

McHenry's Gift

By Mike MacLean

There was a knock at the door. Dillon Leary grabbed the .45 from underneath his mattress and pressed himself flat against the wall. He thumbed the safety off then racked the pistol's slide, jacking a round into the chamber. It was a big sound in the little apartment.

"Who is it?" Dillon called out.

"UPS. Got a package out here."

"Leave it."

"I need a signature, sir."

Dillon glanced through the peephole. The man outside was dressed from head-to-toe in brown. Brown shorts. Brown shirt. Brown cap. Standard issue UPS uniform. He even had one of those electronic clipboards to sign. The kind that looked like an etch-a-sketch toy but that recorded names into a vast computer database. From all appearances, the guy seemed like the real thing. But appearances could be deceiving.

Taking a deep breath, Dillon caught a whiff of the mildew and grime that permeated his little apartment. On Saturday nights the elevators smelled like vomit, the halls like piss. Dillon snuck another look out the peephole. The UPS guy stood motionless, head down, cap low over his eyes.

Screw it, thought Dillon. He held the .45 low behind his back and opened the door an inch. "Pass me the board."

The guy did as he was told, slipping the etch-a-sketch toy through the crack of the door. Dillon scrawled his name on the monitor screen and handed it back. "Take off," he said.

Shaking his head, the UPS guy disappeared down the hall. Dillon waited two and a half minutes. Then he quickly swung the door open and swept the package up from the floor. It was lighter than he thought it would be. He shook it gently. It made no noise.

Who could've sent such a thing?

Great lengths had been gone to conceal Dillon's whereabouts. His dingy little hideaway sat surrounded by government housing projects, pawnshops, and liquor stores. It was a place where people minded their business and kept their mouths shut. Dillon had grown up in a neighborhood like this. He knew how to blend in, how to disappear, becoming another face in the crowd. No one had a clue Dillon was here.

So how did the UPS find him?

As he turned the dead bolts behind him, Dillon scanned the box's surface, reading the return address. Printed clearly in the upper left hand corner was the name Wilson McHenry.

Dillon's blood went cold, chilling his veins. The box nearly slipped from his grasp.

He had just received a package from a dead man.

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Wilson McHenry didn't look like a drug runner. He was tall and thin with stooped shoulders and a salt-and-pepper beard, a little more salt these days than pepper.

Sometime in his late thirties he'd gone bald. Now at 60, he was rarely seen without his trademark black fedora. It wasn't a look many men could pull off, but it seemed to suit McHenry fine.

It was the hat that Dillon first recognized as he trudged over a hill at Cedarbrook park. He spotted McHenry on a bench facing the lake, feeding ducks from a brown paper bag. Along with the fedora, the old guy wore a pair of kakis and a tattered, tweed jacket. More like a college professor than a career criminal. Dillon took a seat next to him and stretched out his legs. The lake smelled like wet grass.

"You ever eat one of those things?" asked Dillon, nodding towards the ducks.

"Every Christmas when I was a boy," said McHenry. He pulled a handful of breadcrumbs from his bag and threw them into pond. A pair of silky green mallards plucked them from the water and quacked for more.

"What'd they taste like?"

"Like a greasy turkey. But greasy in a good way. Maybe I'll make one next holiday. You can come over and try it for yourself."

"I'd like that."

McHenry finished with the breadcrumbs, crumpled the bag, and sky-hooked it into a trash can a few feet away. There was a simple grace to his movements. McHenry was no athlete, not anymore. But he was comfortable in his skin, comfortable in his aging bones. He propped the fedora high on his head and squinted in the sun. "So why am I here?"

"Estaban sent me. He wanted us to talk."

"Estaban, huh? You on his clock now?"

Dillon went silent.

"I have to admit," said McHenry, "never saw that one coming."

"Writing's on the wall," said Dillon. "You've had a good run, Mac. Longer than anyone I know. But Estaban is a Colombian. And this is a Colombian's game."

McHenry smiled sadly. "And it's a young man's game too, is that it?"

Dillon peered out at the water. Gray clouds reflected off its glimmering surface, a bit of sunlight fighting through. "He wants thirty percent. And you have to chip in to pay off the federales. Maybe an extra five a month."

"That sound like a fair deal to you?"

Dillon shrugged. "It's what he's offering."

"And if I say no?"

"This is Estaban Gomez we're talking about. A Mexican judge said *no* to him once. They still haven't found the body."

The old man leaned back against the bench, letting out a long sigh. "You know, I was only nineteen when I started in this business. I'd fly a little Piper cub back and forth to Mexico a few times a month. It was pot back then, a little cocaine here and there. God, I was a cocky little shit. Did it more for the thrills than anything else. Now it's all about the money. Been that way for some time."

"It was always about the money, Mac. You just never noticed."

"Maybe so."

"So why not get out?" said Dillon. "You've got enough put away. And Estaban won't bother you as long as you're not competition."

"Sorry kid," said McHenry. "Not ready to give up the reins yet."

Dillon closed his eyes, listened to the ducks as they drifted away on the water. “Is that your answer then?”

“I’ll talk to the boys. Let them decide for themselves. But I’m still in it.”

Dillon stood, brushed off the seat of his jeans, and rolled the kinks out of his shoulders. He looked down at the old man, seeing his steel blue eyes, dark in the shade of the fedora’s brim. “I wish you’d change your mind.”

McHenry shook his head. “You know me better than that.”

Dillon nodded and headed back up the hill. Just as he was about to disappear over its edge, McHenry called out to him.

“Hey,” said the old man, “you still flying?”

“No. Too busy on the ground.”

“That’s a shame. You always were pretty good at the controls. Had some real talent up there.”

“It wasn’t talent,” said Dillon. “I had a good teacher.”

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Night fell and the apartment filled with gray shadows. Dillon barely noticed. He sat in a dark corner, silent and unmoving, staring at the package on his kitchen counter. He’d been sitting that way for over an hour.

When the package first arrived, Dillon almost opened it. Then he noticed the overnight sticker. The parcel had been sent within the last 24 hours, sometime after McHenry’s death. Which meant someone had sent it on the old man’s behalf, possibly someone looking for revenge. If that was the case, maybe opening the package wasn’t such a good idea. It wasn’t ticking, but that didn’t mean anything. Digital timers didn’t make noise, Dillon told himself. And neither did trip wires.

Now, sitting in the dark corner, Dillon finally willed himself to move. He went to the kitchen and pulled a Budweiser from the fridge. Taking a drink, he circled the package a few times, trying to guess what could be inside.

A small block of C-4 would do the trick, he thought. Or maybe a stick of good old-fashioned dynamite.

No, the old man wasn’t like that. McHenry saw killing as a necessary evil, but one to be avoided at all cost. Pure and simple, he didn’t like to hurt people. And he certainly didn’t have the heart to order Dillon’s death. Did he?

Dillon thought back to their last moment together. He had seen a father’s love in the old man’s eyes. Even in the end.

Setting his bottle down, Dillon found a box cutter in a cabinet over the range top. He just had to know. Carefully, he steadied the package and gripped the box cutter tightly. He was sweating and the plastic handle felt slick in his hand. Once he made his first cut, there was no going back.

He placed the blade lightly against the box top, about to slice into the tape. Then the phone rang. Dillon let out a heavy breath and went to answer it.

“Yeah?”

The voice on the other end was frantic, speaking rapid-fire English with a thick Colombian accent. “Leary, is that you? I have bad news. Very bad. *Dios mio*, you not going to believe it.”

Dillon recognized the voice instantly. It belonged to Miguel Ortiz, one of Estaban’s L.A. Lieutenants.

“Miguel, slow down,” said Dillon. “What’re you talking about?”

“It’s Senor Gomez. He’s dead.”

“What?”

“Estaban is dead,” said Miguel, this time louder. “Someone blew up his Mercedes. Right in front of that house he bought in Brentwood. You hear me Leary? You there?”

Dillon didn’t answer. In a daze, he set the phone back on the receiver and looked once again at the package.

Maybe he was wrong about Wilson McHenry. Maybe the old man was as cutthroat as Dillon himself had been.

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Dillon had put McHenry’s prize Dobermans to sleep with a pair of drugged T-bones, then scaled the south wall of the old man’s estate. The wall’s razor wire cut into Dillon’s work gloves, but left his skin unmarked. He would leave no blood at the scene, no DNA, no fingerprints.

Once inside the walls, Dillon carefully made his way across the grounds, sticking to the shadows and avoiding security cameras. He moved very slowly, very patiently. When he finally reached the main house, he saw McHenry sitting alone outside on the deck, drinking a margarita. The old man looked strange there for some reason. Dillon couldn’t put a finger on what it was. Then it occurred to him that McHenry wasn’t wearing his fedora. He looked unnatural without it, like he was missing a limb.

“You didn’t kill my dogs, did you?” asked the old man.

Dillon stepped into the glare of a flood lamp, his shadow stretching across the lawn. “They’re just napping”

“I appreciate that.” McHenry took a sip of his margarita and eyed Dillon from head to toe, pausing briefly at the .45 automatic in Dillon’s hand. “I’ve let the boys go for the evening,” he said, “so you won’t have any trouble.”

“I’m sorry about this.”

“Don’t be. In a way, I’m glad it’s you and not some punk kid. So how much is Estaban paying anyway?”

“Not enough. But I’ve got family. A sister out in Pasadena. Estaban knows where she lives.”

“I understand. And, believe it or not, I don’t hold a grudge. This is all just part of the deal.”

A cool breeze swept across the old man’s back yard, rustling leaves in the tree branches. McHenry shifted in his chair, set his drink down on the deck floor. “Hey,” he said with a smile, “you remember your first run? Down in Colombia?”

“It was Peru. Eight years ago.”

“That’s right, Peru. We landed that old twin-engine prop on some god-forsaken airfield up in the mountains. In high wind too. You were what, twenty-three, twenty-four maybe? Christ, I don’t know what scared you more, the landing or them guys waiting for us.”

“Bunch of mountain men with automatic weapons,” said Dillon, chuckling. “Almost wet my pants when I saw them. Kept seeing scenes from *Deliverance* run through my head.”

“But how did you feel after it was through?”

“Like I’d won the lottery,” said Dillon.

McHenry’s smile faded. “I miss that feeling. Miss the rush. I guess it was over for me awhile ago.”

The old man stared blankly into the night sky, not looking at anything in particular. All the life seemed to drain from his eyes. “I’ve made some arrangements,” he said.

“We’re not taking about a will, are we?”

“Estaban’s a snake, always has been. Play with a snake, sooner or later you’ll get bit. But I’m not going down alone. I’ve seen to that.”

“What’re you saying, Mac?”

McHenry faced him. For the first time, Dillon noticed the deep lines of age etched into the old man’s brow, like time had run a razor across his skin. “In this game, every move is a risk,” he said. “Everything you do has repercussions. I want you to remember that.”

Dillon nodded. “I’ll remember.”

“Good,” said McHenry. “Now let’s get this over with.”

The old man rested back in his chair and closed his eyes, as if he was about to take an afternoon nap. His face held an eerie calm.

Slowly, Dillon raised the .45 and took careful aim. Never in his life had a gun felt so heavy.

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McHenry’s boys had been busy. Within an hour, Miguel had phoned Dillon’s apartment three more times, the panic in the Colombian’s voice growing with each call. Three of Estaban’s former lieutenants were dead. One went by bomb. Two others were shot. Then the phone calls stopped all together, and Dillon began to wonder if Miguel himself had gotten hit.

Silence hung in the apartment like a poisonous gas. Walking to the fridge, Dillon dug out another beer and tilted the bottle back. Four empties sat on the kitchen counter.

What the hell was he still doing here? He should’ve taken off by now. Yet something kept him. Dillon tried to tell himself he was just biding his time, waiting for things to cool down before he made his run. But that was a lie, and he knew it. It was the package. He had to know what was inside.

Dillon took one last swig of beer then set the bottle next to its empty brothers. He grabbed hold of the package with both hands, carefully lifting it off the counter, testing its weight. It felt light. He shook it a little, hearing no hint at what was inside.

If it was a bomb, it would’ve gone off by now, thought Dillon. He picked the box cutter up and repeated the words in his head, over and over. *It would’ve gone off. It would’ve gone off. It would’ve gone off.*

Hand shaking, Dillon ran the cutter’s blade along the box top, slitting the tape wide. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes and quickly ripped open the package’s flaps.

There were no explosives, no wires, no timers. Instead, the package was filled with paper shavings cut from the *L.A. Times*. Nestled among the shavings was Wilson McHenry’s old, black fedora.

Dillon let himself breathe again. He lifted the fedora out by its brim and looked at it hard. He recalled his last conversation with McHenry—the old man sitting on the

deck, talking about ‘arrangements’ and ‘consequences’. Dillon had thought it was some sort of threat, a last ditch effort by the old man to stay alive. He should’ve known better. McHenry didn’t play that way.

So what was McHenry’s game? The answer came to Dillon as he pulled the hat on over his brow.

McHenry was tired of the business, he had said so himself. But he’d held on so long, he didn’t know how to let go anymore. He needed Dillon’s help. That was why he said he didn’t hold a grudge. McHenry wanted out, and he understood that Dillon was just protecting himself and his family.

The fedora then was a symbol. McHenry was passing the baton. By having Estaban and his men killed, he was clearing a path so Dillon could take over. Run things the way the old man would have.

Dillon couldn’t help but smile. Christ, McHenry was crazy. He wished he could see him now, have a drink together, tell a few jokes maybe. But all Dillon had left of the old man was the hat.

Tossing the empty package in the trash, Dillon smoothed out the brim of his new fedora. He wouldn’t be anyone’s muscle anymore, or a pilot running product. He was going to make something of himself, he decided. He’d make a deal with McHenry’s boys and reorganize what was left of Estaban’s crew. March right out and take control. After all, that’s what the old man would’ve wanted.

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Two of McHenry’s boys sat in a Plymouth parked under a dead street lamp, waiting. They were both big men with square jaws and shoulders cut from stone. A sawed-off shotgun rested in the passenger’s lap, out of sight below the window.

“Someone’s coming,” said the driver, nodding in the direction of the apartments across the street.

The passenger peered through the front windshield, catching sight of a figure stepping out the front entrance. “That’s him.”

“You a hundred percent?”

“Trust me, it’s him.”

“We don’t got a picture or nothing. How can you be so sure?”

The passenger pumped the shotgun. A 12-gauge slug cranked into the chamber, ready for business. “The old man left clear instructions,” said the passenger. “Told us to look for a guy wearing a funny old hat.”

A teacher of America’s youth, Mike MacLean was raised in Tempe Arizona where he lives with his wife and dogs. His work has been seen in Thrilling Detective, Plots with Guns, I Hero, Phoenix Magazine and elsewhere. When not teaching or writing, Mike studies martial arts and watches way too many violent movies. You can write Mike at maclean7@cox.net.