

Open Invitation

By Michael Danese

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On a warm evening in early June, a late model Mercedes sedan slowly rolled along a tree-lined street in Philadelphia's ritzy "Main Line" section. The car turned right into a long driveway that was flanked by meticulously manicured hedges. The house wasn't exactly palatial, but close. It had that "old money" look. It wasn't run down, but a power washing and some mulch and tree trimming would certainly shine it up. The garage door opened and the car entered, then the door closed.

Inside the garage a young couple quickly exited the car. They were both carrying small gym-like bags.

Almost running, they entered the house from the garage into the kitchen. Almost immediately, a young girl, about six years old, rang out an ear-piercing scream and dropped a peanut butter and jelly sandwich onto the floor. The young couple look at each other in shocking disbelief.

Almost immediately, a tall muscular boy of about fifteen years old ran into the kitchen and yelled, "Emily, what's wrong?!"

A split second later the woman punched him squarely in the jaw, sending the boy into a dinette table and then onto the floor. As the young girl heightened her scream level, the woman grabbed the toaster off of the counter, yanked the power cord out, then pounced onto the stunned boy. She quickly tied his arms behind his back and plopped him into a chair.

The man, taking the cue from the woman, pulled the chord from the blinds, grabbed the girl, tied her hands behind her, then placed her into a chair as well. He then grabbed a dishcloth and shoved it into her mouth.

The couple then looked at each other, trying not to let their panic show.

I know right now, dear reader, you're probably thinking, "Who are these people, and why are they torturing these children?" Well, they aren't really bad people. Let's back up a few months.

The young couple are Jade and Bryan, and they're both local college students.

Jade hasn't really changed much over the years. She was described by an elementary school teacher as "strong willed" in an attempt to hint at "bossy."

She was always thought of as being very smart. "Too smart if you ask me!" was how another teacher described her.

She grew to be tall and thin, with shoulder length brown hair and piercing blue eyes. She was always popular and athletic, and excelled on the high school track team. She was a perennial member of the "in crowd" in school. Some may say that it formed around her. You know how those things work, a nod from Jade meant that a girl was welcome. A frown signaled the others in the clique to shun a new girl.

She was always the first to have a date for the homecoming dances and proms, but she was never chosen as the queen though. It wasn't because she didn't have the looks, it was more because so many of the other girls resented her and her ways. She didn't care, because things always seemed to go her way.

Jade always received good grades, not because she worked at it, it just came easy to her. That was something else that the others resented. When it was time to apply for college, she was accepted to just about every school that she applied to. There were thoughts of a track scholarship, but that wasn't in the cards. She chose a top-tier school in the suburbs of Philadelphia where she's studying finance and economics. That's where she met Bryan.

Bryan has always been described as "the nice guy." He grew up at the Jersey shore, was a lifeguard through high school, and always looked like he had a tan, even in the winter. His yellow-blond hair, dimples and toothy grin added to the image. He's tall and muscular and played basketball in high school, where he was thought of as "a catch" by the girls in his small school. He's majoring in general business, and when Jade and Bryan were in the same *Intro to Accounting* class he caught her eye. She made it her mission to get close to him, sticking to him like cold on ice.

Sure, she was attracted by his smile, and he was a willing victim, but she also saw the vulnerability in him, a trait that she exploited to her advantage any time she wanted. I won't say that he followed her like a lost puppy, but not far from it. For a girl that liked to get her way, this was the perfect guy. If he seemed unwilling about anything, all she had to do was tilt her head, give a half smile and bat her eyes. He was a sucker for that, and she knew it. The pair quickly became inseparable, at least when Jade wanted it that way.

One thing that Jade didn't count on was Bryan's roommate, Jack. He seemed to always be around, at least when he wasn't working. Jack was likable enough. He was a slight guy, much shorter than Bryan, with dark curly hair. "Small but wiry!" is how he describes himself. He was a history major with big plans to be a professor. He had a part-time job working for a valet parking service that served several different venues. During the fall and spring he was extremely busy because of what they called "charity season." That's when all of the dinner-dances and galas took place for all of the charities. Jack wasn't around as much then.

One night they were drinking and eating pizza when Bryan started to complain about being broke all the time. Jade could certainly relate to that. In fact, she'd been thinking a lot about it and thought now would be a good time to hatch her plan.

"A few years ago my dad picked me up from a friend's house. My friend lived pretty far away from us, way out in the country. He simply pushed "home" on the GPS on the dash and then he was easily directed to our house. When we got to the driveway, he pushed the remote and the garage door opened and in we went," she explained.

"Brilliant story, darlin'!" joked Bryan.

"Yes, it is, brilliant *and* simple at the same time! Let me paint the picture for you," she said.

"Jack, I'll bet that you see lotsa rich folks at those charity events, right?"

"Duh, yeah! Poor people don't get invited to them!" he snarked.

"So, let's say that some old money couple pulls up in their Bentley and toss you the keys..." said Jade.

"Well, that only happens about 50 times a night!" said Jack.

"So, how long are people usually at these affairs?" Jade asked through a smile.

"A few hours at least." Jack answered.

“So, you get in the car, and you have time to see if there is a GPS, and if it has a “home” button, right? And perhaps a garage door opener too?” said Jade.

“Yeah, sure...” he replied.

“I’m not sure I like where this is going...” squealed Bryan.

“Don’t interrupt!” Jade commanded sharply. She turned back to Jack and smiled. “And, dear Jack, once you know the car is properly equipped, it would be possible for some adventurous couple to take it for a ride, perhaps visit the house and relieve the people of some of their riches, right?”

Jack smiled broadly, “Yes, yes, it would be very possible... and I could even hit the home button to make sure they lived close, so the trip is short. It’s like having an open invitation to help ourselves!” he added.

“And we’ll only go after old people, ones that look like there’s no other family at home!” exclaimed Bryan, as he slowly got drawn in.

“Right, lover! Now you’re getting with the program!” said Jade.

“I’ve been thinking about this for quite some time. A lot of older folks don’t trust banks, so they keep a lot of cash on hand. I know that my parents do. And, maybe they have alarms, but many of them don’t even bother to arm them. I saw that on the news recently. It is like a complicated TV remote. They would rather not bother than risk screwing it up.” she said.

“You really have given this a lot of thought! What if we get caught?” said Bryan with a quiver in his voice.

“Getting caught’s for chumps! We’ll be smart. If it looks like someone’s home, or if the house has cameras, or if the alarm is on, we’ll just come back and get another car!” said Jade.

“Right, I can have two or three cars lined up if you are coming back empty.” said Jack. “It can’t miss!”

“Yeah, can’t miss...” said Bryan.

So that’s exactly how they spent many evenings that spring. From mid-March through early June they were out over thirty nights. They developed quite a process. Jack would valet the potential targets as soon as he spotted them. He sometimes even jumped in front of his valet co-workers to get the best couples. They just thought he was overly enthusiastic. He saw it as opportunity.

He would hit the “home” button on the GPS, and, if they were worthy of attention, he would then park in a corner of the lot and leave the keys. Jade and Bryan would jump in and slowly drive out, following the directions until they were at the garage. Another button opened the door and they were home free!

They grabbed their canvas bags and bolted for the master bedroom. They snatched the jewelry and cash, knowing exactly where to look. They were able to get in and out of a house in less than two minutes. Then back in the car. They parked the car back in the lot, and Jack would soon come and fetch the keys. They repeated this three or four times a night. Some houses were better than others. At worst, they would net a few hundred dollars per house. Occasionally they would hit the jackpot and nab thousands!

Now, I must admit, there were rides that didn't quite pan out. Every so often they would see signs of activity in the house, or they spotted a camera. Or, as the garage door was going up they sometimes heard a large dog barking, which always meant abort. Small dogs weren't a problem, in fact, Bryan loved dogs. He always brought a pocketful of treats just in case. But when things looked iffy, they would just simply back out, text Jack, and go get the next car. You can't be too careful enough in *this* business!

The next day after a "work night" Jack would take the stash to his friend, Billy. Jack and Billy were childhood friends from the old neighborhood. Billy was taller than Jack, but then again, so was everybody. He had wavy blond hair that he kept short. He also had a "stubble" beard, you know, the kind that makes a guy look like he was just too busy to shave for a few days. Not every guy could pull it off, but it seemed to fit Billy.

Billy always wore a sport coat to portray a businesslike demeanor because he worked in his father's upscale pawn shop in Center City on Jeweler's Row. He knew that a few years later, when his dad retires, it will be his business. Billy always paid a fair price and then shipped the goods to various cities in the "pawnshop network," sometimes New York or Boston, or maybe Cincinnati or Baltimore. Tracks were always well covered and everybody shared the profits.

The crimes were almost never reported for days or even weeks, and many were never reported. Jade and Bryan were smart enough to not take everything, to cast some doubt and confusion. So when the burglaries were reported, it was difficult to pin down when they actually took place. Sometimes the victimized couple even blamed each other for missing jewelry or money, or blamed their children, grandchildren, or even friends and neighbors.

The easy money brought Jade and Bryan closer and cozy together. She often talked of plans to travel to Europe or Australia, and Bryan was, of course, all ears. He was happy when she was happy, which she usually was lately. As for Jack, he was dressing better and was dating a lot. Money made that easier.

That all comes to a screeching halt tonight as Jade and Bryan found themselves in this awkward position.

The young girl, Emily, was red-faced and sobbing uncontrollably. She was wearing a nightgown emblazoned with Disney princesses. Her usually beautiful long curly blond hair was all awry, sweaty and tangled. Her freckles were almost invisible because of her flush color.

"Shut up!" yelled Jade at Emily.

Emily tried to tone it down, but it simply wasn't happening.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?!" barked Bryan a few inches from the boy's face.

The boy was Peter. He was wearing a Star Wars tee shirt and gym shorts. He has a mob of brown hair and several acne scars on his face. "Who are YOU and what are YOU doing here!" he snarled back.

Now, while this little drama played out in the kitchen, upstairs in a bedroom was Nancy. She was in her own little world, lying in bed and watching an episode of the old Mickey Mouse Club on her iPad. Her earbuds also helped to isolate her. She was nine years old, and looked like a larger version of Emily. She also had long blond hair and freckles. She was wearing a Little Mermaid nightgown.

When the episode ended, she reached for the cup of water on her nightstand. The earbuds restrained her reach, so she pulled them out. That's when she heard the voices. At first she thought it was the TV, then she heard her brother's voice and got scared. She was about to scream out, but she was too scared to do it. She froze for a second, then listened. She crept as if on kitten's paws, out of her room and to the railing where she had a clear view of everything. Luckily, she never turned on a light, so she was shrouded in darkness.

As Nancy watched this nightmare, Jade smacked Peter hard across the face, which caused Emily to ramp up the muffled crying a notch. "We'll ask the questions! Do what you're told and nobody gets hurt!"

Peter looked at her with disdain and hate. Slowly he muttered, "I'm Peter, this is my sister, Emily. This is our grandparents' house. The last day of school was yesterday. Tomorrow they are taking us to Disney World and then to their Florida house for a few weeks."

"Okay, that's more like it!" said Bryan. "Who else is here?"

Peter shot a look at Emily and said, "Just us. Our grandparents are at a dinner. They will probably be home soon!"

"Okay, good..." said Bryan.

Jade grabbed Bryan by the arm and pulled him into a corner of the dining room, out of earshot of Peter and Emily. As they moved, Nancy followed along the railing and listened to their whispers.

"You know what we need to do, right?" quizzed Jade.

"Yeah, let's get the hell outta here!" replied Bryan.

"Wrong!" said Jade, "These kids saw our faces! They can identify us! I'm not going to jail because these kids were going to Disney World!"

"Jade, we ARE NOT going to hurt those kids! That just isn't who we are!" Bryan whispered loudly.

"You'll do what you're told! I've got a life to live!" whisper-barked Jade, "You can cower in the corner. I'll take care of it. I promise it'll be quick. Those steak knives on the counter will be perfect!"

Nancy was petrified! She thought about calling 9-1-1, but knew they would hear, and it would take too long. She tried not to panic. For some reason she thought back to her grandfather at Christmas dinner, when the family was talking about the recent elections. "Nobody's taking my guns! I sleep every night like a baby, 'cause I know there's a loaded gun right under the bed!" she remembered him saying.

She scampered to the master bedroom while Jade and Bryan continued their whisper-arguing. She knelt next to where her grandfather slept and reached under the bed. She first grabbed a sock, then a handkerchief, then she felt cold metal and pulled out a small handgun. Luckily for her, it was a Beretta Bobcat .22. It was still large and heavy in her wee hands, but as guns go, it is one of the smallest and lightest. She prayed that it was loaded and that it would fire when she pulled the trigger, as voices were now loud downstairs.

"Jade, no! Please! Stop!" screamed Bryan.

As Nancy got back to her perch at the railing she saw Jade pulling a large knife out of a butcher block.

“Help! Help! Stop Her!” yelled Peter as Emily was getting hysterical.

Nancy went into some type of trance, moving with efficiency and confidence, while still praying that her effort wouldn't be in vain. She leaned the gun on the railing and steadied it with both hands.

Jade, as if possessed, slowly walked with the knife towards Peter, as a crying Bryan implored her to stop. She got in position to thrust the knife into Peter's throat as he squirmed and yelled. All at once Bryan launched into action and jolted Jade away as Nancy screamed and pulled the trigger. The bullet entered Bryan's back and lodged in his chest. He fell on top of Jade, gasping for breath and bleeding profusely.

Peter looked up and joined his sister's gaze with relief as Bryan was bleeding out. A stunned and bloody Jade wriggled from under Bryan and threw herself on him as she hugged him and cried. Emily continued her hysterics and a small puddle of urine began to grow under her seat.

Nancy held the gun trained on Jade. Jade looked up at her and knew that she was bested by the child.

“Untie my brother,” Nancy commanded as she looked down the gun barrel.

Jade quickly untied Peter, then Peter slammed his fist through Jade's jaw, sending her backwards, where she hit her head on the edge of the granite countertop. She slumped to the floor holding her head. Peter jumped on her and punched her again in the face. Then he rolled her over and tied her hands with the chord that formerly detained him.

He then hastily untied Emily and hugged her as she began to calm down. Nancy descended the stairs and joined in the hugging. Peter took the gun from her and pointed it in Jade's face.

“Go ahead, shoot me, my life's over anyway!” said Jade.

“I wouldn't give you the satisfaction! I would rather see you rot in jail!” said Peter as he reached for the phone, dialing 9-1-1. “Yes. Hello, please send the police...”

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