

Twisted

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They sat in the remote trailer with the door and windows open, enjoying the last of the Ozarks' warm evenings. The forest's blanketed quiet always brought them peace. That is, until Bo burst through the door fired up, jabbering with a crazed look in his eye. Neither man could understand him until the generous gulps of whiskey from the bottle he carried landed in his belly.

He flopped down on the couch next to Travis, who swiped the bottle from his hand, drank deeply, and handed it off to Jimmy. Bo had talked to an old acquaintance, one of the guys from a shifty past he'd sworn to leave behind. No, he wasn't getting back into "involuntary wealth redistribution," he said. He had a bigger plan: something they could really make money on. "We're going to cook!" he exclaimed, with exuberance that clung to the humid air.

Jimmy shook his head, dark eyebrows drawn, "dude, how we gonna cook shit for anyone if we don't have no place to feed them? I guess I could put up some sawhorses and plywood for tables, but..."

Bo didn't miss a beat, "I'm not talkin' food, man. Jesus, boys, think bigger. With the money we'll make in a few months, we'll eat like kings. But I'm just talking about a year of cooking crank. One year," he held up a finger.

Comprehension landed on Travis heavily. Seeing that he was serious, cold prickles crept into the pit of his stomach. Jimmy took another swig of whiskey and handed it back to Travis who set it down, trying - and failing - to shake sense into his own head.

“Dude, meth? Again? Didn’t you have a close enough call with that the first time? Jimmy and I have watched it take parts of our families. Someone always turns up stinkin’. You get caught with that shit and you’re going straight upstate this time.”

Bo let out an exasperated sigh. “Look, we aren’t going to do it, we’re not the distributors, we’re just going to make it,” he said and added, “it don’t make sense to eat our own product, right?” Bo laughed and Jimmy sheepishly joined.

Travis was still shaking his head. “It’s just too risky, Bo. Now that we’ve all been laid off from the mill, the cops are always looking for reasons to pull us over, expecting us to do something stupid - or desperate.”

Fire flashed to Bo’s eyes at that, disappearing quickly behind forced coolness. “Naw, Trav. You’re not hearing me. We only cook. The guys, our ‘agents,’ will bring us supplies and pick up the finished product here at night, so we never touch it once it goes out the door. It can’t be a better deal for us. But it’s cool, guys, you’ll get to meet them when they come here tonight.”

“What?” Travis’ blood rose to his face. “You told them to come here? They know where I - where we live now? Bo, we haven’t agreed to a damn thing, but you’re not giving us any way to say no.”

Bo looked down and quietly picked at the finish peeling off of the corner of the coffee table. “Because you’re not going to want to turn this down, Travis.”

“Like hell, man. I already am.”

If he could, Jimmy would have become a chameleon and matched the pea-colored plaid of the recliner he sat motionless in. He'd watched his old friends come to blows before; it'd been bloody and mean. His eyes turned, longingly gazing at the fall colors through the window.

"Trav," Bo fixed his eyes on Travis', "I need this. These guys... they're the real deal. I got into a hole with them before I went to prison. They had people on the inside, too, who reminded me of my obligations constantly. I thought they might not find me after, I thought I could get out of it. But they're back. Travis, I need your help. I can't do this on my own. And if we don't do it, they're going to kill me."

Silence fell abruptly. The sounds of acorns dropping from trees onto the metal roof were all that was heard for half an hour.

Travis sucked in a sharp breath with a snap. "You stupid fuck. Couldn't you just gather a shit ton of walnuts and give them the money from that?" he said with a half-smile, and glanced up at his friend.

Bo bolted up, eyes gleaming with unexpected joy. "Yeah, but then I'd need your help gatherin' all them walnuts for 10 years instead of one!" He whooped excitedly and jumped onto Travis, mirthfully punching him over and over. They all laughed when Travis dumped him off in the floor.

"Get off me, you pain in my ass. What time are these fine gentlemen coming?"

"Nine."

"Well, then our house needs cleaned," Travis said sarcastically.

"Yeah, actually. We're going to need to turn *the* kitchen into *a* kitchen," Bo said.

By 9 o'clock, the trailer looked pretty good. It looked better than it had since they'd all lived there together, actually. Except for the fact that the kitchen now claimed a third of the 72-foot-long trailer, walled-in by sheets of plastic and tarps. Five gallon buckets were cleaned, every fan they owned was pointing toward the two windows, and every table they had was lining the walls.

At 9:20, they began to wonder if they'd been stood up. At 9:30, Bo started calling his contact man, without any luck. At 9:45, they decided nothing was going to happen, so they each opened a cold beer and sat down again.

When 10 o'clock struck, they were cussing about flaky drug dealers when a heavy knock shook the door. Bo exploded from his chair, nervously ran his hands through his hair and tugged at his shirt, before shuffling to the door. Jimmy and Travis looked at each other, sat their beers down, and stood. The door opened and three men nodded to Bo as they filed in. A car was left running by the road.

They all took a second to size each other up. Travis and his friends might be decades younger than these three, but they had them beat in bulk and scars. There was no hand-shaking as Bo nervously made introductions and chattered about how long he'd known Travis and Jimmy, chortling nonsensically about childhood times together.

The plump man standing in front held up a hand scissoring a cigarette. "Bo, shut up. I'm not here to hear you talk."

Travis straightened to his full height when the man's sharp eyes settled on him. "You, Travis, right? Hear you've saved Bo's ass before," he smirked, glancing at Bo. "You in this?"

"I don't think I have much of a choice now, do I?"

“That wasn’t my question, son,” the man hissed, “Are you in this or not?”

Travis cleared his throat, “Yes. For the year it takes.”

The man guffawed, beer belly quivering. “A year? Is that what this shithead told you? No, son, it’s for the time it takes to get his debt covered. We’ll pay you enough to survive until his debt’s covered in full. If we like you, we might have you stick around. This is business, fellas, and Bo’s loan has already passed and gathered interest. You won’t default, got it?”

The man motioned over his sloped shoulder to his comrade standing by the door. Without a word, the man opened the door, tilted his bulk outside, and returned carrying three large stacked boxes.

“Things to get you started, boys,” the man said as the boxes were placed on the floor between them. “You,” he said, pointing at Jimmy.

Jimmy only nodded, trying just to not piss himself.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“J-J-Jimmy...” he trailed off.

“Right. Your job is to keep your mouth shut and help your buddy, Travis, here. Travis, you’re the cook. Your job is to keep your mouth shut, too. Can you boys handle that?”

They nodded.

“Good. Ol’ Bo is going to be our middle-man. I don’t ever want to talk to either of you after tonight. Bo fucks up, we’ll reconsider that. Everyone understand?”

They all nodded this time.

“Alright then. My friends here are going to show you the ropes. You’ll learn to cook your first batch. It’s real easy, but never take your gloves off. Any questions, you ask them,” he turned to leave, but stopped, glancing over his shoulder. “Oh, and Bo?”

“Yeah, Mark?”

“If you ever blow up my goddamn phone again like you did earlier tonight, I’ll fuckin’ kill you myself. If I tell you I’m going to be somewhere, you just sit your ass down and wait.”

With that, Mark turned and walked out to the car. Once he pulled away, the other two men turned back smugly. One picked up the box on top, motioning toward the kitchen.

“Ok, fellas, let’s get to it.”

Bo pulled back the plastic sheet as they filed into the kitchen.

After one small fire in the beginning, they’d found a rhythm to their work and were sleeping in shifts. The way Travis saw it, if they created a solid product - and a lot of it - they’d get Bo’s debt paid in the year.

Not that Bo would notice all that much, he thought. He scowled through foggy goggles as he carefully stirred. Bo had changed since all this started. He’d become paranoid and edgy, eaten with ideas that Travis and Jimmy were going around him to the dealers, or were stupidly talking to the sheriff. He filled his role as “middle man,” which meant he exceedingly spent time with the men he was evading after his jail time. A lot of good that did him. They used him as the “quality controller” now, which he never complained about. The distributors wanted to be sure Travis wasn’t sabotaging the cooking. Bo was told to regularly test different batches (or so he’d said). Then, he started testing every batch, developing quite an appetite for it.

Travis and Jimmy discussed getting him into rehab once this was all over. Sometimes he would even tweak tiny batches to be not as hard, just for Bo. Bo would never tell the distributors a batch was weak - it was his debt being paid, after all. This was just more incentive for Travis to work harder and quicker: he knew that if the distributors made a deal not to kill Bo outright, making him their tester was a way to control him while killing him slowly.

Days turned to weeks and, before long, they were seven months in and about 80% of Bo's debt was cleared. Travis began having a hard time motivating Jimmy to keep the pace. It was exhausting, yes, but he kept reminding Jimmy that their goal was close and so was their freedom. Gradually, though, Jimmy's trips to get food and smokes were taking longer and Travis was doing most of the work himself. Jimmy was out there now, doing God knew what. All Travis really wanted was some food.

He didn't care if Jimmy was there all the time. Ending this was the goal and he wasn't sure which friendships or people would survive. As he cooked, he dreamed of using his part of the payout to move somewhere and start fresh. Surely he could find some work. Books about far away places intrigued him as a boy and he read endlessly. When a book was finished, he climbed the old oak across the road to laze through hot summers and daydream about where life would take him. He looked out the window at the tree, hulking and twisted with years of growth and weather, somehow solely surviving the logging around it.

Never was his life supposed to be this way. He'd had other dreams that seemed to burn off like heavy fog with each scorching year of feeling cynical and useless. As light blazed on him, how could the heat be any different?

Stepping back to remove his goggles and let them defog, he heard the voice that whispered when he was tired. *Just give up.* It fed doubts about getting paid, or that his effort wouldn't matter. *Nothing's ever going to change. You're stuck here. No one cares what happens to you.* He had a hard time shaking off these thoughts sometimes and wondered, despite the gloves, goggles, and masks, if the drugs he was so good at making were working their way past his protective barriers. How much of it was already in his system, he wondered.

You don't have it in you, to be all that. The voice contorted from the familiar whisper to one he that made his arms tighten. "Quit wasting time disappearing into all those damn books and find a girlfriend or two. *That's* what real men do, boy," said his father. Travis' mother had left only weeks before.

Travis squeezed his bleary eyes tightly for several seconds before opening them and resuming his work. Didn't matter, he told himself, he was going to be done with this by the summer. It was already mid-March; he was almost there.

Car tires crunched along the gravel, growing loudly to a full stop out front. What time was it?

Looking around, he didn't see a clock before the door burst open and the sound of shouting men and heavy footfall flooded the trailer. Bo's voice rose out from under others but he couldn't make sense of anything they were saying.

Coming out from behind the plastic, he saw that his living room was piled with everyone who'd been here on the first fateful night of this deal. They didn't notice him at first. Jimmy looked rough, slumped on the couch unmoving. Bo was screaming, something about "other ways to do things" or "how it should've gone down." The two men who'd taught them to cook

were holding his arms, hauling him backwards, before pushing him onto the couch next to Jimmy. Bo jerked away from him as if he were diseased. Mark, Bo's contact man, slowly came through the door and the look on his face froze the room. Jimmy still hadn't moved.

"What's going on, guys," Travis asked.

Mark cocked his head at him. "Seems your boy, Jimmy, screwed up, Travis."

At this, Bo erupted into a new stream of rants before one of the other men landed a fist across his cheekbone, knocking him out. Travis felt his blood go cold.

"And it seems your boy, Bo, knew it was happening. Son, I need to know right now, who've you talked to?"

"Talked to? Talked to?," Travis sputtered, so angry his body shook. "I talk to myself like a crazy person. I talk to these two because I don't even leave this damned trailer! I'm here all the time!" Tearing his gloves off, he threw them onto the stained carpet with a splat. "You outta know that, I see your guys drive by every hour of the day and night. I've kept my head down and worked until I can't see straight. What the hell is going on!"

Mark only smiled, pinched a fresh cigarette in his lips, and lit as he said through gritted teeth, "I figured as much, kid, and wanted to hear it from you. But watch your goddamn tone with me." His eyes stayed on Travis as he gave a slow exhale, smoke filling the doorway.

He nodded at the other two men and motioned to Bo, who lay limp on the couch, cheek swollen and reddening. "He's going with us. Travis, seems you still have a lot on your plate. More, now that Bo's debt just increased because of trusting that asshole," he pointed at Jimmy, who still lay motionless slumped on the arm of the couch. "He recruited you two for this job and someone has to finish it..." Mark reached over, snubbing out the cigarette on Jimmy's hand.

Travis watched in horror as the glowing cherry buried itself into Jimmy's flesh, the sickening smell radiating, yet Jimmy didn't move.

“Your boy, Jimmy, talked to the wrong people, Travis. He spent too much time in town and was too nervous. We had another kitchen busted last night and it was all because that asshole couldn't keep his mouth shut. Sammy, take the kid's body to the bathroom.”

“You fucking killed him,” Travis murmured quietly, “Jesus Christ. Jimmy'd never hurt anyone.”

He dropped to his knees as he watched his childhood friend's limp body be dragged into the bathroom and carelessly flopped into the tub.

“Why are you doing this? Why are you leaving him here?”

“Cuz if I'm given a problem, it goes away. I don't fuck around, Travis, but I reward loyalty. The way I see it there's two things for you here: he's your buddy to manage and you can show me that you're still with us by making him disappear.”

“But what the hell am I supposed to do? He's the only one I'd have counted on to help me with something like this.”

“Son, I don't care what you do as long as you keep your mouth shut and you keep cooking. That's it. Do whatever you want with that guy: bury him deep, drive him into a lake, burn him, find some hogs, blast him off to the moon for fucksake. We'll be in touch about the next batch in a couple of days. And don't worry about Bo,” Mark gave a knife's-edged grin, “we'll take care of that one for you, on the house.” He stooped to pick up Travis' gloves and held them out. Travis' hands absently rose to meet them and just as he grasped, Mark's fat hand landed

heavily on his shoulder. Two hard pats left his skin burning as the last man turned and closed the door.

With that, Travis' houseguests left. All except one.

He spat out the open truck window, hoping to send the bitter memory with it and pulled into a far spot in the parking lot of the local diner, *Debbie's*. It'd been the same place, owned by the same lady, for as long as he could remember.

"Have a seat anywhere, hon," she called to him as she raced back into the kitchen.

The place was busy this evening, with only a couple of two-tops open. He picked the one in the far corner, next to the window. He watched the flow of traffic on the two-lane road that ran through town and guessed it was the weekend.

"What can I get you, hon?" Debbie asked, holding a coffee pot.

"I'll just start with coffee. Thank you, ma'am."

She filled his cup with a smile and slight nod before turning to greet people walking in. He watched Debbie and the way she was with each of them. Was she truly this cheerful or did she go home to a different life - like he would later?

His palm found his face and smeared feeling into his cheek. He had to finish the job, but what was he going to do with Jimmy? The fool, he thought. The pressure had squeezed him like a snake. And Bo.

Swallowing the knot in his throat, he drowned it with coffee. Pity wouldn't accomplish a thing. The grief would find him later, but right now he had to think. If he kept at this, he'd be their drudge until they'd had enough of him, too.

Travis' thoughts were interrupted by the squeal of cell phones. Nearly in unison, everyone's phone in the diner beeped urgently. Confused, the patrons looked around at each other before reaching for their own phones, realizing it was all of them. He looked at his to see it was an emergency storm warning.

As if on cue, the storm siren on the corner began to drone. People immediately asked for their checks and others began to get to-go boxes for their food. He watched absently as the crowd bustled and shuffled with chairs, jackets, boxes of food, checks, money, and doors. Debbie sped by, dropping his bill on the table.

"We're closing up, hon. You just owe me a buck. Storm's a'coming," she said. Reading his confusion she continued, "It's on the news there," pointing at the television mounted on the wall before hurrying off again.

"At 4:38pm, at least one tornado touched down just west of West Plains... continuing its path in an east-northeast direction.... at least half of the town, now inaccessible by car... total devastation of structures... rescue teams are in transit.... Local churches are open for those seeking shelter..."

Someone turned up the volume over the crowd's noise.

"This storm is still extremely dangerous and has a lot of energy left. It is still capable of producing tornadoes. A tornado warning is still in effect for Howell, Oregon, and Shannon counties and is moving east-northeast at 25 miles per hour. If you are in the path of this storm, seek shelter immediately... We are now on the phone with stormchaser, Tom Bishop. Tom, can you tell us what you're seeing?"

“Hi, yes, Ann. Thank you. We’re driving from the north now, just over the east side of West Plains. I’m having a real hard time making out where we are exactly... everything is a mess. Nothing’s recognizable and it’s... it... it looks like a war zone, Ann and... I’ve never... I’m... excuse me. The trees are splintered... broken off at the bases. Ok, I think we’re approaching the Civic Center and we are seein’ ... my God... pulling folks from the Civic Center on St. Louis Street. I... there are no words. If you pray, now is the time.”

The broadcast was interrupted by another announcer:

“The Federal Emergency Management Association is calling all First Responders. If you are a qualified First Responder and can safely reach West Plains, report now. Staging location coordinates are...”

That storm was headed straight for them. He looked at the time on his phone: 4:52 pm. Any minute. Travis took out his wallet, looked inside to find only a \$10 bill. Glancing up at the frantic crowd of people, he tossed it on the table, rose, and strode outside to his truck. The sky was a sickly shade of green that only clouds carrying a lot of water, wind, and hail can make. Everything was muggy, still, and the smell of earth and ozone stung the air.

Yes, this was going to be a big one, tornado or not.

He climbed into the truck, pushed the key into the ignition, and his hand fell to his knee. Home. There was nowhere else to go. He tore the door open and immediately threw up. He’d come home to a meth lab and a dead friend while a deadly storm barreled toward him. Well, that about summed up his life.

Wiping his mouth, he slammed the door. The truck roared to life and his tires squealed as he floored it.

He closed the distance fast - no sense in lingering - until the truck skidded to a stop on the gravel out front. The wind was already whipping the trees in all directions as fat rain drops splattered against the windshield. He sat for a minute, looking at the trailer he'd once been proud to own and realized he was mustering the courage to walk through the door. His fist pounded the dash.

With long strides, he walked to his door, opened it, and stepped inside, slamming it shut. What now? The kitchen obviously wasn't a place to hunker down. The closets were full of shit. And Jimmy was still in the bathroom. The tornado sirens' howls rotated over tree tops in the distance.

He opened the fridge, found a beer, and flopped down on the couch to wait. He needed a damn break after everything had gone wrong. He opened another beer. Rain was blowing in sheets now as wind gusts caused the trailer to creak with the pressure.

Travis had drifted off until the hail started. It hammered sharply against the metal roof, growing to a deafening roar. He glanced out toward his truck, sure that it would be permanently pockmarked but it was too dark to see.

He started laughing. Of all things, he thought about that last ten dollar bill he'd left on a table for a cup of bad coffee. It was the last cash he had and he'd given it away. He laughed wildly, harder, until his sides hurt and tears were streaming down his cheeks. It was only then that he realized he was really sobbing.

He howled, months of anger and despair coming out as hard as the rain was coming down outside. Then he heard it, the low unsettling rumble. He'd maybe heard it once as a kid. This was louder and he could feel it vibrating through the floor of his metal-sided home.

A tornado was on the ground, speaking its deep warning that the finger of God himself was coming. He ran to the window, peering into the rain-streaked dark in vain.

Stark blue lightning lit up the forest around him, illuminating trees bending to the ground. Travis was in shock at the irrational scene. Trees don't lay sideways. But a voice inside him rose from the darkness.

Run, Travis. Hide. Run!

He turned on his heel and barreled toward the bathroom, pulling the cushions from his couch as he passed, kicking the full beer across the rug. The rumbling grew to a deafening roar under the sound of shattering glass. He flung himself next to Jimmy in the tub and pulled the cushions on top of them both.

The sound was gut wrenching. Metal was being torn, screaming, crashing, shattering, and explosions. The drain started sucking air just below their heads, but he opened his eyes. The roof above him peeled back like the top of a tuna can. The air changed immediately and his ears popped, making him flinch and pull the cushion down tighter as the floor beneath the tub buckled and cracked. He turned his head.

Jimmy lifelessly stared back at him. The cacophony faded to a single, deafening buzz as he looked into those dead eyes. Travis wondered if this was going to be the last thing he ever saw. At least, if he was going to die, he'd die with someone he'd treasured. He flung his top leg over Jimmy's body as he felt the bathtub shift and buck. No way his friend's body would get sucked away by a twister.

Travis slide an arm underneath Jimmy's neck, pressed his forehead to his dead best friend's, and prayed.

Dear God, Dear God... I didn't leave you, I swear. But please, God, I need you. I'm in trouble. I tried to help, but I think I'm going to die. I hope Jimmy's with you, God. Help me. I can't do it anymore, I'm letting go...."

And he repeated himself over and over, mind blank with the only mantra that would come to him as he hugged his friend.

Dear God, please, Dear God, please...

Travis awakened, head throbbing. He had no idea how long he'd been out, but the rain was still falling lightly. Only a small breeze remained. Blinking his eyes open, he realized he was outside and something lay heavily on top of him.

His memory came back in flashes: the storm, the trailer, the tub, Jimmy, pain, and then nothing. He started low and began wiggling body parts one by one. Something was on top of his right arm, so he felt around with his left. The bathtub must have turned over and jammed against a wall: it just dumped him and made a lid over half of him, pinning his arm instead of crushing it.

Too heavy to move, he dug the fresh earth out from under that arm until it was free, then scooted through the gap and pushed the arm forward. Once in the open, he rolled to his side in anticipation of sensation returning and froze.

Jimmy's head was cradled in Travis' right hand. His shaggy hair was plastered onto his unnaturally pale face. His nose was still a little off-centered, mouth was slightly open, and Travis could see the hole where he'd lost a bad tooth a few years back. Jimmy almost backed out of letting Travis and Bo pull it, but once the copious amounts of whiskey were in his system, there was no stopping any of them.

Travis smirked at the memory before his eyes widened in understanding, smile fading. Holy shit, that was it.

His head poked up from the pile of rubble smeared across the landscape. A fire burned where the kitchen had been, which wasn't a surprise. His now-crushed truck lay at the edge of the trees: the power line was down across the hood, sparking menacingly. Nothing was recognizable. Destroyed. Everything was just... gone.

And that was it. Either God or Jimmy or both: they'd given him a plan. He jumped up and began to hoot ecstatically.

No dental records. Everything was gone.

He could be gone, too, he realized as he slowed to a standstill and looked back at his friend.

Kneeling, he stroked Jimmy's cold head and said, "Jimmy, I'm so sorry. Forgive me. I love you, buddy. And I'll see you on the other side."

Working quickly, Travis emptied Jimmy's pockets and removed his watch, taking anything that could identify him, and he pocketed it. Travis removed his own wallet, the silver chain he wore on his left wrist, and the old ring he wore on his right hand, and put them all in the same places on Jimmy. Neither of them had dental or criminal records. Travis' name was the only one on the trailer and land. If one body was found, everyone would assume it's him. Just one more thing.

Travis pulled anything that could burn to Jimmy's body, encasing him in a pyre. He scavenged gas cans, bleach, lye, and everything else flammable he could see and doused the pyre and rubble around it.

He walked to the already-burning kitchen fire, pulled a flaming curtain from the edge, and tossed it onto the top of the pyre.

“Here’s to you, Jimmy,” he yelled over the flash of heat and light, “You saved me.”

As the fire grew and spread behind him, Travis walked to the old oak across the road, placed a hand on its trunk, and said goodbye. It still stood despite the unrecognizable carnage around it, just a bit more gnarled now. Travis easily blended with the shapes and shadows surrounding him. He resolutely stepped into the forest beyond, beginning the walk to a new life.