

JUST ONCE

By Robert McClure

“Dog, how do I look?”

Harrison “Dog” Shepherd pulled away the curtains to let the sun flood into the Econoline. He and Vince Bocelli squatted on low stools in the rear compartment of the van, fussing in front of portable cosmetic mirrors like amateur actors on opening night. Dog looked away from the light of his mirror and squinted. “Your nose is a little crooked to your right. . . . No, dummy, it’s crooked to your right, so you gotta move it to your left.”

“Jesus,” Vince said, and cut to the mirror to re-adjust his nose. He turned back to Dog. “How ‘bout now?”

Their disguises—wigs, eyebrows, prosthetic noses and jowls, colored contacts, a beard for Vince and moustache and sideburns for Dog— were composed of the highest grade materials and, after months of practice, expertly applied. The overall effect was perfect, but what Dog said was, “Not bad.”

“Not bad? The best you can say is *not bad?*” Vince pulled his mirror closer, patted the beard and adjusted his wig. “Man, I put this stuff on and ate in the restaurant where Nora works. She thought I was somebody else.”

“Nora probably wishes you were somebody else.”

Vince snapped his head around. “Hey, *fuck you.*”

Dog stared at Vince, his face simmering with concern. “You know, pal, something tells me you’re gettin’ a little edgy.”

“*Edgy?* Yeah, I’m gettin’ a little edgy the same way Charlie Manson was just a little eccentric.” Vince’s eyes went wide. “Christ, man, part of your eyebrow just popped up. God, we’re never gonna pull this off . . .” Vince gulped and rubbed his chest, a young man who was aging five years per minute.

Dog glanced in the mirror and dabbed some glue on the eyebrow and pressed it back in place. He scooted away from the table to rest his back against the door panel, his head almost touching the roof. “Vince, you have’ta calm down. You’re thinking about pulling out, aren’t you?”

Vince didn’t say anything.

“We can’t pull out. We stole two cars already. Spent our last dime on disguises.”

“I know.”

“Besides, we don’t do this and the banks take our houses, our cars. We can’t pull out.”

“Okay.”

“Well, center yourself then. Commit yourself all the way, a hundred and ten percent.”

“O-kay.”

“Because it’s really lame to think about pulling out now. We can’t even think about it.”

“All right already, quit saying that. Now you have’ta calm down.”

“You committed?”

“*Yes.*”

“All the way?”

“Jesus, yeah, a hundred and fifty fuckin’ percent or whatever. What else you want me to do, man, take a blood oath?”

“Why the hell didn’t I think of that?” Dog said, then looked Vince over and allowed himself a hesitant smile. “Look, we can do this, man. I know it. We’ve worked too hard to fail.”

A transistor radio sat on Vince’s table, and Bob Marley’s *I Shot the Sheriff* began to play. Vince switched it off and turned to face Dog. “You’re right but, man, don’t ever ask me to do this again. I’ll do it this time but not again. Never. Understand?”

“Roger that. Once is all we—”

A female voice squawked from the handheld police radio that hung on Vince’s belt. They tensed, listened to the dispatcher.

Dog relaxed. “We’re cool.”

“Jesus.”

“Look, Vince, let’s rehearse one more time.”

“Ah, man, are you kiddin’ me? What’s so hard about—”

“Look, we got,” he checked his watch, “three more minutes. I want to tune my voice, get in character.”

“Yeah, yeah. What, gotta find your motivation? Dinner theatre actors, man, are the worst.” He shook his head. “All right, Sir Lawrence Olivier, let’s rehearse.”

Dog narrated each of their moves and marks—pausing to listen to the scanner a couple of times—and said his lines in the Southern accent he first developed while performing in a college production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. For each planned move, Dog recited alternate ones in case something screwed up or didn’t look right. When

things went really bad, the alternate move was to, “Abort. Brandish our guns and back out the door, you watching the guard and customers and me watching the street.”

Vince’s most likely line would come in this situation, when, as the lookout, he was supposed to say as loud as he could, “Nobody move! Nobody talk! Or we will kill you!” Vince had wanted to crank up the line, make a threat with some real *oomph* behind it like, *Freeze, scumbags, or we’ll blow your fuckin’ brains out!* Dog had nixed the idea right away, saying even a B-movie writer wouldn’t use cliché shit like that. Vince had finally told Dog, *Okay, all right, Jesus, I’ll say it your way*, but he’d deliver the line however the hell he wanted if the need arose. What could Dog do, yell, “Cut!” or “Line!”?

“Okay, that’s it,” Dog said.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go do it then.”

“Yeah, let’s go.” Vince connected a wire to the police radio on his belt, inserted his earpiece then pulled on his jacket.

“You sure you’re ready?”

“I’m sure, dammit. Let’s go.”

“Man, you’re a real sweetheart today. . . . Oh, I forgot to ask. How do *I* look?”

Vince looked Dog over. “Not bad.”

They stepped from the van into bright sunlight, the Beverly Hills National Bank's revolving door about twenty yards away. They looked like pudgy, middle-aged guys in suits with Dog wearing a light trench coat and toting a briefcase. A rain shower had swept through thirty minutes before, and the humidity and body padding made sweat jet from every pore in their body. They hurried to the door, each worried his make-up would melt.

They separated and ignored each other the way total strangers would do.

Vince walked to the self-service counter in the loan area and found a loan application. He picked it up carefully—not wanting to touch anything else for fear of leaving fingerprints—then pulled out his pen and scanned for the guard. There he was, on the other side of the ornate lobby. *Oh, shit*, thought. The guard was chatting with the bank manager outside his office door. An unforeseen scenario: *Abort, man, abort . . .*

Dog walked toward the manager and guard, an electric jolt of panic jabbing at his stomach. His first thought, too, was *Abort*. Then he thought, *No. It's better this way—two birds, one stone*. He smiled at the receptionist, a friendly-looking brunette in her forties with a Sarah Palin beehive. He nodded at her, strolled right to the big cheese. “Mr. Whittle?”

The guard, a young guy, scowled.

Whittle's bored expression changed to one of relief and he smiled. "Yes. How may I help you?"

Dog said in his aw shucks accent, "Afternoon. Harold Biggs, sir, senior examiner with FDIC?"

"Oh?" Whittle said.

"Yessir, I'm here for a routine cash audit." Not that he thought Whittle would jump on a chair and sing *The Beer Barrel Polka* at the sight of a bank examiner, but something about the man's demeanor made Dog more uncomfortable than he expected to be.

"That's unusual, er, Mr. . . . Biggs?"

"Biggs, yessir."

"One of your auditors came by last week."

Dog cleared his throat and eased into the contingent script. "Well, Mr. Whittle, I'd, uh, preferred to talk about this privately. But, you see, that audit turned up a cash flow issue with teller num—"

Whittle stood erect, touched Dog's elbow and said, "Um, come this way, please, to my office." He then turned to the guard. "Parker?"

The guard practically snapped to attention.

Whittle paused a few beats as if considering something . . .

Dog thought, *Please, don't ask him to come with—*

"Parker, well, I guess you had better stay out here."

Whittle went stark white when he asked for identification and Dog unsnapped his briefcase, said, "I keep it in here," and pulled out his .457 magnum with a suppressor attached. He pointed it squarely at the man's nose. "Freeze, scumbag, or I'll blow your fuckin' brains out."

Yeah, this was an improvisation, a split-second decision to use a line of Vince's that Dog had rejected as too over-the-top. Dog felt it necessary for a reason he couldn't explain; maybe he sensed Whittle was an officious jerk he had to slap down a notch or maybe it was the adrenaline. Either way, he was certain he'd never tell Vince how hard he leaned into that line, how it hit the target so pure and true.

"Easy, Whittle, easy. You know what's goin' on here, so I want you to calm down. I also want you to talk or move only when I tell you to. Nod if you understand."

A slight nod.

"Good. Now, I want you to appear very relaxed when we walk to the vault, so you need to practice smiling. Gimme a big toothy grin. C'mon, smile."

Whittle hesitated, pursed his lips like he wasn't going to cooperate. Dog felt kind of sorry for the man, having to smile while staring down the barrel of a pistol the size of a piece of field artillery. But business was business, so he aimed the .457 between White's eyes and cocked the hammer. A pregnant *click* filled the room. "Smile for the birdie, Whittle, smile. . . . That's it . . . That's good."

Whittle's fearful smile made him look like a ghost had just told him a bad joke and he was doing his best to humor the thing.

Dog prodded him and the smiles got better, finally so natural that he appeared almost totally at ease. This confirmed what Dog had learned in a behavioral science class in college: the mere act of forming facial muscles into a smile had a calming effect on the nervous system, especially when the subject had a lot to be anxious about.

Dog took an earpiece from under his lapel, inserted it into his ear and returned to his script: “Mr. Whittle, this wire is connected to a portable radio on my belt that’s tuned to a police frequency. If you give anyone a signal that prompts a silent alarm, I will hear the police dispatch. In that event, I will kill you. Nod if you understand.”

He nodded.

Dog looked at his watch—perfect timing. “In three minutes, you and I will walk to the vault. You will tell the vault clerk exactly what I have typed on this piece of paper.” Dog handed Whittle the paper. “Read it, out loud.”

Whittle recited the instructions. Short and simple words that Vince composed as concisely as he could: An introduction of Dog to the clerk as Mr. Biggs with the FDIC, here to perform a cash audit. Instructions for the clerk to leave them alone since there were personnel issues to discuss. Dog made him read the script three times.

“Hand me back the paper.”

Whittle complied.

“Now recite the lines back to me precisely.”

Whittle did a good job, botching it in a minor way the first time, improving the second then nailing it the next two times.

“Mr. Whittle, after I have filled my briefcase with cash you will escort me across the lobby and out the door. You will place your hand on my shoulder as we leave the vault, smiling like we are old friends. Or I will kill you. Nod if you understand.”

Whittle nodded.

“You will be my hostage after we leave the bank. I will release you a few minutes thereafter unless I hear a police dispatch responding to an alarm. In the latter event, I will kill you. Nod if you understand.”

Whittle nodded.

Dog felt a surge of confidence, and it triggered another improvisation: “If you do everything as I have instructed, you will spend your night at home with your family. Otherwise, tonight your body will be on a slab at the city morgue. Nod if you understand.”

Whittle nodded then rolled his eyes, just a little.

Yeah, Dog thought, I kind'a shanked that one.

Vince had to piss, and the sensation intensified when he heard a siren wail in the distance. If cops were headed for the bank, he should have heard the callout over the two-way radio in his belt. But, you never know. Radios malfunction. Radio signals rebound off the atmosphere into outer space before they're received. He fingered his earpiece and gritted his teeth, glanced at his watch and concluded that Dog and the bank manager had been in the vault for about three minutes and would be exiting soon. Then, in less than ten

minutes, this adrenaline roller coaster ride would level out and his nerve endings would start to heal; and he could drain his bladder.

His adrenal glands slacked off when he heard a traffic cop announce over the radio that he had pulled over a motorist at Sunset and Griffith Park, then they kicked into overdrive again when he saw the lobby guard stroll his way. Vince's mind raced as the guard approached and he feared he would wet himself. He scribbled on the loan application in front of him.

"Mister?" the guard said, and stopped a yard or two away. He planted his feet and hitched his thumbs on his holster belt.

Do not move. Do not talk. Or I will kill you, Vince thought, but what he said was, "Sir?"

"You waiting for somebody?"

Something's wrong, Vince thought. Was his beard peeling off? Did the guard see the radio earpiece? He thought the beard was probably fine, and there wasn't much he could do now if it wasn't fine, so he tapped the earpiece and said, "Sorry, I, uh, didn't quite hear you."

The guard canted his head and nodded as if he acknowledged Vince's explanation but wasn't ready to accept it. "I said, '*You waiting for somebody?*'"

"Oh, uh, yeah. Mr. John Hardin," Vince said, "the small business loan officer? I want to start a business." An embarrassed grin.

The guard didn't grin back. "Yeah?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm tryin' to get a loan to buy a car wash." From the corner of his eye, Vince saw Dog and the manager walk across the lobby from the vault area, both grinning

and staring straight ahead. Dog's eyes doubled in size, though, when he cast them in the direction of Vince and the guard.

The guard stared at Vince like he was still sizing him up. "Mr. Hardin always takes a late lunch. He won't be back for about twenty minutes."

Vince knew that before he walked in, but what he said was, "Oh. Guess I'll just come back later," and folded the application and tucked it in his jacket.

The guard stared at him, and, to Vince, the man's face was as slack and unreadable as a stuffed moose head. "A car wash?"

Vince gulped. "Yep, a string of 'em is what I eventually want. That's my dream." What Vince really wanted was a string of strip joints, and he smiled wistfully at the guard while pleading with God to make this prick get lost and allow his dream to come true.

The guard moved closer, which made Vince think he was studying his beard, then turned toward Dog and Whittle, who were fifty feet away and closing fast. The guard turned back and cocked his head as if looking into Vince's left ear. Leaned forward and spoke in a low voice. "Listen, buddy, I don't want any trouble . . ."

Do not move. Do not talk. Or I will—

". . . so don't tell Mr. Hardin I asked you this. But, hey, uh, you need a manager for that car wash?"

On the sidewalk, Dog turned to Whittle, said, "Give me your glasses," and put the glasses in his breast pocket. "Look to your left, not your right. Now, nod if you can make out

that Ford Escort parked about a hundred feet away, the blue one with the tinted windows and a man seated on the driver's side."

Whittle nodded.

"Good. . . . Whittle, I lied about taking you hostage. What I really want you to do is walk slowly toward that Escort. Stop after ten paces then stand very still on the sidewalk until the car pulls away from the curb. The man behind the wheel is my accomplice. Do not look directly at him and do not look back at me. Or he will kill you. Do you understand?"

A final nod.

"Okay. Walk ten paces, slowly."

Whittle paced toward the Escort just as Vince exited the bank and nodded. Dog followed Vince to the van, glancing back every other step or so at Whittle. Dog jumped in the van as Vince fired it up. They pulled away from the curb.

Just before Vince pulled the van into the next alley, Dog could see Whittle still standing there, frozen in place-and-time about sixty feet away from the Escort, having never looked back. The man didn't seem to have a clue that the figure behind the wheel, guarding him, was a mannequin.

"Man, I gotta piss like a drunk monkey," Vince said, flushed. "That fuckin' guard scared the—"

"Hold it 'til we get to the garage! It's not over," Dog said, breathing so hard he was almost panting. "Any dispatches yet?"

“Not yet, man. Not yet. . . . Damn, are we lucky or what?”

“Luck has nothing to do with it, so let’s not get sloppy now. We have to chill out and collect our thoughts. That call’s gonna go out any minute.” They drove in silence, listening intently to the walkie-talkie in the seat and shaking their heads in amazement—still no dispatches. “Turn here,” Dog said.

“I know.”

“*Here.*”

“*I know.*”

Vince swerved into the parking garage, drove to the fourth level and backed into a parking place against a corner wall.

They scurried into the back of the van and, first thing, Vince opened the back door and whizzed in the corner of the garage, emitting the usual moans and sighs.

He stepped back inside and joined Dog at the make-up mirrors. They ripped off their prosthetic noses and jowls, their wigs and facial hair. Popped the colored contacts from their eyes. Rubbed palms full of glue remover into their faces, wiped it all off with Handi-Wipes then followed the process with cold cream. Followed that with wet rags they had stored in sandwich bags and finished off with towels.

A startling metamorphosis: two jowly, middle-aged guys with blue eyes were now chisel-faced twentysomethings: Dog had sharp features that reflected his German-Irish lineage, brown eyes and surfer-boy blonde; Vince was dark with short and curly black hair, showing the Italian blood of his father.

Dog turned to Vince. “Clear?”

“Yeah. Me?”

“Clear.”

They threw everything into a trash bag.

They took off their clothes, shoes and body padding. Tossed it all in the bag and slipped on their work shoes.

The blue uniforms they wore underneath were now revealed—LAPD, patrolman, standard issue.

The call finally came over the walkie-talkie. A bored-sounding female said, “*Adam 118, what’s your twenty? Over.*”

Dog smiled and picked up the radio. “Parker and San Pedro. We’re just now 10-8 from lunch. Over.”

“*Roger the 10-8. We have a 211 reported at Beverly Hills National. Suspect fled on foot.*” She described the suspect. “*Code 4-Adam. Meet detectives at the scene, Code 2.*”

“Roger that.”

Dog made sure no one was in sight then exited the back of the van. Vince tossed the garbage bag and briefcase of money into the trunk of the police cruiser parked in the adjacent space. Both wiped every surface of the van they even remotely suspected they might have touched.

Then they jumped in their cruiser: Officers Shepherd and Bocelli, easing back into their day jobs.

That evening they sat at a poker table in Dog's partially renovated garage—a place they called *The Doghouse*, a place that until the next day would remain under the same threat of foreclosure as the connected house. The walls were decorated with posters of baseball and football heroes, NFL cheerleaders and nude centerfold models. Another wall ornament was a poster of J. Edgar Hoover, snarling at the camera from behind the sights of a Tommy gun, “FREEZE, YOU DIRTY RAT!” scrawled at the bottom with a blood red marker. Beside the poster was Dog's police academy diploma, unframed and crooked, tacked to a dartboard with a *Guinness Professional* tungsten steel dart.

Vince twisted yet another joint over a baggie of weed. Dog popped tops from two more bottles of *Corona* he had just fetched from the old Frigidaire rattling and humming away in the corner. Their paranoia had fizzled out about six beers and two joints ago after summarizing the meager fruits of the official investigation. They had watched the surveillance tapes, talked to the FBI agents and read the preliminary reports: No fingerprints. No witnesses outside the bank. No getaway car identified.

In short: No leads, the only suspect being a heavysset, middle-aged guy with a Southern accent, possibly wearing a toupee.

Party time.

They had talked a lot about the cash. How they would have to spend it in dribs and drabs and only as needed to keep the vultures from swooping down. In about a year they would zero-out their debts and quit the force a month or so apart, take a month-long vacation in Rio and go wild, man, *wild*. Then Vince would buy his first strip joint and Dog would enroll in acting school full time.

There was a lull in the conversation and Vince smiled. “Hey, Dog,” he said, his voice crimped up from hot-boxing a hit off the joint.

“What?”

Vince blew smoke. “I can’t believe we did it. It was perfect.”

“You said that a hundred times already, maybe a thousand. And I’ve said two hundred or two thousand times back to you that it was too perfect.”

“Maybe,” Vince said, “but I’ll tell you something else I can’t believe.”

“Something new and original, I hope?”

Vince smiled.

Seconds ticked away before Dog turned to him. “Well, you gonna tell me what you can’t believe or you just gonna sit there with that stupid grin on your face?”

Vince sat there and grinned.

Dog looked closely at Vince’s eyes, saw something going on in there that he liked. Still, to plant the hook a little firmer he shook his head again and again, saying, “No, no, no, don’t tell me. . . .”

Vince nodded, slow.

Dog said no a few more times. Called Vince some choice names. “You’re psychotic, man. I’m not gonna do it. You hear what I’m saying? Do you . . . hear . . . what I am saying?”

“Well,” Vince said, “I guess I hear you.”

Dog paused long enough to figure out Vince was on to him and smiled back. “Man, we already burned our disguises.”

Vince shrugged. “So what the hell, man? Now we can afford to buy even better ones.”

THE END

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