**Lot 649**

Clayton Russell leaned up against his car, waiting for his client. He was antsy thinking about the deal he could make today. The buyer was a ghost, some mysterious merchant who went by the name Dryden. This Dryden character had a habit of calling Russell from different numbers at inconvenient times to plan out a tour. The most recent was a week earlier when Dryden called at one in the morning to inquire about security. Russell told him all he knew, and Dryden seemed satisfied.

The town was full of urban decay. Smokestacks from the old steel mills rose high into the air, far up past even the highest overpasses in town. Below these overpasses were rusting and crumbling factories and long abandoned rail cars on unused railroad tracks. Russell never dared venture below those overpasses, he valued his life too much.

The popping of tires rolling over gravel caught his attention. Russell looked up and saw a shiny black Cadillac rolling up slowly through the dense foliage that was especially full and lush in the humid Ohio summer. It stopped and idled for a few moments; Russell could feel a pit growing in his stomach that started to fill with sour anxiety. His mouth grew dry, and his ears started to get hot. Finally, the car inched its way up and parked a short distance from Russell’s own car.

The factory was surrounded by a wide field that was speckled with trees and garbage from the nearby highway. It was white, or it used to be once upon a time. There was a tracing of a T and K from where the sign hung on the top right corner of the building, but the rest had fallen victim to the elements and was now illegible. With no name or known owner, it was listed simply as: Lot 649.

From what Russell could see through the tinted windows, there were two figures inside. He was not expecting an ambush, as Ohio was not known for its cattle rustlers or banditos. The anxious pit remained stagnant until the passenger door opened and everything came flooding back. A man stepped out. He was dressed casually, nothing out of the ordinary. His complexion was lighter than normal, and it contrasted oddly with his feathery jet black hair. His eyes were as dark as his hair, and his jacket was slightly dusty.

“You’re the realtor?” he asked, looking around.

Russell nodded, unsure of what he should say.

“Dryden sent us. He wants us to go in and take some pictures. Said he’ll make his decision when he gets them.”

“Can I at least get a name?”

The man just stared at him.

“My name is Clayton Russell… Clay. It’s nice to meet you.”

He reached out a hand, but the man stared at it like it was a foreign gesture. He looked up at Russell and said, “If it makes you feel better, you can call me John.”

“John what?”

“John. Look, Mr. Dryden sent us to take pictures, I’m not lying to you. Do you really want to blow the chance of collecting what, 10, 20% commission on an $800,000 pile of scrap metal?”

Russell looked at him, then he looked at the building contemplatively. He thought about his choices. He felt that whatever direction this situation would go, it would end with him being killed. If he said no, John would kill him. If he said yes, John *could* kill him. It was almost worth the risk.

“Come with me,” Russell said, walking towards a rusted metal door with a lockbox on the handle.

“The factory itself was built in 1908,” Russell said, his voice echoing throughout the desolate skeleton of steel production. “It was owned by James Parrish from 1908 until 1921, and from there it was bought by the eccentric Scot Andrew Robinson. They said Robinson was so devoted to his work that he would sleep in his office… it’s right back there.”

He looked over at John, who was taking photos with his cell phone. He noticed that John used a flip phone, which seemed odd. He wasn’t too old, and most people don’t use flip phones in 2023. Could it be a burner phone? Russell wanted to ask, but at the same time, he didn’t want to lose his head to the maniac. John turned back after a minute and said, “Go on, I’m listening.”

“Right, as I was saying… it’s uhm, actually 27,000 square feet. We’ve used that sign before in the past to sell a few other buildings. Trade secret, you know?”

John stared at him before he started snapping photos of the mezzanine behind Russell. Papers, dirt, and bricks were strewn around the building. The windows were either shattered or boarded up, and little light filtered into the stuffy room.

“So, what does Mr. Dryden think so far?”

John looked down at the phone, Russell noticed he was wearing surgical gloves. Hopefully John was a germaphobe.

“Nothing yet. Keep talking though, tell me more about the town.”

He went back to snapping photos. Russell looked at the door, the Cadillac had moved closer to the door. The sun was beaming off of the hood and shining like a star.

“Oh, well sure… the town was dominated by steel production until the late 70s when the mills closed. I grew up here, but the closure was closer to my dad’s time.”

“Really?” John sounded completely uninterested.

“Yeah. My grandfather worked as an instrument repairman at the sheet and tube factory for 45 years. He said back then, in the 50s, if you lived here, you were set. You went to school for a while, then you went to work in the mill.”

“Your grandfather worked for the mills huh?”

“His whole family did. But they were immigrants, so they had a farm too… a dairy farm. That’s just how it was back then though. We’re not so lucky these days.”

“I’d say so.”

The cell phone buzzed. The vibration carried through the building like an earthquake. For some reason, the anxiety returned. What could Dryden be saying? *Kill the realtor! Shut him up already!* John looked at the phone screen for a moment, then back up to Russell.

“Wait right here.”

Russell nodded. John walked past him and out through the front door, leaving it wide open.

He got back into the Cadillac. Russell looked around the room, looking for a potential weapon should this deal go south. There was a dusty wooden post leaning up against the wall. It’d work as a fine spear if it didn’t look like it weighed 150 pounds. He had a Swiss Army Knife in his pocket, which he knew was no match for whatever Inquisition these men could put him through. But Russell’s mind kept emphasizing the word *could.* He *could* leave with 5% of an $800,000 deal, or he *could* end up headless in a river.

The driver got out with John. He was frighteningly tall and lanky. He was also bald, with a head almost as shiny as his waxed Cadillac. Russell heard the trunk pop and watched as the bald man leaned down and started rooting around in the trunk. John walked back into the building, past Russell. “All good?” he asked, watching John disappear into the darkness beyond the reach of the thin cracks in the window boards where light streamed in.

The bald man slammed the trunk door shut and walked around the car, carrying a brown paper bundle wrapped in twine. He walked into the building, offering the bundle to Russell.

“What is this?” he asked, taking the bundle.

“Paid in full, with commission. Send all the paperwork to the address Mr. Dryden provided.”

“Dryden didn’t give me any…”

His phone buzzed. Russell balanced the bundle in his hand while fumbling for his phone. There was a single text from 000-000-0000:

*1581 Dearborn. Aurora, OH. 44202. PO Box 18. C/O A. Dryden*

He looked up at the driver, who was smiling.

“Usually there’s paperwork that… the uhm IRS has to…”

The man raised a hand to shoulder level, equivalent to Russell’s face.

“Mr. Dryden has made it clear that he is interested in the property. He has secured all the funds necessary, including taxes, realtor’s fees, and other such necessary expenses. It’s all in the bundle, check it if you don’t feel comfortable.”

Just from holding the bundle, Russell could tell that there was more than $800,000 inside. It was probably a million, which he would have to bring back to the office and explain to his boss, Mr. Kurtz. He could hear John pitter-pattering upstairs on the grated mezzanine. The clang rattled the entire walkway, which stretched the length of the building and surrounded the center like a courtyard. The driver asked, “So we’re good? You’ve got your money; we’ve got our building?”

Russell studied the look on the driver’s face. He was obviously a man who had seen some shit in his time that most people go their whole lives without seeing. He commanded more authority than John, and Russell felt pressured to agree. Something about the driver made him wary. He nodded slowly. “Yes,” he said. “We’re good.”

The driver nodded and walked past Russell, disappearing into the abyss. He took this as a sign to high tail it out of here.

Russell dumped the bundle in his backseat, almost compelled to buckle it up. Before he did, some part of his mind screamed at him to unwrap the bundle before driving off. For all he knew, those men could have given him 20 pounds of heroin, or a bomb. Slowly, he untied the twine. The crunch and crackle of the brown paper sent chills down his spine. He pulled the paper away and looked away, closing his eyes. Slowly, he craned his head back down and peered at the wrapping. There were two rows of five, all bundles of $100 bills, wrapped in red rubber bands with $10,000 stamped on the side. Russell began tearing down the brown paper bag, sure enough, there was 10 rows of 10 stacks. A full $1 million. He looked around before grabbing a folded blue blanket on the floor of the backseat. He draped it over the money and walked around to the front of his car, passing the Cadillac. He noticed the car had no license plates.

It was certainly a deal he hadn’t seen before. Russell was almost compelled to call the police, but those men knew his name. They knew his car, they knew *him.* He had to bring the cash back to the office and explain to Kurtz what happened. Sure, he’d just sold a piece of his hometown’s history, but that was the last thing on his mind. He could lose his realtor’s license for this, but then again, that was just something that *could* happen. Right now, he was thinking about what sort of pool his commission could buy. Hopefully something in-ground, maybe with a slide.

Russell started his car and drove slowly down the gravel driveway towards the rusted barbed wire gate, leaving Lot 649 behind.