OTHER THAN MURDER

By
John Lutz
Frank Quinn was wearing his dark mourning suit beneath a black overcoat. A knit muffler was wrapped tightly around his throat, and his large hands were encased in black leather gloves. He was still cold, not only because of the weather but because of what he was about to do.

Looking around didn’t make him feel any warmer. This was the seventies, and the Times Square area was a mess and getting worse. Many of the great old theaters were closed. Peep shows and X-rated bookshops had taken their place. Discarded needles crunched like candy beneath Quinn’s chunky black size-twelve shoes. It was too cold for prostitutes to be roaming the streets this brisk December morning, but various other suspicious and more malevolent types were braving the biting wind to walk the stone canyons looking for whatever kind of score they wanted or needed. The wind set the litter in the street into motion, the flyers and cigarette butts and crumpled newspaper. With each gust, empty beer cans went rolling. It was no wonder people referred to the area as “Slime Square.”

Quinn was on his way to see some of that slime now. Its name was Malvin. If it had a last name, nobody knew it. Next to a pawnshop on West 45th Street was a battered wooden door that opened on a narrow flight of stairs leading to Malvin’s office. Quinn opened the door, stepped inside out of the wind, and found himself next to a gigantic black man wearing a brown vest over a tie-dyed T-shirt. His bulky tattooed arms were bare. Quinn didn’t know him but knew he was called Heap.

“Are you cold, dressed like that?” Quinn asked, closing the door behind him.

Heap smiled with gold-adorned teeth. “Yeah, I need me some action to keep warm.”

Quinn, not yet twenty-five, and lean and hard from doing rough work on the docks, might have furnished more action than Heap could handle, but that wasn’t why he’d come here.

Quinn knew the next step in the dance. He moved back slightly and raised both arms and let Heap frisk him to make sure he wasn’t armed. There was only one reason he could be here–to see Malvin. And nobody with a weapon went up those stairs.

Heap closely examined the various contents of Quinn’s many pockets. He seemed satisfied and returned them.

“I’ve got an appointment,” Quinn said.

“Yeah, I know that. I don’t like seeing anything wrapped up. Makes me uneasy. Whatcha got in there?”

Heap started to take a brown paper sack from Quinn’s outside coat pocket, but Quinn moved faster and opened the bag to show what was inside. “A gift,” he said. “Fine Irish whiskey.”

“Ain’t that nice,” Heap said, squinting appreciatively at the brand. He let the bottle slide back into the bag, stepping aside so Quinn could pass. “You go on up.”

Quinn didn’t like the stairwell. It felt confining and smelled as if something had died inside a wall.

After climbing the squeaking wooden steps, he knocked on the door. It wasn’t closed far enough to latch and swung open at his knock to reveal Malvin, seated at a wide, littered desk. He was a huge man with shoulder-length red hair, freckles the size of moles, and a complexion so florid it glowed. He was wearing a green leisure suit with a floral pattern, his silk shirt collar laid over the coat’s collar. His eyes were blue and bloodshot. He didn’t say hello, didn’t get up, didn’t so much as nod at Quinn.

Ignoring this dearth of hospitality, Quinn walked into the office and sat in the chair facing the desk. He didn’t remove his coat or gloves.

“What’s that?” Malvin asked, nodding toward the paper sack.

Quinn drew out the bottle of Irish whiskey and stretched to hand it to Malvin. “Call it a peace offering,” he said. Malvin sneered. “I didn’t know we were at war.”

“We might have been. You did kill my younger brother.”

“I wasn’t anywhere near when he was shot.”

“Had him killed.”

Quinn realized that the man before him, who ran much of organized crime in New York, enjoyed not denying complicity in Brendan’s death by gunshot four days ago. “The whiskey’s for you to drink in good health,” he said, feeling as if he might leap across the desk and begin pounding on Malvin.

“And why would you be bearing such a gift?” Malvin asked.

“My brother was working undercover, gathering evidence so the police could roll up your operations and put you away for life. And it would be a life sentence this time if drugs were found in or around you.”

Malvin shrugged. “I don’t do drugs.”

Quinn drew a folded brown envelope from his overcoat pocket, the sudden movement making Malvin blink if not flinch, and laid it on the desk corner.

“Would this be another peace offering?”
“My brother’s notes. There’s enough in them to make life uncomfortable for you, maybe even put you behind bars.”
“Maybe’s a big word.”
“Isn’t it, now?”
Malvin sighed and absentely reached back to place the whiskey bottle, still in its bag, on a shelf behind his desk. He settled deeper into his padded swivel chair, facing Quinn directly. “Let me get this straight now, son. Somebody killed your brother—“
“Brendan.”
“Okay, Brendan. This was because he was an NYPD undercover detective who infiltrated my operations and was going to give me to the law. Now here you are handing me his notes and talking some kind of truce. Seems to me you’d hate my guts, if you really thought I did Brendan, and you wouldn’t be thinking of any kind of truce. So what’s the deal?”
“A trade.”
“Ah! Young as you are, you’ve figured life out.”
“Those are Brendan’s original notes, and there are no copies. Now you have them. Destroy them--whatever you want--and you’re safe.”
“So why didn’t you give them to the cops?”
“There’s nothing conclusive there. You’d be charged, for sure, but you’d beat the serious stuff in court, maybe only do a couple of years.”
“I’ve got the best lawyers,” Malvin said.
“But you knew about the notes, and you were worried.”
“I’ll concede that. And now that I have them and I’m not worried, what is it you expect in return. Your safety?”
“I have another brother,” Quinn said. “I want him left alone.”
“His name is Colin,” Malvin said. “Your mother died in a car accident some years ago. And your father was a New York cop killed in the line of duty.”
“I guess you came across that information learning about Brendan,” Quinn said.
“Guess away. The thing is, I know. And more than you might think. So there’s just you and Colin now. Your little brother, three years younger, so you feel a responsibility.”
“That’s right. I feel a responsibility.”
“You and Colin, don’t you ever think of carrying on the family tradition and joining the police?”
Quinn smiled crookedly and sadly. “After what happened to our father and Brendan, no thanks. It’s not the kind of thing we’d want to make a family tradition.”
“So you two are from the smart side of the family.”
“That’s what we’re trying to be now.”
“I haven’t the slightest motive to harm either of you,” Malvin said.
“That’s the truth of it,” Quinn said. “Now that you’ve got Brendan’s notes, there’s no reason. You can’t be touched by the law.”
Malvin leaned back in his desk chair and studied Quinn. “But if it was my brother I thought you killed—“
“You’d think about it like me and do the smart thing,” Quinn interrupted. “Nothing can bring Brendan back. He lost the game he was playing. But Colin isn’t in that game, and neither am I. And we never plan on playing it. In return for the notes, I want you to leave Colin alone.”
“And you?”
“I’ll take my chances.”
“That means you’ll take my word.”
“I understand it’s good, despite some of your other character flaws.”
Malvin stood up. He was almost as big as Quinn. He offered his hand.
Quinn looked him in the eye and shook the hand, wishing he could wrench it off Malvin’s wrist.
“I like the way you think,” Malvin said.
Quinn shrugged. “I’m a businessman, just like you.”
“You’re just some kid working on the docks,” Malvin said.
It didn’t surprise Quinn that Malvin knew that. He smiled. “I didn’t say I was a businessman with a business.”
Malvin returned the smile. “Maybe at some point you and I can do business.”
“Maybe,” Quinn said to the man he knew had killed his brother.
He turned to go.
“Don’t worry about Colin,” Malvin said reassuringly behind him. “Or yourself.”
“I’m betting I can trust you,” Quinn said, looking back and nodding good-bye.
Leaving the office he almost ran into Heap, who was standing right outside the door on the landing and holding a sawed-off shotgun. The bodyguard followed closely as Quinn went down the stairs toward the street door. Heap watched him all the way out but said nothing.

It had begun to snow from a low sky the color of lead--large, heavy flakes that looked like the ones in those glass globes you shake. One of the flakes lit on Quinn’s right eyelash like a gentle cold kiss.

Half a block away, Colin stood, dressed much like Quinn in a dark suit and overcoat, waiting for Quinn, shivering and hunched against the cold. He was a smaller version of Quinn in build, lean-waisted and broad through the chest and shoulders, but with their mother’s sweet face and curly blond hair.

“It go all right?” he asked eagerly, as Quinn approached.

“It did that,” Quinn said.

Colin began flexing his gloved hands into fists. “That bastard killed Brendan. Whenever I think about him—”

“Time for that later,” Quinn said.

“My God, you’re a cool one.”

“I think right now we both are,” Quinn said. He stepped into a nearby phone booth, shutting the folding door against the cold. Colin stood staring at him from outside the booth, his breath fogging before the face that looked so much like his mother’s.

When Quinn had finished his call he left the booth and stood next to Colin, leaning against a brick wall that blocked at least some of the wind. They both stared silently down the block. The snow stopped as if to give them a clearer view.

Within five minutes an NYPD radio car passed them and parked near the building Quinn had just left. Another arrived and parked behind it. Neither car had its roof-bar lights flashing. Two unmarked cars arrived, and men in coats piled out. One of them, in a long brown leather coat, appeared to be in charge. They didn’t knock when they entered the doorway leading upstairs to Malvin’s office.

Almost immediately a uniformed cop emerged with Heap. Heap’s hands were cuffed behind him, and he appeared calm. He’d gone through this before. First the law, then the lawyers, then back on the street.

“I hope to hell they actually find dope up there so they can nail Malvin,” Colin said.

“I didn’t give him all of Brendan’s notes,” Quinn said. “I kept the one that said Malvin, like a lot of dealers, doesn’t do drugs.”

“That’s no surprise. But he still might have some of the product around.”

“He isn’t sloppy or careless,” Quinn said. “Other than murder, he doesn’t seem to have any bad personal habits.”

Colin was staring at Quinn inquisitively

Quinn said, “He is in fact a teetotaler who hasn’t touched liquor in years.”

“What’s that got to do with whether they find white powder in Malvin’s office?”

“Oh, they’ll find some. And along with Brendan’s notes it’ll be enough to put him away for life twice over.”

Quinn drew a stainless-steel thermos bottle from his pocket and handed it to Colin. “Have a slug of this to keep you warm,” he said. “It’s fine Irish whiskey.”

The two of them, standing in their mourning clothes and passing the thermos back and forth, watched while a handcuffed Malvin was led none too gently to one of the radio cars and stuffed inside. One of the cops escorting him was carrying a brown paper sack. Something, perhaps intuition, made Malvin glance down the street and see Quinn and Colin a second before he was pushed all the way into the car and the door was shut. His expression changed in a way you had to be paying close attention to notice.

It was at that moment that Quinn decided to become a cop.

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