

TEARDROP
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For Warren and Willamae Ngorlag

Love, love is a verb

Love is a doing word

Fearless on my breath

“TEARDROP” BY MASSIVE ATTACK

CHAPTER 1

BUDDY

The man who would eventually tell Mike Harden he was going to die stood waiting by Mike's mailbox and watching him approach on the sidewalk with his two Chihuahuas.

The morning walk was the first thing Mike did every day, even on frigid December days like this one, and it was as punctual as the daily school bus stop by the curb or the delivery of the mail. The white dog was named Payton and always seemed energetic and eager to go on these strolls, while the larger black Chihuahua was named Butkus and stayed in an ill mood twenty-seven hours a day. Both dogs had been rescued from an animal shelter, a fact Mike continued to remind Butkus of every morning, though he was always ignored.

Mike disregarded the stranger standing in front of his house most of the way down the sidewalk. He'd been walking for half an hour now, and the wind seemed to be picking up, making his nose and cheeks numb. As he neared the guy, he took note of his fedora and long black overcoat.

The only guy who should ever wear a fedora anymore is Harrison Ford. And that would only be as Indiana Jones.

"It takes a strong man to own two little dogs," the middle-aged man told him.

Mike nodded and smiled. He'd heard it before. Many times before. "I take the St. Bernards on their walk later in the afternoon."

The look he received from this stranger who was obviously waiting for him was surprising. It was an almost-condescending glance, one that seemed to say "cute" at the joke. Mike was just trying to be polite at the barb that he'd already heard from most of his buddies. This guy in the expensive-looking coat and silly-looking hat wasn't a buddy, however.

"How are you doing today, Mike?" The stranger emphasized his name.

If this is another moron trying to pay me nothing for the shop, I might need to go inside right away before saying something I regret. Mike nodded and said a very mediocre "Fine." No follow-up question. No intention of having a conversation. It was way too cold to make small talk outside anyway.

Payton, however, had nobler intentions. He walked up beside the man and began sniffing at the stranger's ankles.

"I just had a rather unfortunate run-in with a rottweiler. I bet your dog smells him." The man bent over to pet the Chihuahua. "What are their names?"

The man had a George Clooney kind of look and attitude about him. He was probably in his fifties and carried a been-there-and-done-that air that reeked of success and hinted at sarcasm. Or maybe it was just pure and simple smugness.

Mike was going to wrap this up in another ten seconds. "Payton and Butkus," he said, pulling the former away from the man's leg and turning toward his house.

"Such original names."

Now this guy who doesn't know me and undoubtedly wants something is mocking me. "I was going to use Jordan and Pippen, but the lady across the street named her cats that," Mike deadpanned. "Come on, boys."

"Mike Harden."

The way his name was uttered felt like an insect crawling over his skin. Mike felt a chill that didn't come from the cold as he stopped and waited for more. Evidently there was no way out of whatever he was going to get pitched or sold or serenaded.

"Aren't you the least bit curious why I'm waiting for you?"

"Uh, yeah. I just hope you're not from the IRS."

There was a laugh that sounded genuinely amused. "I like that. The last person I showed up to see—well, he wasn't as initially receptive."

"What can I help you with?"

"Do you think most people consciously think about the last breath they'll ever take?"

Mike shook his head, barely even acknowledging the question. He needed that first morning cup of coffee, and he needed it now.

"Or," the stranger said, posing like an actor in midsentence, "do you think they only contemplate it when they get older or if they become ill or when they lose a loved one?"

He has no clue who he's talking to. "Hey, man, it's early and I'm freezing and all I'm thinking about is throwing away these poop bags in my hand, you know? So no offense, but I have to get going."

The stranger stared at the plastic bags and gave him a nod. Then he opened his gloved right hand and dropped a silver pocket watch until it dangled from its chain as if from a noose. He rocked the round piece back and forth like he was trying to put someone under hypnosis.

"The kids like this watch—always have. Adults usually think it's a bit strange that I'm carrying it around. A bit pretentious. Showing

it off when I do like it's some kind of Super Bowl ring. Of course, it depends on the look I choose for the presentation."

Uh-huh. "I have to go."

"I'm trying to connect, Mike. Didn't you like the football association I just gave?"

Mike had heard enough. "Look, buddy. What do you want?"

"The question isn't what *I* want, Mike Harden. It's what you want. You have a choice to make, and you have—well, let's see—less than forty minutes to make it. This pretty little piece isn't just for show, you know?"

"What are you selling?"

"Mike, 'buddy,' it's not what I'm selling. It's what you're buying. Seven more hours of your life. All for the price of nothing. All for the enjoyment of one. To think that I thought you might actually be pleased by the proposition."

"Listen, is there a problem?"

Some habits and statements and stances were ingrained into him like the cracks in the sidewalk he'd just been stepping over. Mike didn't back down and didn't glance away from Mr. Smug *GQ* with his tanned and blemish-free face.

"Only if you think death is a problem."

"Look, buddy—" Mike started to say again.

"The name is Thomas Constant. Buddy is the name of a dog owned by someone who doesn't live in the shadows of a Chicago football team that existed over two decades ago."

"Thomas, then—if there's some kind of problem—"

The stranger shook his head. "I'm not going to harm you, and hopefully by now you can perceive that I'm not a raving lunatic."

"Crazy's got all kinds of colors, mister."

Thomas Constant, if that was his name, burst out laughing. "I like that, Mike. Do you mind if I use that later today?"

"Be my guest."

“Be mine, too, Mike. Invite me in. I really don’t want to have to do this on a sidewalk in front of your house. The very least you could do is give me a cup of coffee and sit across the table from me. It’s called respect.”

“Oh, is that what it’s called?” Mike laughed in disbelief. “I’m sorry, how utterly rude of me. I’ll be at the coffee shop a block and a half north of here. Place called The Grind. I’ll give you a free cup of coffee. On the house. Sound like a plan?”

“You’re losing precious decision time.”

“I’ll just have to live with that.”

Thomas Constant chuckled. “Ah, if you only knew the irony of that statement.”

