

The Little Things

by
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The first mishap came in late April. I was on a relatively simple job, contracted by a client I'd worked for several times in the past, and I had no reason to believe it would be different than any other job. In fact, except for losing the tip of the little finger on my left hand, it wasn't. I performed as I always did – with accuracy and precision.

I didn't think much of it at the time. After all, it was only a little finger, not good for much more than socially unacceptable tasks like picking one's nose or cleaning one's ear, and just down to the first knuckle. And, although I left a copious amount of blood at the job sight, my DNA was not in anyone's database, at least not until then, so they didn't have anything to compare it with. For that matter, neither were my fingerprints in a database, nor my retinal scan; I had never been in the armed forces or the penal system, never had so much as a parking ticket. I always wore surgical gloves on a job, and I picked up the fingertip before I left, so they still didn't have my prints.

Granted, it never should have happened. After all, I'm a professional; I should have known better than to get my finger anywhere near the weapon's slide. But it wasn't on my gun hand, so it was no great loss.

Or so I thought at the time.

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I'm not married. If I were, the questions would be hard to deal with. Not just the physical part of the job, but the logistics as well. I mean, what *could* I tell her? That I'm a pharmaceutical Rep. with a territory spanning the entire planet? I guess I'd come up with something if I had to, but I doubt I'd be able to sustain it. The little things would eventually give me away. And telling the truth would complicate the relationship more than maintaining the fiction. So, long ago I decided it would be simpler if I remained single.

There's been a long string of semi-casual relationships over the years, none of them lasting more than twelve months. The work always got in the way of anything permanent. Or maybe I did; I never let anything get in the way of the work. So I kept my apartment in the East Village.

At any rate, I told the current girl, Laura, that I'd closed my finger in a car door. She bought it, until the next time.

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That next time was two months later – June, in Los Angeles.

I tried never to do any two jobs in exactly the same way, so I wouldn't

establish a pattern the police could observe. Over the years, I'd used pistols, rifles and knives. For strangulation I'd used rope, telephone cord, electric cord, pantyhose, and many other things.

And, although I never used the same weapon twice, I never tossed a weapon, either. The first thing most people in this business do is get rid of the weapon. That's the *worst* thing you can do. If you can't see a previously used weapon, you don't really know where it is. And if you don't know where it is, the police might have it. Every weapon I've ever used went into a drawer in my bureau or into my closet.

This time, although I carried a pistol, I was determined to beat the target to death. He wasn't a particularly large man, and I am, so I thought I would probably be okay.

What I didn't count on was that in his earlier years he had been featherweight boxing champ for the U. S. Army. He dug two hard rights to my body, breaking two of my ribs and forcing me to pull the pistol to finish the matter.

"You should go to the hospital," Laura said as she wrapped my ribs after I returned. "They can do more for you than I can."

"No hospital," I grunted as she pulled the bandage tight.

"What happened this time?" she asked.

I told her I fell running up a flight of stairs.

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I took a job in Bangor, Maine in mid-January. Bangor in the dead of winter isn't to be believed. The temperature often plunges to well below zero and stays there, and the wind is considerably more than a force of nature.

This time it was a thumb, again not the one on my gun hand. I could somewhat justify the accident this time; the cold had numbed my rubber-gloved hands and the driving sleet made everything unbelievably slippery – because of the rubber gloves. I picked up the thumb, so cops still wouldn't have my prints.

But they had more blood to work with now. Compare it to the blood I'd left behind when I lost the tip of my little finger, and they'd know the same individual had worked both jobs.

Although my career wasn't yet in crisis mode, I was definitely in some strange kind of slump. And I knew that before I got out of that slump I'd have to get over more than a few hurdles.

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Explaining the loss of the thumb to Laura was one of those hurdles. She wasn't an idiot. Of course, even an idiot would have some suspicions about my profession by this time.

"Another car door?" she asked as she unwrapped the bloody bandages and examined my thumb's mangled stump.

Obviously, I couldn't have gone to a hospital in Bangor; with all that blood, the local police would have checked the hospitals. So, I'd done what I could to stop

the bleeding and bandaged my hand in the bathroom of a seedy motel before flying home. My overcoat slung over my arm hid the bloody bandages in both airports, and a magazine opened in my lap worked during the flight. Still, I was lucky no one noticed.

The throbbing in my thumb had kept me awake the entire flight, so I'd had plenty of time to fabricate a response for Laura's eventual question. I hadn't come up with anything – not anything she would believe.

"Would you believe someone bit it off in a bar fight?" I said, trying to be cute. Cute I'm not.

She frowned, then pushed the stump under a stream of cold water in the kitchen sink.

"Just what is it you do for a living?" she asked as I winced from the excruciating pain. "You dress well and you're never without money. Yet you don't seem to work for months on end. When you do, it's always out of town, and you return with an injury."

"The injuries are something new," I said.

"Just since you met me?"

I thought about that as she put gauze over the stump and wrapped it with Scotch tape. It was all she had in the house.

Yes, strangely, it had been since I'd met her. I had suffered the first loss – the tip of my little finger – just after I'd met her.

Could Laura somehow be responsible for this? Could she be some sort of bad luck charm?

I have never been superstitious. I've known others in the profession to carry a rabbit's foot, cross the street to avoid a black cat, or otherwise go out of their way to keep from walking under a ladder. But I'd always thought the best way to make things work the way you want them to was to pay attention to the details. I'm sure that's why I've enjoyed a long and profitable career.

But my troubles *had* started when I met Laura. It was my turn to frown.

"You don't honestly think—" she began.

"I don't know what to think," I said. "I hadn't been hurt until I met you."

Of course, that did in the relationship. Two days later, when I tried to call her, she wasn't home. I left a message, but she never called back.

That didn't mean she was no longer interested in me – just not in the way I'd hoped.

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One night, three weeks after my breakup with Laura, I returned to my apartment from a movie to discover my telltales had been disturbed. Of course, the strand of hair across the door and frame could have been dislodged by a puff of air; it had been held in place by dried saliva. But the piece of tape low and on the outside of the door, also stretched across the gap between door and frame, could only have been broken when the door was opened. Someone had been in my apartment.

It didn't seem like anyone had opened the bureau drawer where I kept most of

my weapons, as well as my severed fingertip and thumb in a Mason jar of formaldehyde, or the closet where I kept the larger pieces of equipment. Still, I had to assume they'd seen it all.

I reset the telltales, and added a few more. For the next three months, nothing was disturbed. At the end of that time I had to take another trip.

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Denver was a new city for me. I didn't know the city's layout, so I'd have to familiarize myself with the place before I could concentrate on the job.

It's a small but beautiful city – at the end of May it is particularly so. Flowers blooming, the mountains beckoning. I decided to take a little more time than I needed and really enjoy the area.

And maybe it was because I was more in vacation mode than work mode that I became careless. I simply didn't notice the signs I ordinarily would have picked up on.

I certainly didn't see the surveillance that had been placed on me. Granted, they were good, but under normal circumstances I was better. I *should* have detected them, and aborted the job.

But I didn't.

Later, I would wonder if it was because my confidence had been shaken by the string of injuries. Or was it because of my relationship with Laura? Had she really brought me bad luck?

Of course, ultimately, it *was* because of her. She'd talked to the police after that last job, after I hinted that she'd brought me bad luck. The police had found not only the weapons in my apartment, but also the fingertip and thumb, from which they could gather DNA evidence.

So, although my downfall could be attributed to a woman scorned, it was the physical evidence that actually did me in. It was, after all, the little things.