



Mission: Cassette

By Eli Vandersaul

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“Well, this is it,” Detective Mike Norman said, stopping to face the end of the slightly ascending dirt tunnel. “Shovel through this last bit and we’ll be in.” He looked back at the man behind him, making sure not to shine his headlight into the man’s face. “Are you ready, man?”

His partner Bill Cook looked at him, nodding solemnly. “Let’s do this.”

Mike grinned and turned back to the end of the tunnel. Slanting his shovel up toward the roof, he heaved through the dirt with a grunt. The ceiling of the tunnel above Mike collapsed with a whoosh, showering dirt and debris on his head. When the dust in the air cleared, Bill could see a few small, scattered streams of sunlight shining into the tunnel from the hole.

“Right on!” Mike said, shining his headlamp into the dimly lit space above his head. “I knew we were here.”

“You should have shoveled more in front of you instead of over your head, so you wouldn’t have gotten so dirty,” Bill said, starting to wipe the dust off of Mike with his hand.

“I like dirt,” Mike said, pushing Bill’s hand away and starting to climb up into the hole. Bill just rolled his eyes and followed behind him.

When Bill came up through the hole, he surveyed the room with a sweep of his headlamp and saw that they were in the middle of an old, musty cellar. It had a dirt floor, rough

stone walls, and a decayed wooden ceiling with so many holes it looked like Swiss cheese.

“We’re here all right,” Bill whispered to Mike. “Which means we successfully snuck into the hideout of the most dangerous gangsters in the country. Now we just need to go up and steal the plans for their deadly secret weapon and we’re done!”

Mike chuckled. “Call me when you get to the top,” he said, handing Bill a walkie-talkie, “so I’ll be ready with your escape when you have the plans.”

Bill nodded and took the walkie from Mike’s hand, trying not to let his partner see how much his hand was shaking.

“Hey, you’re gonna do swell,” Mike said, giving Bill a reassuring smile and pat on the back. “You’ve done lots of really hard missions before. Just chill, man.” Mike looked down at his wristwatch and joked, “Just don’t take too long or I might start worrying.”

Bill tried to smile back but couldn’t as he thought about the fact that not all his jobs had to do with such deadly gangsters. Instead he went to work finding a decent-sized hole in the ceiling for him to fit through. There were remains of an old rotting wooden staircase, but that led to the outside. So a large hole would have to do to get them up into the house. Once he found one, he took his rope and flung the looped end up through the hole and over a beam that still was pretty strong. Then he slipped the coil through the loop and pulled

tight. Bill tested his weight on the rope and it held, so he hoisted himself up through the hole.

Now he was on the main floor in one of the front rooms. It was completely bare with only a couple boarded-up windows and a few closed doors. Thankfully, it was also devoid of human life, as they had expected. The detectives had watched this house and had seen absolutely nothing in the front rooms, so that anyone who passed by could have easily mistaken it for an abandoned house. Bill had to admit it was very clever of the gangsters. But to him it seemed even more clever that they were using it to their advantage.

Quickly, Bill untied the rope and noticed Mike staring up at him. As their gazes met, Mike gave him an encouraging thumbs up. Bill smiled and stood up, listening carefully for any signs of life nearby. He didn't hear anything, which was what he wanted—it meant that no one was after him. But then again it could also mean that the gangsters had caught wind of their mission and cleared out. The only way to find out would be to keep going.

Bill looked up at this ceiling for large holes, preparing to go to the second story the same way as he got to the first. Seeing one a few feet away, he stepped forward. But as he did so, the board under him squeaked terribly. He froze. After listening for a few seconds, he didn't hear anything, so he continued forward more carefully.

When Bill finally made it to the hole, he once again used the rope and went up to the second floor, which was much the

same as the first. There were holes in this ceiling, too, but this time it didn't matter, because he wasn't going up to the attic.

He walked around carefully, dodging the squeaky boards and holes as much as possible, while he searched the room. Finally Bill found what he was hunting for—a piece of white paper that was covering a hole in the plaster. Bill gingerly pulled out the white tacks that held the paper in place. Reaching his hand into the hole, he pulled out the private notebook of a man named Joe.

Before the detectives knew about Joe, they hadn't had any solid evidence against Boss Bobbs and his gang, although many crimes suggested they were responsible. To the whole world, Bobbs was just one of those wealthy guys that gave away a lot of money to charities. But then things began to change when the detectives met Joe.

Bill could remember that day as if it were yesterday, though it was actually several weeks ago. He was sitting in his office doing some paperwork, when he heard a commotion outside his door. He glanced out the window that looked into the rest of the office, but he didn't see anything unusual. He sighed as he looked back down and saw the paperwork he needed to fill out. Anything would be more interesting than working on that, he thought. So he decided to get up and see what was going on.

The instant Bill stood up, a man burst through the door and sprinted straight toward him. Bill instinctively dove behind his desk just as the man lunged over him, crashing

through the outside window behind him. As Bill came to his senses, he heard one of the officers shouting orders to follow the man outside. Slowly, Bill raised himself up and saw Mike standing in the doorway, pointing a gun in his direction. Bill quickly raised his hands above his head. Mike grinned.

“Did you get a good look at the man?” Mike asked, putting his gun back in his holster.

Bill shook his head, “I was—uh—behind the desk.”

“I see,” Mike said, shaking his head in mock disapproval. “Always hiding when things get tough.”

“The guy was about to tackle me!” Bill protested.

Mike smiled mockingly. “Well at least I was able to get a look at him.”

Bill ignored the implication and nodded approvingly. Then he turned around to survey the broken window and shook his head. “I wonder how much that pane is going to cost,” he muttered to himself.

“Probably a *painful* amount of money,” Mike said.

Bill rolled his eyes at Mike and asked, “So what did he take?”

“Nothing that I’ve found,” Mike replied.

Bill started gathering the papers that had fallen to the floor and putting them back on his desk. Suddenly, he noticed a pink slip of paper. He picked it up and examined it.

“Hmm, what’s this?” Bill murmured.

“A notice that you’re fired?” Mike asked, seeing the color of the paper.

Bill ignored his comment. “It’s a note,” he said, and then read it out loud. “Boss Bobbs Base: 149 Drury Ln. Only one man can get past the security to get the plans. More info inside. Joe.”

Bill looked up at Mike and smiled. “And there is a diagram of the house, how we are to get in, and where more information is inside. We now have our first legitimate lead!”

Mike crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows. “How do you know it’s not a trap?”

Bill frowned. “Well, we’ll have the boys look into it. Watch the house for any activity and check to see if we can find anything on this Joe character.”

From almost all appearances, the Drury Lane mansion seemed abandoned. The house was surrounded by a thick forest in the front and a lake in the back. Though there was an overgrown driveway that cut through the woods, it curved so that the house couldn’t be seen from the road. Searching the woods and watching the house revealed no signs of human life. It wasn’t until they watched the lake that they found out the

gangsters used boats to get to their base, with the aim that it would continue to appear unused. That confirmed to the detectives that it was the right house.

The other side of the investigation—finding more about Joe—proved fruitless. They simply could find nothing of him. But because they felt like they had enough as it was, they commenced the plan of digging the tunnel to the house cellar. It was then up to Bill, with his superior stealth, to complete the mission.

Bill brought his focus back to the notebook in his hands. Inside were the schedules and routines of Boss Bobbs, to-do lists, tasks the gangsters had accomplished, and a floor plan of the house. Then on the last page Bill found what he really wanted—the steps to getting the secret weapon plans.

After scanning through the steps, Bill stuffed the notebook into his pocket and crept across the room to one of the doors, remembering to watch his step. He finally got to the door and cracked it open, revealing a deserted hallway. There was a camera on the wall opposite, facing away from him as shown in the notebook's blueprint.

Seeing no one, he squeezed through the partly open door and crept across the hallway to the lounge, which was opposite from the room he had just been in. Joe's notebook claimed it had the security system box that would allow him to disable the cameras, so he could retrieve the plans without being seen.

Bill took in the whole lounge with a glance, relieved to see no one was there. But unlike the other rooms, this one was nicely furnished. There were a couple of couches and easy chairs in a circle, with several tables, lamps, and bookshelves against the walls. Bill didn't look too closely at them, because what he wanted was that security box, which he spied on the far wall across the room.

When Bill reached the box, he pulled a screwdriver from his pocket and started unscrewing the lid. But just as he was about to take out the first screw, he heard a noise behind him. Bill turned and, to his surprise, saw a man with his eyes closed, lying on the sofa behind Bill. Apparently, Bill had been too busy staring at the box to notice him when he passed by his couch.

The man sat up, yawned, and rubbed his eyes. Bill took that moment to stash the screwdriver back into his pocket. The man looked at Bill, surprised, and that's when Bill recognized him as Boss Bobbs. His features were unmistakable—bald head, dark eyebrows, jiggly jowls, and round body dressed up in a signature 1920s Al Capone pinstripe suit. This was indeed the gangster boss he had spent years searching for and was now trying to put in prison.

"I'm sorry," Boss Bobbs said, "I told Clark to wake me up when you arrived." He shook his head. "That man forgets more things than I can remember. But he's faithful. It's hard to find someone as faithful as Clark."

He stood up and extended his hand. “Mr. Jackson, the master assassin—it’s good to finally meet you. Boy, do I have a lot of work for you.”

Bill smiled and nodded, trying to do so as naturally as possible as he shook the gangster’s hand. He couldn’t believe he was actually shaking the hand of the most dangerous criminal of modern times. It was certainly something to tell his kids about. But he had to tell himself to get back in the game. Apparently Bobbs thought he was one of his contractors. Bill didn’t like the thought of playing the role of a gangster—pretending was more Mike’s expertise. But since he didn’t have much of a choice, he decided the best thing he could do at the moment was pretend he was Mike.

Bobbs withdrew his hand from Bill’s grasp and put it on his shoulder. “Why don’t we go into my office. I think it’s a much better place to do business than in here.”

Bill plastered on a smile and let Bobbs lead him into his office, which was the room adjacent to the lounge. This was exactly where Bill was planning on going all along. Now he just needed to find a chance to get at those secret plans, which Joe said were stored on a cassette. His shoulders sagged as he entered Bobbs’ office and saw rows upon rows of cassettes on shelves across the room.

Bobbs saw Bill looking at them and said, “Amazing collection, isn’t it? Almost five thousand cassettes.”

“Far out!” Bill said, trying to sound like Mike. “How do you keep them all organized?”

“Alphabetically, of course,” Bobbs said, waving his hand from one end of the room to the other, “from A to Z.”

Bill smiled. “Awesome!” This would be easy, since he knew the name of the plans.

Boss Bobbs smiled at Bill and pointed to an easy chair for him to sit in. Bill sat down as Bobbs sat in his chair behind his large oak desk.

“Would you like something to drink?” Bobbs asked.

Bill’s cool mood instantly changed, as he frantically tried to think of what a gangster might drink. But try as he might, he couldn’t think of anything. He was thirsty for some water . . . or milk. It would probably just be safer not to get anything. Besides, there might be a chance it was drugged.

“Nothing right now, thanks,” Bill said. And then he wondered if he shouldn’t have said “thanks.” Bobbs didn’t say anything to him, but pushed a button on his intercom to call for Clark to bring two waters. He glanced at Bill and said, smiling, “You may get thirsty before we finish.” Did he suspect something? Bill wondered.

“Let’s get down to business,” Boss Bobbs said leaning back in his chair. “I need the city police gone for five days.”

Bill tried not to look surprised, but he was. He raised his eyebrows. "Dead?"

Bobbs laughed. "No, not if you don't want to go that far," he said, still chuckling. "I would've just said I wanted them gone, if that's what I meant. I said I want them gone *five days*." He chuckled a little more.

Bill's face grew hot. How could he have missed that? But he tried not to let it get to him, so he came back with a forced chuckle, pretending he was just being funny. But he was nervous. How much longer could he keep this up?

"I like you, Jackson," Boss Bobbs said with another chuckle. "You're funny. Not many in this business are."

Just then Clark came in with the two waters. But he had barely walked in, when he stopped and stared at Bill.

"Ah, Clark!" Boss Bobbs exclaimed. "Why didn't you wake me like I said to, when Jackson came?"

Clark opened his mouth to say something, but then quickly shut it. He walked to his boss's desk, set down the glasses, and whispered something in Bobbs' ear. Bobbs glanced at Bill and then whispered something in Clark's ear. Then Clark left and Bobbs stood up.

"You make yourself comfortable," he said. "There's some business I need to attend to for a moment."

With that, he left and Bill knew that he was found out. That meant he had only a moment to complete his mission. He took Joe's notebook out of his pocket and quickly reviewed the next step that he had to do. "The secret plans are all on a cassette tape titled *Turret*."

Bill went to the shelves of cassettes and hunted till he found the *T* section. Then he quickly went to the end to find the one titled *Turret*. To his dismay, Bill found two. He pulled them both out and inspected them. Then he sighed with relief. On the inside, one said *music* and the other said *files*.

Bill was about to put back the one he didn't need, when he heard someone opening the door.

"Just looking for some music to put on," Bill said, without turning around. He was trying to stuff the one back onto the shelf, but as it happens when you're trying to hurry through something, your hands shake and it actually takes longer.

"Well, play the one you have in your hand," the person replied. Bill wondered if the person suspected that he had found the tape and was trying to keep him from taking it. But seeing a cassette tape player built in the wall right next to him, he decided to obey the voice and play the cassette anyway. While he shoved it in, he stealthily put the cassette with the plans into his pocket.

As the music started, Bill realized he probably shouldn't have played the tape that had the same name of the secret plans.

But it was too late to change it, so he turned around to face his adversary.

The man Bill saw was an enormous seven-foot-tall giant. His muscles bulged out of his tank top and his bare arms had so many tattoos Bill couldn't count them. Maybe if he would've had a nice face, it wouldn't have been so bad. But with the man's unshaven, glowering face on that sort of body—just the sight of him made Bill's legs turn to jelly. Still, Bill put on a tough look.

“Who are you?” the giant boomed.

Bill choked back a scream and squeaked, “Jackson. Who are you?”

“Jackson.”

“Oh,” Bill said, feeling the color drain from his face. Here was the master assassin Bobbs had been looking for. But now was not the time to give up—it was time for action.

Bill quickly scanned his surroundings for his escape. Unfortunately, all the large windows were boarded up. There was no way he could quickly get through any of them. But then he noticed one small window that was near the ceiling. He could tell it was basically used as a vent. That would have to be his way out—if he fit. And then he remembered he was supposed to call Mike. If Bill didn't call him now, he wouldn't be ready to pick him up when he got out with the plans.

Quickly he made a plan.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Jackson,” Bill said extra loud as he held the talk button on his walkie-talkie in his pocket. He hoped that Mike could hear. “But I’ve got to be going now, you know, so . . .”

The real Jackson grinned, but it wasn’t a very nice grin. Bill started slowly moving to get behind the desk and Jackson started moving toward him. When the giant was just in front of the desk, Bill used all his strength to lift up the heavy desk and push it on top of his enemy.

Jackson let out a cry as he was pinned to the floor. As quickly as he could, Bill raced to the window, vaulted himself onto a chair, and dove through the opening. He closed his eyes as he sailed through the air. It was his moment of glory, his moment of freedom. And then he realized he had stopped—Bill was stuck in the window.

Panic struck Bill and he began to try to push himself out with all his might. But it was to no avail. The extra donut he ate that morning must have done it, he thought sadly. There was now only one thing to do, Bill thought, groaning inwardly—be like Mike again.

“Help! Help!” Bill screamed. “Jackson, please pull me back in. If you don’t, I’ll fall and drown!”

Bill heard a “huh?” and then a noise from behind him, like the scraping of wood on wood. And then he heard steps.

“Help! Pull me back in!” Bill cried. “I can’t swim!”

Suddenly, Bill heard what he wanted—a laugh.

“Please hurry, man! I’m starting to feel sick just at the sight of it.”

“I’ll hurry!” Jackson said.

Then Bill heard the door open and Boss Bobbs cry, “What are you doing!”

“I’m getting rid of him once and for all,” Jackson roared as he came nearer to Bill. Bobbs cried out to stop, but it was too late. Jackson hit Bill like a train and shot him out the window like a cannonball into the sky.

It took Bill’s breath away, getting hit so hard and then flying through the air. But the few moments flying above the lake was actually quite enjoyable. Bill saw Mike circling the speedboat to get as near to him as possible when he hit the water. That’s when he realized he needed to prepare himself for impact. Bill made a perfect diving posture and hit the water without any problem.

Quickly he came up for air as bullets whizzed by him. But he wasn’t too worried. There wasn’t much chance of aiming through that little window. Mike came up beside Bill in the boat and helped him on board.

“Have you got it?” Mike asked, starting up the boat again.

Bill nodded and smiled. “We did it!”

Mike held up a hand to give him a high five. Bill was about to reciprocate, when he thought of something. “Cassettes don’t get ruined by water, do they?”

The End

