

# CUTOUTS

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## John Boston

Daniel had a lot to do and very little time to do it in. He was a set mover and decorator for one of the largest home builders in Las Vegas. Everything had to be perfect. If the realtor lost the sale, somehow it would be his fault. He raced around the house and made certain everything was in its place. He checked for dirt and dust. He made certain all the lights were on and the beds were immaculate. He was allowed to stay in the houses until they were sold. The owner of the company liked having someone living there to discourage squatters and other riff-raff. Sometimes the houses could be unoccupied for months at a time.

Daniel heard some noise coming from downstairs. He poked his head through the staircase and saw a couple walking around the living room, looking out the window. They were very well dressed. He just assumed they were potential buyers. His immediate boss would sometimes let friends see the house unsupervised, which he thought was a very bad idea. He didn't want them to damage something and he got blamed for it. The couple looked oddly familiar. He was certain he had seen them someplace before. He just couldn't place them.

The man and woman began passionately kissing on the sofa. Daniel knew he should just get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. Call his boss and let them know they were here. In a matter of seconds, they had their clothes peeled off and were having sex right there on the sofa he had just cleaned. It was too late to leave now. He thought he would just sneak out back, through the kitchen, but then he realized this particular model only had one door in the living room. The back door had a special padlock on it to discourage burglars. His only way of escape was through the front door. He thought about going out a window, but he was on the second floor. He knew if they were to see him, things could get messy. He just told himself he had done nothing wrong and waited for them to finish.

He knew he shouldn't be watching them. He knew this was wrong, but so was having sex in someone else's house. It wasn't their house, they hadn't bought it yet. Daniel just sat there, on the top of the stairs and watched the show. He just couldn't get the thought out of his head. He did know these people, he just couldn't remember how he knew them, or where.

The man kissed the girl, then hit her across the face. He grabbed her, and then threw her on the couch. Daniel couldn't believe what he was seeing. The man continued to punch her, bloodying her face. He then threw her on the ground and began to strangle her. Daniel wanted desperately to help the poor girl, but he couldn't move. For a split second, he thought his legs had turned to plastic. He tried to scream and shout, but no sound would come out of his mouth. He was frozen in place, watching helplessly as the young woman fought for her life. He just closed his eyes and waited for it to be over.

It took a few minutes for him to regain his composure. He had to very quickly decide what to do. There was simply no way he could tell the cops he stood by and did nothing while the girl was killed. That was simply not an option. He figured his best bet was to sneak outside and go into the house next door. He would just tell the police that he was inside the other house and had no idea what happened inside this one. That plan sounded much better. Much more believable. Many houses on the block were still under construction and not yet finished. The camera system in the houses wasn't even installed yet. There was actually no physical proof he was in the house at all when the crime occurred. He just had to get out without the man seeing him. He wouldn't even call the cops. He felt terrible for the poor girl, but he had his own life to think about here as well. The man might try and kill him if he saw him trying to leave. Daniel waited until the man stepped out of the living room. He figured now was his only chance. He bolted down the stairs and quietly opened the front door. He didn't see the other man anywhere. He walked quickly to the other house and let himself in. He was glued to the window, waiting for his boss to arrive, but she never did. He didn't see the killer leave the house either. This bothered him greatly. He didn't want his poor boss to walk into the house alone and get killed. He was stuck. His only real chance of escaping detection was to say and do nothing. His best chance of survival at this point was to simply be a coward. As unpleasant as it sounded, it was really the only logical choice at this point. He made himself a pot of coffee and waited for his boss to call.

He knew he had to do something. He waited for over four hours and didn't see the killer come out. He knew it wouldn't be possible for him to use the back door. That left the front door, which he could see from his window. He had to deal with this guy himself. He couldn't risk having anyone else killed. This guy was clearly a psycho. He looked around the house and found a small hammer in one of the drawers. It must have been left behind by one of the crews that built the house. He grabbed it and walked over to the other house. He slowly opened the front door and walked inside. He saw that the man had removed the girl's body from the couch. There was no blood anywhere. The killer had been very careful. He walked around the house with his hammer ready, but couldn't find the killer. It just didn't make any sense. How in the hell did he escape? Daniel searched the entire house. There was no sign of the killer. He left the house with no clear plan of attack. He had just witnessed a murder. He had to listen to his heart at this point, not his brain. His heart was telling him to do the right thing. He just couldn't walk away, not from this. Not from murder. He knew he was going to be crucified, but he also knew his best chance to see the killer prosecuted was to call the cops. He just had to make certain they didn't decide to do something stupid and blame him for the girl's murder. After all, it was going to be his word versus the killer's. Daniel reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He used the non emergency number for the police department. He hung up as soon as he remembered there was a cop who had just moved into one of the houses down the street. He bolted out of the house went down four houses and stopped. The cop's name was John Kellog.

Daniel rang the doorbell. No one answered. He saw a car parked out front. He knew somebody was home. His front door was locked. He walked around to the back of the house and saw someone in the kitchen. He recognized him as John Kellog. He tapped on the window. Kellog turned around and came outside to the small patio area.

"Can I help you?" asked Kellog, holding a coffee cup.

"Are you a cop?"

"Sure am."

"I think you better come with me."

"You mind telling me what this is all about? I kind of like knowing what kind of a mess I'm getting myself into," said Kellog.

"I just have to show you. It's a real mess."

He and Daniel walked solemnly back to the house where the murder occurred. Daniel spent the next fifteen minutes describing what he saw. Kellog said nothing and sipped his coffee. When it was over, Daniel sat on the couch, totally lost. He had no idea if he had done the right thing or not.

"So, he just beat her and killed her, right here?" asked Kellog.

"Yes."

"There's no blood. Not on the sofa or the rug," said Kellog.

"He must have cleaned it up."

"The sofa and carpet are completely dry."

"Maybe none of the blood got on the carpet?"

"Seems pretty unlikely. If she was bleeding and trying to fight the guy off, I have a hard time believing there wouldn't be some blood spilled."

"Like I said, he must have spent those hours cleaning up his crime," said Daniel

"What did he do with the body? You said you didn't see any cars parked in front of the house?"

"No. I don't know, maybe they parked down the street or something?"

"Why would they park down the street if they were going to be looking at this particular house?"

"I don't think they were buyers at all. I think they thought the house would be empty and a good place for them to have sex."

"Daniel.....your story doesn't make any sense at all. If he killed her, he must have moved her body. How did he do it?"

"Maybe her body is still in the house?"

"Maybe we should check," said Kellog.

The two of them spent the next hour going over every inch of the house and attached garage. There was no trace of the girl's body. There was no blood trail. Daniel could tell that Kellog was getting suspicious of him and his story.

"Daniel.....look. I'm just not buying any of this. I'm not even sure there is another person involved here. You can't tell me who they were or anything. I see no evidence that a crime was even committed here. I just wish you could tell me what the hell was really going on here."

"I am telling you the truth. I'm not a liar or a killer."

"Well.....so you say. You said you were staying in the empty houses owned by the real estate company that is selling them. I got your name. If anything else unusual pops up, I'll be sure and give you a call. If I were you, I'd stay nearby. Don't take any sudden, unplanned long vacations, you follow?"

"Yeah, I follow."

"I'll check and see if there were any missing persons reported that match the girl's description. I got to tell you, you could very well find yourself a suspect here my friend."

"Don't do me any favors here, Mr. Kellog," he said angrily.

"Daniel, the only reason I haven't called a homicide detective is cause last month, I caught a couple that strongly resembles the one you describe trying to break into a house down the street. We never did catch them, they just seemed to vanish into thin air. So, I can't outright dismiss your story. I just need more evidence. Look, you aren't a suspect yet. If you have anything about their identities, let me know. The more information I have, the better."

"If I find out anything, you'll be the first person to know. Are you going to report this?"

"No, I'll be working this one off the books. Truth is, I got myself into a little hot water. I am currently on suspension."

"You don't say."

"Don't let anyone tell you being a cop is easy. I wish to God I had chosen some other career.....any career but this one."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I can let myself out. No need to trouble yourself," said Kellog

Daniel watched TV that night in his house. The TV had become his best and only friend. He lived a very lonely existence. Sometimes days or weeks would pass and he would simply lose track of time. It was almost as if time didn't really matter to him. He would stare out the window until the sun came up. He wasn't even sure if he slept or not. He had other things on his mind.

He tried and tried to remember where he had seen the killer. He was certain they knew one another, then it hit him. It hit him so hard, it nearly knocked the wind out of him.

*He was in that house because he worked for Mary Wallace too!*

It made perfect sense. He probably had a key for the back door as well. That's why he never saw him leave. He figured Kellog had called Mary and filled him in. He hated calling her. Especially about something like this. She was not very pleasant. She was kind of a rich ice princess. She wouldn't even answer, just act as if no one was on the other end of the line. It drove him nuts, acting as if he wasn't there!

She had inherited the company from her father. She liked to tell anyone who would listen how she built it from the ground up. The only thing she did was drive around in a big Mercedes. Her parents had built the company and made it what it is today. Daniel had worked for her parents as well. They were very nice people. His first job had been in a simple ranch house in Pasadena, many years ago. The houses seemed to get bigger and bigger every year, while the pay remained exactly the same.

He decided to give Kellog a call and see if he had turned up anything since they had last spoken.

"What's up?" asked Kellog

"That guy who killed her. He must work for Mary Wallace as well. That's how he got in."

"Oh yeah.....about that. I spoke to her secretary. She said there shouldn't be anyone in that house. She doesn't have anyone named Daniel working for her."

"Of course I work for her, why else would I be here?"

"You tell me. You Daniel, I'm a cop, not a shrink. I think that's exactly what you need."

"Kellog, I'm not lying. Why can't you just do your job?"

"I did my job. I investigated and didn't find shit."

"You didn't really look very hard."

"No, actually, I did. I managed to track down the man I think tried to break in last month. Does the name Bryce ring a bell with you?"

"Yeah, it kind of does. I think I've worked with him on a few jobs for Mary.....yes, I'm sure I did."

"Tall guy, about six three or six four. Looks like a football player?"

"That's him."

"Great, now we're getting somewhere. Just stay alert, this guy may try it again. We still have one big problem."

"What?"

"Where's the dead girl's body?"

"I know. I've been thinking about that as well. I still think the body is in the house. It has to be."

"We looked over that house from top to bottom and didn't find anything, except for a bunch of mannequins."

"He didn't just take it with him. The body has to be here."

"We should find it in a few days when it starts to stink. Mary Wallace is going to have a hell of a problem on her hands then."

"Kellog, can I ask you a question?"

"Fire away."

"What did you do to get suspended from the force?"

"It's kind of complicated."

"I've got all night."

"Well, I don't. Let's just say that a very unique opportunity presented itself and I decided to take advantage of it."

"Isn't that what criminals do?"

"It hurt."

"What hurt?"

"My punishment."

"Punishment? Don't you mean suspension?"

"They told me I wasn't a cop. That I had never been a cop and they have no record of me. It's like I never even existed to these people. I worked with them every day for over twenty years and they just threw me away like a two-dollar hooker."

"Wow.....man, I'm sorry. That must be tough."

"Yeah, I'll get over it. Like I said, I never really liked being a cop anyway. I just liked the pay and benefits. Once in a while, I actually get to work on something fun, like this. We'll get this guy, I promise."

"Thanks, Kellog, you're alright."

"Don't tell anyone. It would ruin my reputation," said Kellog

"Daniel.....why did her secretary say she has no idea who you are?"

"I don't know. We have a lot of employees. She was probably new and had no idea."

"I just thought it kind of odd. This whole case is kind of odd. Nothing really lines up. That bothers me." said Kellog.

"That's just how life works sometimes. It's a mystery."

"Right. Don't go too far. I may need to speak with you again." He said and hung up the phone.

Daniel was in the kitchen, making dinner when his phone rang. He didn't recognize the number but figured it might be Kellog.

"Hello?" said Daniel

"Daniel.....what's up?"

"I don't know. You called me."

"I mean about calling the cops. The hell were you thinking? You want Mary to find out about us?"

Daniel's face went as white as a ghost. He knew he was talking to the man who had killed the girl earlier today.

"Is your name Bryce?"

"Daniel, knock it off. We have a big problem here. What on Earth possessed you to call the cops?"

"You killed that poor girl."

"Yeah, so?"

"Don't you feel bad about taking someone's life?"

"Daniel, what the hell is wrong with you? Last month, you killed her, remember?"

"What? How do you know my name?"

"We've been working together since like forever. Did you fall on your head or something?"

"Look, Bryce. I don't know what the hell is happening here, but I know I did not murder anyone last month, especially a pretty girl."

"Um, ok. If you say so. Look, sometimes I kill her, sometimes you kill her. Sometimes nobody kills her. We're just having a little fun with her. The whole thing was your idea in the first place."

"Bryce, you're nuts. I mean, you really need serious, professional help."

"No, nuts is calling the cops and reporting this as a murder. Like I said, what if old Mary gets suspicious about us? You know what happened to all of our friends in those Bay Area homes, remember?"

"No."

"Daniel, she got rid of all of them. Threw them right in a dumpster. You want that to happen to us? We got a good thing going here, I don't want you to screw it up."

"Bryce, I don't know what the hell is going on here, but it needs to stop. You need to turn yourself in."

"Turn myself in? For what?"

"For murder."

"Not that again. Look, Daniel.....this will all be over in a few days and we can go back to our normal lives, okay? Just try not to do anything stupid between now and then."

"No promises."

"Come on Daniel, this isn't rocket science here. Just don't talk to or call anyone, especially that stupid cop. He could ruin everything for us."

"Leave me alone Bryce. I don't want any part of your sick fantasy world."

"Whatever, later," he said and hung up.

Daniel slumped back in his sofa. He had no idea what Bryce was talking about. He was no murderer.

He knew he sometimes had problems remembering things. He knew sometimes he would wake up and have no idea how he got there or why he was there. Sometimes he would lose weeks at a time. He was scared and alone in this world. The strangest part of Daniel's existence was that the more chaotic and mysterious his life became, the happier he was. He didn't care if nothing made sense at times or if no one around him made sense. He was happy just living in the moment. Taking it one day at a time and never looking back. He treasured every second of his existence, there was never a wasted moment.

A few days had passed. Daniel had prepped a few houses for Mary in the development. He had no car, so his choices of work were severely limited. He would rearrange furniture and chairs, based on her drawings. The work could be strenuous at times. He had developed ways to move



heavy chairs and sofas all by himself. You had to be creative in his line of work. He was moving some chairs when his phone rang.

"Hello, Daniel speaking."

"Daniel. It's Kellog. Hey, I've been tracking Mr. Bryce for a few days. He just seems to vanish without a trace sometimes. I've got him now. He's got some chick with him. It looks like they're on their way over to your house."

"How do you want to play this?"

"We have to catch him in the act. We're going to put the girl's life in danger, but it's the only way. I don't think we have a case until it happens. You got a camera on that cheap phone of yours?"

"Yeah, but it's not very good."

"Alright, I'll be there in a few minutes. Look, if he tries anything, you're going to have to stop him. I don't want another dead body on our hands. We'd have a hell of a time trying to explain that one."

"Why don't you just arrest him?"

"Daniel, we don't have anything on him. We got no body, no evidence of a crime scene, nothing. This is the only way we're going to nab him. Be ready for him." he said and hung up.

Daniel was ready. He had his hammer in his hand and was grateful to have a do-over. He wasn't going to fail this young lady now. He would kill Bryce if he had to.

He watched them come in the house. They acted as if it were their house. Daniel nearly dropped the hammer when he saw who Bryce was with. *It was the same girl as before. The exact same one. Same cheap dress and earrings. This was impossible.*

He watched the two of them make out on the couch. He knew it was now or never. He ran out from behind the wall and pushed Bryce off of her.

"Get off her Bryce, I'm not going to let you hurt anyone else."

"What the hell has gotten into you? Have you lost it?" he said getting up off the floor.

"Cops will be here soon Bryce. It's game over for you."

"Cops? That's great. Do you know who else is going to be here soon? Mary Wallace with some rich buyers. Way to go ace."

"Daniel, what is the matter with you? You know this is all just a big game, right?" Said Celeste.

"Is your name Celeste?"

"Daniel, knock it off, this isn't funny. You made a giant mess here that we have to clean up."

"I'm sorry, I thought.....I thought he was going to kill you."

"Kill me? Like you killed me last time?"

"I.....I don't understand. This is all very confusing." said Daniel as he sat down on the sofa.

"Okay, nobody move, you're all under arrest," said Kellog as he ran into the house. He made it look as if he had a gun in his pocket, but everyone could see it was just his finger sticking out.

"You! You're not a cop," said Bryce.

"I sure am. Now reach for the sky!" said Kellog.

"Mr. Kellog.....what's your first name?" asked Daniel

"I don't have one. I'm just Kellog," he said trying to frisk Bryce.

"You don't have one, or you don't know what your first name is?" asked Daniel

"What difference does it make?"

"You two idiots are going to ruin everything. We need to get upstairs before she gets here, or we're toast," said Bryce pushing off Kellog.

"Why can't you remember your first name?"

"Daniel, I'm trying to arrest this perp here, could this wait until later?" said Kellog exasperated.

"You don't know your first name.....and I don't know my last name. I don't even know how I got here or why I'm here."

"Shit! She's here.....come on get upstairs, it's our only chance," said Celeste as she picked Daniel up off the couch.

"There's no time! Daniel.....you have to remember, you're one of us. Think hard!" said Bryce.

Daniel closed his eyes and suddenly he remembered. He couldn't believe he had forgotten already.

"Man, I really messed things up. Sorry guys," he said and closed his eyes.

Mary was in a decent mood. She had just closed on a two-million-dollar property a few hours before. That was an easy 75,000 dollars. Her clients were rich. She loved cash buyers. She had already made reservations to take them to lunch afterward. She knew they were just buying the house to rent it out, not that it mattered. Once it was theirs, they could do whatever they wanted with it. She was just in it for the money, like everyone else.

"Mary.....why are their mannequins in the house?" asked the husband

Kellog, Daniel, Bryce, and Celeste had now been transformed into life-size plastic dolls.

"Oh, we like to keep them near the windows with a light on. Makes it look like there's someone at home. We have a deal with the rental car company to park some of their cars in the driveway. We just want to make it look like the house is occupied."

"That's a good idea." said the wife.

"I see someone was having a little fun with our dummies." she said pointing to the handcuffs on the Bryce dummy's wrist."

"I'm thinking of getting rid of these things. Sometimes, I'd swear these things have a life of their own," she said and continued on with the tour.

"They kind of creep me out." said the wife as she passed by.

"Let me show you the house, I think you guys are going to love it, I know I do and I'm hard to please."

Had she looked hard enough, she would have been horrified to see a small tear coming down the cheek of Daniel, who was now a lifeless, plastic mannequin. He was just counting the minutes until he was a person again. ....whenever that would be. That was fine. He could wait. He was patient. He was used to waiting. He didn't mind. He was among friends. They understood each other in ways no one else could.

*In the end, we are all waiting. It's just a question of who we are doing our waiting with.*