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DST, INC.

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DST, INC.

So at 9:30 on a night in October, Doug Jennings stood where he'd been told to stand: in a Newark, New Jersey, parking lot surrounded by a chainlink fence topped with barbed wire, the only way in or out past the credit card reader, around him a few stores showing lights but mostly the dark buildings of a city in despair, empty shells and walls covered with graffiti, the language of the angry and dispossessed.

He stood as he'd been told: facing the trunk of his car, which he'd pulled into the space after removing the orange traffic cone he'd been told to expect. In the inside pocket of his jacket was a plain envelope holding five thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills.

He waited. In another five minutes or so he heard a car pull in. He'd been told to stand as he was. The car stopped. Two doors opened and closed.

"Turn around, Mr. Jennings," said the voice of a young man, somewhat muffled.

He obeyed. The two men who'd parked their black Mercedes right behind his car wore the kind of Halloween masks that you can see through but you can't make out the faces. Like trying to see through smoke. They both wore jeans, black jackets, and dark-colored baseball caps.

"Password," the one who'd spoken said.

"Attack," Doug answered.

The second one came forward. "The card," he said, and Doug gave it up. Both men were wearing black gloves. "Money," was the next command. Doug also gave up the envelope.

"Okay," said the first one. He waited while the second man counted the cash with a small flashlight, as the lot's own lights were on the dim side of dim.

"All here," was the verdict.

"Listen," Doug said. "I mean...I have to ask...how do I know there're going to be results?"

"We guarantee. If you don't like the immediate results, you can meet us here night after tomorrow, same time. You'll get a refund of half your money."

"Okay...but...I want to be clear on this. I don't want violence. That's not what I'm after."

"We know what you're after," said the second masked man. "That's our business."

"We're done here," the first man said. Without another word they returned to the Mercedes. As they drove away, Doug got a quick look at the license plate: Michigan.

He pulled his own car out of the space, got out, and returned the traffic cone as had been explained to him he must do. Then he paid for his quick parking time with his credit card to open the metal security gate and started the drive back to Manhattan, where he lived with his girlfriend Clarissa on West 39th Street.

I'm doing the right thing, he told himself as he drove. Yes. For sure I am. I couldn't let that kind of thing go. Couldn't let that bastard off the hook. No way. No freaking way. As he thought about it his hands tightened on the steering wheel, because the anger was still so fresh.

It had started this morning, at his office. Cornucopia...fifty varieties of popcorn and counting...pop pop pop...ship it to you overnight, wherever you are...the ad agency got Angelina Jolie to do the TV spots...she loved popcorn...who knew?

But that bastard Jason Sheffley...screwed him over. Got the accounting management job Doug had been working to get for over a year...that Sheffley bastard had been throwing lies about Doug here and there...oh yeah, it was Sheffley all right...about Doug's drinking on the job, which was absolutely a damned lie...and other things, and Sheffley was the kind of slick smooth Yalie type of guy who could sell himself to Mark Yurbin, the accounting head...and now Doug was stuck in his cubicle while Sheffley got a name on the door, plus a ton of extra money, and Doug and Clarissa lost their chance to get a better apartment.

Sure, things like that happened. It was business. In a corporation like that, you had to step on people or you got crushed. Doug had managed to keep Linc Alcott and Jane Salina from moving up, but why not? They weren't sharp enough, so let them stay where they were.

He had raged about Sheffley to a number of people he trusted, had spilled out all his bloody guts of anger. You had to trust somebody, sometime, even in a cut-throat corporation. So this morning suddenly on his desk, in his cubicle, he'd found a white business card with the plain title of DST, INC. and on the back somebody had written in black Flair: ATTACK, with a Manhattan area code phone number underneath.

He had gone about his work but kept looking at the card. DST, INC. ATTACK. The phone number. What the hell was it, and who had put it there? He stood up and did the old lookaround: Jane glanced quickly at him, Roger did too, Alan the same, Linc ignored him.

So who? In this office or another one? And why?

It was after lunch when his curiosity got the best of him. He dialed the number on his cell.

"Password," the woman who answered said.

Doug hesitated.

She hung up.

Doug sat there for awhile, thinking. Then he dialed the number again.

"Password," she said.

He hesitated.

She said, "This number will be out of service in five seconds."

"Attack!" Doug heard himself say, as quietly as his nervous throat would allow. "I'm holding the card. Attack. Is that right?"

"Hold," she said.

He waited again. The music that played was AC/DC's "Highway To Hell."

"Name?" A man had come on the line.

"Doug—"

"Not *your* name, Mr. Jennings. The target."

"Target? What do you mean, target?"

"Who do you want destroyed?"

"*What?*"

"You've called Destroy, Inc. Give me the target in five seconds or this call is ended and your password invalid."

"Destroy? I mean...*how?*"

"Our business. Goodbye, Mr—"

"Jason Sheffley!" Doug had blurted it out. "That's who I want destroyed. Sheffley. Ok...now is this a freaking joke, or what?"

"Public figure, charity or individual?"

"What? A guy, just a guy."

"I'll call back." Then he was gone.

That was one crazy load of crap, Doug thought. Jeez! Destroy, Inc? Sure!

His cell buzzed.

Doug saw the cell reported UNKNOWN CALLER.

He hesitated, and suddenly he was both afraid and in a way, strangely euphoric. He answered. "Doug Jennings," he said, more quietly than before.

"Your instructions." It was the deeper voice of a different man. He told Doug where to go, at 9:30 that night, what to do, and what to bring.

"Five thousand dollars?" Doug had to hold back a laugh. "Are you kidding me? Is this a ripoff or what?"

"You want Jason Sheffley, who works in your department at Cornucopia and lives in Apartment 14 at 219 West 76th Street, destroyed. You have your reasons. Five thousand is our standard rate for an individual not a public figure. If you don't wish to go further—"

"Hold it, hold it. Wait. Five thousand dollars for what?"

"To destroy Jason Sheffley. Utterly and completely."

"You mean...like...assassinate?"

"There are better ways."

"Like what?"

"I won't ask how you make your butterscotch popcorn, you won't ask how we make things happen."

Butterscotch popcorn, Doug thought. Their best seller. The guy had already scoped out the company.

"Are we go, or no?" the man asked.

On the drive to the apartment after the Newark meeting, Doug was trying to figure out how he would explain five thousand bucks removed from his and Clarissa's joint account. Another point of irritation—big time—was that Clarissa earned more than he did as a graphic designer at Macy's, and that money going to Sheffield would have brought him up even with her.

He couldn't help but grind his teeth. Was he a fool, or not? To destroy Jason Sheffield utterly and completely...then the job would be open again, right?

Right.

He and Clarissa—his dusky beauty, he called her, because her family was originally from Ethiopia—had a vegetarian dinner (she was a great vegetarian cook), shared a bottle of wine, watched some Netflix, made love, and then crashed until the morning alarm did its birdsong bit. He said nothing about the money or any of it; he didn't dare, just yet.

At eleven o'clock, Jason Sheffield had still not sauntered into the office as he usually did. He was two hours late, and Mark Yurbin hated late...so said Richard, his secretary, a young guy with product-sculpted black hair, studious horn-rimmed glasses, and a wardrobe straight out of GQ.

"Hey, Richard," said Doug after a trip to the coffee bar. "What's happened to Jason?"

"Oh...Mr. Sheffield," said Richard, "has suffered some *problems* this morning. He called in to tell Mark. It's a tragic thing."

"Really?" Doug felt his heartbeat pick up. "Um...can you tell me?"

"His very new Porsche...has been *vandalized*. Yes. Right in his supposedly-guarded parking garage. Four tires slashed and someone threw paint all over that gorgeous vehicle. And then...he said there was a problem with his credit cards when he was trying to pay the tow truck."

"Wow," Doug said. Heart beat...beat...beat...

"Yes...and the very most weird thing...*all* his credit cards were fouled up. I hope I'm not speaking out of school, but I am sure it has been a *tragic* morning for Mr. Sheffield."

"Yeah," said Doug. He nodded. "Tragic."

As he walked away from Richard's desk, he was aware of being watched by Jane, Roger, Alan, and Linc. Did any of them see him smile, just a little bit? He didn't think so.

He decided that maybe he'd made one of the best investments of his life. He took Clarissa out to dinner that night, and they ate Indian food.

The following morning, at eleven o'clock, Jason Sheffley was still not there and something was up. Doug noted Richard going in and out of Yurbin's office several times, and he didn't look happy. Gordon van Nickolson, the Danish big chief behind Cornucopia, entered Yurbin's office and when he came out he didn't look happy either.

In time, Doug managed to make his way over to Richard. "Hey, what's up?"

"No tell, it's hush-hush time."

"Something with Jason?"

"I am not at liberty, Doug. *Please.*"

"Sure, I understand. But hey...aren't we all like a family here? I mean...really. I think of us as a family. So if something's happened to Jason...in a way, it's happened to all of us in this office."

"Oh no, it hasn't!" Richard said, and then he took his glasses off to clean the lenses with a blue cloth and while his head was lowered he said very quietly, "You know last winter when Sheffley"—no mister this time, Doug noted—"was supposedly on a ski vacation in Aspen? Well...it seems Mark has found out that Sheffley was actually in Boulder at a..." He checked to make sure Yurbin's door was still closed, "...hate-filled anti-LGBTQ rally. He has the pictures to prove it. They're from the website of those *animals*. Yes. You can see his face right there in the crowd. He's holding a sign that says...well, it is disgusting."

"Pictures?" Doug asked. "There are *pictures* of him?"

"Very *clear* pictures. Mark got a call this morning from a young man who was a member of that odious group until he realized he was gay himself and it was...you know...a mental confusion. He lives right here and he's one of our customers. So he decided he should do the right thing, in case Sheffley was hiding his true face...and oh my Lord was he ever!"

"What does Jason have to say?"

"What can he say? Mark says he's trying to find all his ticket receipts and things for Aspen. But he still could've been at the rally in Boulder, too. Trying to prove he's not guilty, but why in the world would a person make up something like this? And his *face* is right there! Bottom line: it would be terrible for the company if any of it got out, so I'm swearing you to secrecy, Mr. Jennings."

Doug nodded. *Mister Jennings*. He liked that. "Hush-hush time," he told Richard, and with the mightiest effort kept his mouth from grinning.

Mark Yurbin was gay. Which meant Jason Sheffley was destroyed in this workplace. Utterly and completely. They'd pitch his belongings out into the street before five o'clock. Wow, what a turnaround! And Jason might offer up receipts and excuses, but he had gone to Aspen *alone* to make time with the snow bunnies. Wow...DST had done their homework, they had moved

fast and if all continued this way, that corner office would soon have a new name on the door.

Doug was considering where to take his dusky beauty out tonight to celebrate—just for the sake of good things to come, sweetness—when his phone buzzed. It was a number he didn't recognize, from the Empire State Health Clinic.

"Doug Jennings," he said. "May I help you?"

"Mr. Jennings," said the woman on the line, an acidic voice, "it is very nice of you to finally pick up. We've been trying to reach you for four months. Do you not respond to your emails or answer your phone?"

"I'm sorry. What is this concerning?"

"It concerns, sir, the balance of your account here. It is long overdue, as you well know."

"Ummmm...what account would that be?"

"The eight thousand dollars you owe for your medical procedures. Shall I list them for you?"

"Lady, you've got the wrong person. I have my own doctor and I've never heard of you before."

"Well that's very peculiar," she said, "since I'm sitting here looking at your computer records, with your phone number and your home address. That would be 19B at 451 West 39th Street? And it shows a long list of times our collection staff has tried to reach you through our automatic dialing system."

"That's impossible. No one there has ever tried to reach me."

"Sir," she answered, "the computer says differently."

"Ha!" Doug said. "Okay, this is a scam. I'm ending this call."

"We expect a payment of one thousand dollars within ten days. If you do not comply, then we will—"

Doug pressed the red button and that was that.

Damn ridiculous! But nothing could get him down today, certainly not a minor mixup...or a scam, which it for sure was.

Driving home, fighting that traffic, he marveled at the efficiency of Destroy, Inc. They'd found out first of all that Mark Yurbin was gay, and so was his secretary. Then they had tracked Sheffley's vacation and linked him to that rally by a series of photoshopped pictures. They'd hired an actor to start the ball rolling and hacked into Cornucopia's records to show the guy was a customer. He didn't doubt that they couldn't hack into Sheffley's travel records and produce a one-night hotel stay in Boulder that coincided with the rally.

Very smart, very efficient.

Doug figured it was all over for Sheffley. The guy might shoot himself in the head tonight. Waste of a bullet, but there you go.

When he walked into his apartment Clarissa was sitting on the sofa. Just sitting there, holding a piece of notebook paper. But her face...tight... unsmiling...and she didn't even look at him as he came over to give her a kiss. In fact, she pulled away.

"Oh oh," Doug said. "Did I forget an anniversary?" They had been living together for three months and Clarissa had wanted him to note the exact day every month, which so far he had.

"Something came up today," she said, still staring straight ahead and past him as he sat down. "On the laptop." She motioned toward it on the workdesk. They shared the laptop, each doing some work from home. "I thought it was a pop-up ad at first. Then I realized it was a notification."

"Okay. Weird, but what?"

Clarissa looked down at the paper and read what she'd seen on the screen. "Dear member B L K Ho Lover329...your subscription is about to lapse. From your friends at BBBW.com." Her eyes lifted to his. "Well?"

"Well...what?"

"I went to the website. I didn't know what it was. Ever heard of Big Beautiful Black Women Dot Com?"

"Huh? No, of course I haven't—"

"Doug!" she said, her voice sharp. "You know what it is."

"I'm sorry, I don't. It sounds like a—"

"Porn site," she said. "I thought it was a mistake...I thought...I don't know what I thought. Then I started looking through your files. It just...it was something I felt I had to do."

"Again," he said, "weird, but—"

"I found your hidden file," she interrupted. "The one inside a file inside a file. All those videos. Those black women...doing terrible things." Tears suddenly filled her eyes. "Oh my God, Doug...oh my God...is that how you see me? A black ho?"

"What? Angel...it's a mistake! It's got to be a—"

"That trash is on the laptop!" Her voice shattered. "On the laptop I've been using for three months! The time stamps on those videos...they're from before we even met! And the last one was two days ago! Oh my God, oh my God!" She began weeping. She stood up and threw the paper into his face. "Do I even know you? Did I *ever* know you? This is beyond what I can take. I'm getting out of here tomorrow." She started walking toward the bedroom. He stood up to grasp her shoulder but she shook him off and said with horrible ferocity, "I am *not* a ho. But *you* are a very sick man."

Then she went into the bedroom and he heard the lock turn.

Doug stood in the middle of the room.

It hit him. Hard.

Destroy, Inc.

Somebody was using it on him.

He nearly threw up. His heart raced. Somebody in the office...somebody... Jane or Linc or somebody he'd stepped on.

The call today. The first of it. Now this. An evil touch: in that fake user code they'd placed his birthday, 3/29.

He looked at his watch. His hand trembled. They said if he wasn't satisfied he could meet them tonight at 9:30 at the parking lot in Newark. He had time to get out there. Find out who was trying to destroy him. Find out...stop them...this was crazy...this was something that could be fixed...yes...got to fix this...got to get out there...*now*.

On his reckless drive from Manhattan to Newark he thought they had found out Clarissa was black...had found out she got home an hour before him...had found out her habit was to get on the laptop and look up vegetarian recipes. They'd put a file full of garbage on there...if she found it then, fine, if not it was there to be found. They had tracking programs...psychological action predictors...expert hackers...they had all the tools to destroy. And all they needed to plant was a seed. Just a seed, then sit back and watch it grow ugly thorns that killed a person.

He was in the parking lot surrounded by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire by 9:30. The hulks of dark buildings and wreckage loomed all about. When they came, they came in a black pickup truck. They were wearing their masks, and when their shoes touched the cracked concrete Doug was out of his car shouting, "Who's trying to destroy me? Who's trying to destroy me?"

They stood without moving. Then one said, quietly, "Are you satisfied with the results on Jason Sheffley?"

"I've got to know...who's trying to destroy me?"

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Jennings?"

"Okay...yes yes yes...but who's trying to destroy me? For God's sake! Tell me!" His ragged voice was nearly a scream.

Silently, the two masked men climbed back into their pickup truck. Doug chased it. He saw the license plate: Pennsylvania. As Doug screamed and beat at the side of the pickup the driver calmly put his credit card into the reader with a black-gloved hand, the metal security gate lifted and closed and then they were just two red tail lights speeding away.

Doug almost fell to his knees. He had to get back to Manhattan now, and talk Clarissa out of leaving him. Tell her the whole story...she'd believe him, yes she would. He would make her believe.

To his credit card, the reader reported DECLINED.

He tried again. DECLINED.

Tried once more with another card. DECLINED.

He tried his debit card, and got the message INSUFFICIENT FUNDS.

The machine took no cash...it was credit card, debit or nothing. He sat in the car, stunned.

Then his cell buzzed. His father, calling from the family home in Indiana.

"Doug!" his father said, an anguished voice. "Oh my God, Doug! Why did you do it?"

"What? Did what?"

"Your uncle Paul found it on the net. Son, it's gone virus!"

Which might have been funny in any other circumstance, but then Doug's father said, "Your mother saw it...she's had a heart attack. I'm at the hospital. Dear God...Doug...why did you do it? Your mother is destroyed! Hear me? Your mother is—"

Doug's cell phone went dead.

Just dead. Black screen, no service, nothing.

Doug got out of his car like a sleepwalker. He didn't know where to go or what to do, but he must go somewhere and he must do something.

He left his car, staggered between the gate and the fence and out of the parking lot. Was that him sobbing? He couldn't tell, because the grip of a nightmare had him by the throat and he was being strangled to death.

He staggered on, into the darkness amid the broken buildings, into a city that had never before seemed so lonely, so alien, and so destroyed.