuous eavesdropper. *The brunette's dark green eyes and full lips are most appealing.*

The brunette put down her latte. “Our Girl Scouts did so well selling that many cookies. Now we'll be able to set up our booth at the State Fair. I did not really think we'd make that much when we started last Christmas. I wish Stan had lived to see this day. I miss him so much.”

“I know you must. It's so sad, losing your husband in that terrible accident.”

Teasing her red bangs, she continued, “Oh, I am so forgetful today. We must remember to officially thank Byner-Cooley for their contribution, even if *my* husband is the CEO.”

*Stuck-up or rubbing it in?*

During his next peek, Sam observed the pulling of a drawstring at the top of the velvety-brown bag. How nice it must be, he mused, to have the time and money for community activities. Dressed casual but neatly, they would not believe he could be homeless soon. He had been closing in on the ‘good life’ before the collapse of the

financial markets took away his investments, then his job. Didn't take more than nine months before he had to move into the dumpy apartment that he was now about to lose.

The women switched to chitchat. Sam tuned out again. His thoughts drifted back to 2007 when his wife was at his side. Today, he'd not let his downfall sour his coffee. Who knows about tomorrow?

The voices of the two women bidding each other 'good-bye' brought him back to the present. This time his tactic failed as the brunette's eyes locked onto his. Caught, all he could do was smile. Sam watched as they exited the near door – both were head turners. His eyes fell to the vacated table. The brown bag was on the floor against the back wall! *Must have fallen out of a jacket pocket – surely wouldn't fit in that purse.* Sam quickly slid off his bench seat onto theirs, retrieving the softball-size bag. Instead of running out the near door after the redhead, he left quickly by the far door and walked two blocks, entering the town park.

Sam felt the compulsion to clear his mind. When he had reached under the table for the bag, he had no thought other than returning it. Yet, his body had deceived him, which meant his subconscious had something else in mind. He'd not stolen the money; he had found it. Moreover, as long as he returned it, he would have done nothing wrong. Still, he could not dismiss the invading thought that the solution to his immediate financial problems was hidden in his jacket pocket.

On the other hand, Sam felt sure the brunette would recognize him, from his ill-timed glance and smile. But why would he be the only suspect? Anyone else coming in would have had the same opening. Shockingly, he recognized his own thoughts as laden

with criminal intent. *Am I just like many others who succumb to temptation when opportunity knocks?*

Despite the coffee, a headache was seeping in, like the fog now gathering in the park. He began a quick pace to his apartment.

That evening, he opened the bag of bills and spread them out atop the small cheap dining table. Edge to edge, they covered most of the surface. “That’s a lot of money,” Sam muttered, eyeing his cat.

*Odd, nothing but twenties. If matching funds were added, why not replace the originals using the minimum number of small bills?*

He stepped away, scratching the back of his neck. It was then he remembered he had not given Damitall his last de-worming treatment. He opened a small bottle of Lugol’s iodine, placing it on the crowded table next to the bills. The solution he was going to mix required but five drops. When Sam bent over to retrieve the cat’s water dish, Damitall raced over expecting food, and ended up underfoot. Sam, shifting his feet to avoid the cat, nudged the table. The iodine bottle tipped inward, spilling the solution onto several bills.

“Damn it, Damitall,” Sam shouted, parroting his favorite phrase, “I’ve made a big mess because of you!” The startled cat had already taken cover under the dilapidated sofa.

The wet bills instantly developed dark spots.

“Son-of-a-gun!”

Sam immediately realized what had been revealed. During training as a bank teller years ago, he learned the various ways to recognize counterfeit bills. One detection method fell under the heading of chemical sensitivity and one of the chemicals that darkened only counterfeit bills was iodine. Dipping into the small pools of iodine with a pencil eraser, he tested each of the bills. Wherever the iodine touched the twenties, dark brown spots appeared. *Now the large stack of twenties makes sense. The whole batch is funny money!*

“What the hell? Damital, if I’m caught with this, I’m in deep doo-doo!” His cat, intimidated by Sam’s outburst, remained under the sofa.

*An exchange must have happened, most likely when Byner-Cooley added the matching funds. Perhaps one or both of the women are involved.*

“Listen to this, you fraidy-cat. Gotta return this money without getting caught. Let the Girl Scouts deal with this problem.”

Taking a chance, Damital eased out and bounded up on to the back of the sofa. Perhaps he was back in his master’s good graces.

“Tomorrow, Damital, tomorrow. I’ll have a solution. Perhaps I can turn this into something good for us.” The cat recognized only two words: his name and ‘good’. Now Damital felt sure he had been forgiven.

In the morning paper, which he was reading at more remote McDonalds, a front-page column implored the person who took the money to return it – no questions asked. A phone number was given, along with a detail description of the brown bag. He skimmed the rest of the article not learning anything new. *Damn, I really need to be cautious now.*

Only one solution had occurred to him: deliver the bag of money, packed into a small cardboard box, to the address on the redhead's (Ramona Neifson) deposit slip. He knew just the right box. From the kitchen trashcan, Sam retrieved a Girl Scout cookie box polished off last week. *How ironic that the missing money from selling cookies would be returned in one of their own boxes.* Wearing gloves, Sam made sure his fingerprints were removed from the money, the bag and the box. He finished the packaging with a band of clear wrapping tape.

*I'll do a reconnaissance trip this afternoon. If conditions are just right, I'll make the drop. First, do a drive-by to see if the address has a newspaper tube or mailbox at the edge of their yard. If so and no one is around, I'll park my car a few blocks away, stuff the box in my coat pocket and jamb it in the receptacle, barely breaking stride. The small cardboard box, slid to the back, will not attract attention other than that of the owner. Failing this, I'll return late tonight and leave it on the Neifson's doorstep.*

Sam procrastinated for the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon, hoping a better plan would hatch. That did not happen.

Nearing his destination, Sam observed a lot of activity. Cars coming and going, people working their immaculate lawns, a young girl on a tricycle and a medium-size flooring van parked uphill from the girl. He was less than four blocks from Ramona's house.

*What was I thinking? Too much activity. Get out of here now.*

Slowly passing by the young tricycler, Sam was stunned to see the van creeping backwards directly toward the girl! He heard a yell from a man across the street, then a

scream from a woman out of his view. There were only seconds left before the accelerating van would back over the confused girl, facing downhill.

Without thinking, he did the only thing he could. Sam turned his car crosswise into the path of the van about 10 feet ahead of the little girl. There was no time to get out or even vault over the console to the passenger seat. Upon impact, the protruding rear bumper of the van crunched the driver's door against the left side of his chest. Simultaneously, his head banged against the side window. The car slid downhill a few feet before stopping, as did the van. The last thing he heard before blacking out was a woman, crying, telling the girl that 'she loved her and that everything would be okay.'

Sam regained consciousness lying in a hospital bed with bandages on his chest and head. He learned he had three cracked ribs and a mild concussion.

The cardboard box, concealing the moneybag, had been on the passenger seat. Were the box opened by the police, he had little doubt that an arrest warrant would be forthcoming.

"Mr. Petroni, you have two visitors. Would you like to see them?"

The nurse's announcement startled him. *Who would be coming in this soon after the accident? Must be the police to arrest me for theft. May as well get this over with.*

"Okay," Sam replied. His head was turned away from the doorway when one of the visitors spoke. Her voice sounded oddly familiar.

"Mr. Petroni, we meet again."

Sam turned to face the brunette with the enchanting eyes.

*Am I dreaming?*

“This is my daughter who you saved. I am now and forever grateful. My name is Lenora Benson, and my daughter,” touching the child’s shoulder, “is Shelly. I’m so sorry you were injured.”

“I just did what anyone would have, ma’am.”

“Please call me Lenora. You were trying to return the money you found to Ramona.” She delivered this as a statement, not a question. “I found it in a cookie box on the seat. I’ll get it to her tomorrow. The police know it has already been recovered. Why did you delay the delivery when you had Ramona’s address?”

Sam knew he could not lie to this woman, wherever this was leading, and whatever the consequences. “I had to think about this overnight. I’ve never stolen anything before but I was tempted. Come morning, I knew I had to do the right thing.”

He stopped short of telling her the Girl Scout money was counterfeit. Already feeling that Lenora would not be involved, he’d investigate this later, given the chance.

Lenora came closer, put her hand on his arm and said, “You took a tremendous risk.” She hesitated, wiping her wet eyes with a tissue in the other hand. “I lost my husband in an accident last year and today, I almost lost my daughter. That would have been more than I could endure. You are a savior!”

Lenora paused again, tears spilling. Sam was silent, knowing firsthand the pain she had suffered and had almost repeated. His wife had died of cancer three years ago, when all was right with his world. Pulling Shelly close, she said, “I never dreamed such a terrible accident could occur right in front of my house. I never ...”

“Nothing really that terrible happened today. I’ll heal and my car can be fixed.”

“Your car will be in a garage tomorrow getting repaired. I have already arranged to pay both your medical and auto bills.”

“No need, I can manage. But thanks for offering.”

“Mr. Sam Petroni, this is already a done deal. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Feed my cat – Damitall. He will be expecting a can of tuna tonight.”

“Sam! I have a young daughter here!”

“Sorry, Lenora, but Damitall is my cat’s *name*. I guess I should have written you a note.”

With that, they both laughed, Sam moving his right hand over the broken ribs.

“One more thing before I leave. Does your PI schedule leave room for another client?” Before Sam could close his mouth to respond, Lenora added, “Yes, I’ve done my homework. You don’t suppose I’d walk in to greet my hero knowing nothing about him?”

*This woman is becoming more amazing by the moment.*

“Then I reckon your question was not necessary since you must know I am clientless, and have been since I was laid off. Oh, and hold onto to money for now. I’ll explain why tomorrow. Tell me about your needs?”

“I’d like to enlist your services to investigate the accident in which my husband died. I believe that the original investigation was a whitewash. You will be paid well whether we get the results I expect or not. Oh, and a generous bonus if you can prove I am right!”

Sam gave her his best smile. He had picked up on her use of the word 'we' and liked the way it sounded.

"I'll get on it as soon as I can, ma'am."