

Arch Foster chattered away while he and Norv Lalouette stirred water into premixed concrete. Tommy Carmellini could hear the water running from the hose into the buckets, the sounds of bags being ripped, the shovel clanging against the metal pails. He remained paralyzed, completely unable to move. He couldn't even focus his eyes on the ceiling. He could hear okay, though. "Too bad, Carmellini, that you couldn't see the advantages of working with us. You weren't man enough to just up and ask what the deal was. Naw, you had to break into my place and snoop. I always said you were the kind of guy who couldn't be trusted, didn't I, Norv?" Norv grunted.

Arch came over, looked at Carmellini's face. He reached and ripped the tape from Carmellini's mouth. "You might drown in your own spit if I leave this on," he said, and laughed. "Hey Norv, he can't even close his mouth." He addressed his next comment at the paralyzed man. "Drool all you want, big guy."

"I told you that was good stuff," Norv told Arch. "Never seen it work before, but I got it from a guy who used it in China a couple of years ago. Said the effect was awesome."

"Okay, I'm a believer. Go easy on the water in the concrete, man, or it'll never set up. Don't let it get soupy."

They worked with the shovel for a few seconds, then Arch said, "Yeah, that's enough water. Stir it up good. When it's ready we'll jam his feet in."

"Shoes on or off?"

"Off."

Tommy Carmellini could feel someone peeling off his shoes, but he had no control over his legs. Or his bladder. He could feel a spreading cold wetness.

"Hey, he just pissed himself."

"What did you expect?"

"Maybe we ought to shoot him. Won't stink up the place so much." That was Norv. He was a hell of a guy.

"Naw," Arch told him. "More fun this way." He chuckled.

They pulled Carmellini down the table and jammed a foot into each bucket. He felt the slimy cool wetness. The buckets were sitting on something below the table level, so Carmellini's knees were bent ninety degrees. He knew that too, although for the life of him he couldn't move those legs.

"Whad'ya think? Should we give him another injection?" Arch asked that.

"The juice is good for forty-eight hours. Another shot would stop his heart and breathing."

Arch put his head over Carmellini's face, and grinned. "See you tomorrow night, asshole. I'm going to think about you all evening, lying here paralyzed, waiting to make the big splash tomorrow night. That's as old as you're going to get."

"That's enough, Arch. Let's lock up and get going."

"Okay."

"I still think we should shoot him now."

"Waste of a bullet," Arch replied. "We'd be doing the bastard a favor. I don't like him that much. The fall will probably kill him, and if it doesn't, he'll drown. That's more his speed."

He stepped over to Carmellini and whispered in his ear. "Think about the fall."

The lights went off. A little daylight light leaked through the joints in the tin siding, so the building didn't become truly dark. Carmellini heard a door close and the sound of a padlock clicking. A moment later he heard a vehicle start, then it drove away.

He listened for minutes. He was alone.

He tried to move his arms. No. Then his head. Close his mouth. Move a finger. Speak. All to no avail. He couldn't move a single muscle. He was totally and completely paralyzed.

He lay there on the table motionless for the longest time. He heard airplanes start and taxi, occasionally a plane went overhead. The motors sounded like piston engines. Once he thought he heard a jet, but it wasn't loud. Every now and then he heard car doors slamming far away, twice he heard voices. He concluded that he was at a general aviation airport, probably in a private hangar.

When his vision got extremely blurry he realized he was crying.

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Lying on the table totally paralyzed, Tommy Carmellini's mind wandered freely. He thought of his parents, friends, places he had been, things he had done, stupid things he was ashamed of, things he regretted.

The night had come and the building was totally dark. He heard some airplanes for the first few hours after the sunset, then silence.

Complete silence, broken only by the gentlest whisper of the breeze around the gaps in the metal siding of the hangar.

His mind resumed its aimless wanderings. Norv and Arch were going to kill him--of that he had no doubt. If they didn't kill him he would kill them, and they knew that.

He certainly never thought it would end this way. Or this soon. He was still a young man, with a lot of great years left.

He was thinking about dying when he heard a plane coming. The noise grew louder and louder. It seemed to be taxiing up right outside the building. Then the pilot cut the fuel to the engines and they died. Engines--Carmellini was sure there were two.

He filled his lungs, tried to shout. And couldn't.

Tommy Carmellini tried to moan, to speak, to say a single word. He couldn't make his lips or tongue move. He couldn't swallow, couldn't move his head...

The door of the hangar opposite this one creaked as it was opened. Voices reached him, although he couldn't distinguish the words. A small gasoline engine started...probably a nose tow of some kind being used to move the plane. After a while he heard the hangar door being closed.

This was his only chance! He had to make a noise now!

He filled his lungs, tried by sheer strength of will to move his cheeks and tongue to form a word.

And failed.

When he heard a car start and drive away, he stopped trying. He lay staring up into the darkness, concentrating. If he could move a finger...

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Tommy Carmellini could smell the shit. His bowels had moved and he hadn't even known it. The sun was up the light was again leaking into the hangar where he lay. Not a sunbeam, just light.

He worked hard at focusing his eyes. Could he see better?

He told himself he could, that his vision was coming back. If his visual acuity returned, the drug was wearing off. Soon he would be able to move. He would kill those two greasy sons of bitches, strangle them with his own hands. He would be waiting when they returned, snap their necks like twigs.

The anger ran through him like hot lava. Oh, what he would do to Arch Foster and Norv Lalouette. Just plain murder would be too easy for them. Oh, yes. He would strangle the life from them as he looked into their eyes.

Thinking of strangling, he tried to flex his fingers, make them move. That was the project, and he worked on it.

Worked, worked, worked.

Of course, his fingers didn't move, the ceiling of the hangar was still slightly blurred, he couldn't even move his lips or close his mouth. But he had to. He had until tonight.

If he failed he would simply disappear, vanish like Richard Doyle and God only knows how many others.

Jesus, his mom couldn't even collect his government life insurance for seven years. Wasn't that the time a missing person had to be gone before the government declared him dead? Funny he should think of that now. Pathetic, really. Foster and Lalouette are even fucking over my mother, for Christ's sake!

As he tried to bend his fingers, he listened to the airplane noises, the noises of cars and people going about the business of life. While he lay here dying.

Without food and water he was gradually getting weaker. If Foster and Lalouette gave him another injection when this one began to wear off, he would lie here paralyzed until he died of thirst. His heart would eventually stop when his blood got too thick.

But he didn't have that kind of time. They were coming back tonight to load him on a plane and take him somewhere--probably over the ocean--and dump him out. Concrete shoes. Foster was right--the impact with the water would probably kill him. The concrete would take his corpse to the bottom where it would never be found.

He kept trying to flex his fingers and move his tongue. Futilely. The drug held him firmly in its death grip.

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The hangar had been dark for hours when Tommy Carmellini heard the car drive up. Heard the engine stop, heard the doors slam.

Heard the key in the padlock on the door.

Heard the door open.

A light came on.

"He's still here."

"Did you think he wouldn't be?"

Arch's face loomed above him. "Still paralyzed, all right. Slack facial muscles, drooling up a storm, can't focus his eyes. Hey, Asshole, look at me. Look at me!"

Carmellini couldn't, of course.

Arch slapped him three or four times, stinging slaps that made his ears ring. Then he laughed.

"Tough shit, Carmellini. Hope you've had a hell of a bad day lying here getting ready to die. I went to a ballgame. Drank beer, ate good food, even got laid last night. How about that? And tomorrow I'm going to keep on living. Go to work, eat, drink, get laid, enjoy life. And you'll be dead!"

Arch tired of taunting him, finally, and checked the hardness of the concrete. He could feel Arch lift his leg. He felt the weight of the concrete in the bucket, too, pulling on his muscles and tendons.

Arch dropped his leg roughly and the bucket banged.

"You're ready to die, Carmellini. And we're going to do it to you. Hope you enjoy the ride." Foster left him them.

Carmellini heard them opening the doors of an airplane, snapping latches, preflighting it, probably. Time passed--it was difficult to judge how much. They talked about the fuel and oil,

even checked the air in the tires. Meanwhile he strained every muscle, trying to move something, anything. He tried so hard he felt his eyes leaking tears.

They came for him finally. Arch took his head and Norv took his feet, each of which had several gallons of concrete attached. With the concrete and his weight, it was all they could do to wrestle him off the table. They dragged him across the hangar floor toward the open cargo door in the right side of the airplane. The concrete was like sandpaper on his skin, ripping off his skin. He could feel the pain, but he couldn't even groan.

The two of them somehow wrestled him up and through the opening in the side of the plane. The plane seemed to be a single engine. He got a glimpse of the fixed gear. It was probably a Cessna 206, he thought, like those he had seen hauling skydivers. He was thrown on a bare aluminum floor. Norv got in and arranged the buckets that held his feet near the aft bulkhead. Then he used bungee cords to secure Carmellini in place, so he wouldn't inadvertently fall out the gaping hole in the fuselage, which had no door.

They left him there while they opened the hangar bay and pulled the plane out onto the taxiway with some kind of nose-tow tug.

He heard them climb into the front seats and he heard the engine start. After a minute or so he heard garbled voices coming over the loudspeaker as the plane began taxiing.

Carmellini found himself focusing on a rivet in the floor. It was eight inches or so from his face, but he could see it clearly. He forced his eyes to move.

As the engine roared and the plane began its takeoff roll, he found that he could clearly see the cargo door in the subdued light from the instrument panel. It wasn't much light, but it was enough. He could see! He could move and focus his eyes!

His hands were still tied in front of him. The tie wasn't tight; the blood was still flowing to his fingers. He forced his eyes down so that he could see his hands. He could barely make them out in

the gloom. He flexed his fingers. And they moved. Perceptibly. He could see and feel them move.

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The engine noise of the Cessna drowned out all other sounds for Tommy Carmellini. The plane seemed to bounce occasionally, move gently in the turbulent night air.

As the plane burrowed through the night he worked his fingers, tried to flex his legs, forced a shoulder to move. The wind coming through the open doorway was cool and welcome. It swirled around his face and dried the perspiration.

He was afraid to do much more. He was still alive only because Arch Foster was a sadist. If one of those guys glanced back here and saw him moving, they would shoot him without a qualm.

He swallowed. For the first time in thirty-some odd hours, he swallowed. Worked the muscles in his face.

Forced his tongue across his teeth.

The plane flew on and on. Tommy Carmellini lay still as death. His moment would come--he could feel the strength flowing back into his muscles. He forced himself to relax, to not tense up.

The waiting was the most difficult thing he had ever done. Every minute passed glacially. He was so focused on killing these men that he never thought of afterwards. Not for a second.

Waiting listening trying to stay relaxed.

An hour later he was still lying in a heap, still waiting, when an overhead interior light came on.

Norv put a leg over the back of the co-pilot's seat. He kicked at Carmellini, then found room for his foot. Now he was stepped completely over the front seat. Squatting, he grabbed Carmellini by the jaw, turned his head so he could see his face.

Using iron self-control, Carmellini kept his eyes unfocused, his face slack.

Norv unfastened the bungee cords that held Carmellini and his concrete buckets secured in place, took them off one by one. He slid one of the buckets toward the door, then reached for the other. When the buckets went out, Carmellini was going out.

As Norv pulled and shoved, Tommy Carmellini flexed his right leg, lifted the concrete bucket off the floor, and kicked Norv with it.

Lalouette grabbed for the door post, tried to save himself. Carmellini got a glimpse of his face, saw the shocked expression, then the slipstream took him and he was gone.

Tommy Carmellini pulled his legs under him, used his arms and hands to lever himself upward.

The airplane danced. Carmellini could see the whites of Arch's eyes as he looked wildly at the apparition coming to life. Arch tried to fly and pull a pistol from a holster behind his belt. His shoulder and lap harness kept him pinned to the seat. Carmellini saw the fear in Arch's face--and it made him glad!

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