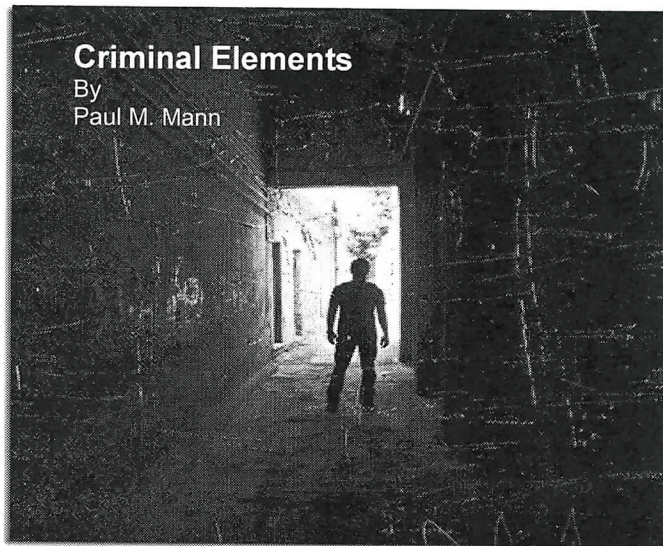




Criminal Elements

By
Paul M. Mann



It's not like I should be surprised. After all, I've always known that Mason Lee Randolph was capable of some seriously depraved shit—that's why I wanted him on my crew. But this? This is beyond depraved, and something has to be done.

"Mason? You alright over there?"

It's 'round midnight and me and Mason, well, we're parked up on a levee overlooking the Escambia River—that's in the Florida panhandle, right where the buckle is in the bible belt, just north a ways of Pensacola. The full moon's shining on the river all full of whitecaps, overflowing after days of rain from a hurricane passed through here a few nights ago, Alberto I think it was.

The lumpy red clay, soaked through and soft, swallows my boots like a vacuum, and the smell of the damp air and river water reminds me of summers way back when. We'd go camping along these very same banks, me, my kid sister Suzy, and our old man, long before the prick left us and drown his self in cheap booze and bad drugs and unsophisticated women.

So I look over at Mason and he's jumping around like a nervous hyena in front of the car. He is amped to the bones, and that sucks, because I been pulling jobs with him long enough to know it's difficult if not damn near impossible to get through to him when he's this wired.

"Mason, you need to chill son," I instruct him. "And lay off that product. We got to figure out what the fuck to do."

Well, he stomps over toward my ass something fierce, catches me off guard, jams the barrel of his nine-millimeter Glock directly into the base of my neck above my shoulder. The metal of his gun on my skin is still warm from our little adventure earlier in the evening.

He stares at me. I tell you his pupils are busting out. Fuck him. I don't budge.

"Don't ever fucking tell me what I need to do old-timer," he growls in my ear. Then he drops his hand with the gun to his side, rests his other hand gently on my shoulder, and chuckles. "That was something back there, huh Donnie?"

Before Mason knows it I grab his hand off my shoulder, jam it up behind his back real good, and pitch him for-

ward across my leg. He lands with a thud face down in the in the wet grass as I drop a knee into the small of his back and snag the gun from his hand.

Mason struggles a bit before going limp.

"Son, next time you point this at me you better pull the fucking trigger," I warn him.

"Dude, what the hell?" he whines through clenched teeth. "I's just messin' around."

"Oh yeah Mason? Me too." I jam my knee down a little harder.

"Lemme up Donnie."

"You gonna play nice?"

"Lemme up bitch, I'm getting grass in my fuckin' mouth." I can't help but let out a snicker.

"Mason? You gonna play nice?"

He's slow to answer. "Alright, alright! Now get your goddamn knee out my back."

I lift my knee from his back and stand up. Mason pushes his self off the ground and brushes at the front his formerly white tee shirt, now a lovely ball field green with accents of red clay. He gives me the hairy eyeball and I try not to laugh as he spits out tiny bits of grass. He pauses and nods at his gun in my hand.

"Ah, my piece?" he says.

Something about his eyes givin' me trouble.

I flip the gun flat on its side 'neath my hand and hold it out for Mason. He stares at it for a moment, his face contorted in a kinda frown. Hell, I can almost hear the gears grindin' in that fat head of his. He finally swipes the gun out my hand and stuffs it in his waistband.

"Go get the shit out the car," I tell him. He turns and marches toward the car like a spoilt child, but I ain't worried, he ain't going nowhere. I got the keys right here in my pocket.

Now up to this point everything about the last 8 hours is kinda blurry. I ain't had time to process nothing, it being more'n little complicated.

Thing is, I never messed around in the drug trade. Done my share of drugs, sure, who ain't, but never really been involved on the retail end. Market's just too volatile, make you paranoid, especially you be doing your own shit. You just can't trust drug dealers.

Actually, burglary's always been my crime of choice. I don't see my victims—hopefully—which means I don't need my gun in the course of my burglarin', that's just plain dumb anyway, you get caught carrying you can right there tack on ten years to your sentence no matter the circumstances, and my biggest risk is merely financial—dealing with them slimy-ass fences. But drug dealers? Uh uh. Those greedy pricks are the bottom feeders of the criminal element far as I'm concerned, save of course for your child molesters.

But ol' Mason, he has a way of sugarcoating even the bitterest pill, and he assured me this deal was an in-and-out thing, a simple exchange of money and drugs. He's jawin' about what a big score it would be, how we'd be sitting on Miami Beach drinking Mai Tai's and chasing college gals, and I bought it, plain and simple. But drug deals are never easy—you got to read the other fella, know when to zig and not zag, etcetera and all. In the end the thought of an easy score was just too great, and I joined Mason in his little venture. I gave in to a thief's worst enemy—greed—and there it is.

Funny, it all happened so fast but also kinda in slow motion. One moment we're standing around that shitty dive of a hotel room, all nervous-like, hot air rank with stale cigarette smoke and cheap beer, the next all hell is breaking loose.

Okay. Firstly, Mason told me we were doing business with two dealers. Second, he knows I don't do business with bikers, who are even less trustworthy than drug dealers, if that's possible. So what happens? Door opens. We walk in the room. What do I see? Three ol' boys from the notorious Sons of Jefferson bike gang, I shit you not. That wasn't good, not even horseshoes close to good. Worse yet, they're tweaking on their own shit.

So we're standing there in the room like a couple of rubes when Gopher—short little fireplug of a guy with ungodly bad body odor, yellow teeth, and a Confederate Flag tee shirt—done brought up the matter of money.

"You got the cash?" Weasely little prick wasn't exactly asking.

He was tweakin' hard and fidgetin' on the edge of the bed, which made me nervous as a snitch in prison. He was scratching his self like a retarded monkey and constantly getting distracted by I Love Lucy on the television.

Gopher's buddy was propped up next to the door like a wall of tattooed flesh. Lumbering knuckle-dragger musta clocked in around six-foot-seven. Name a Thor, like the Viking. He had long black hair and a weird, pasted-on grin, like the Joker, at odds with and yet strangely in sync with his demented features. He nodded toward the small backpack Mason was clutching tight to his chest.

"That it?" Thor mumbled.

"Depends," Mason shot back.

Oh, nice Mason, very nice. Depends? What the hell was he pulling? These boys definitely did not need a reason to fuck us up. Before I could talk the serious looking dude in the chair in the corner stood up. 'Til now he ain't said a word.

"The fuck you mean 'depends?'" He sounded like he had ground up glass in his throat. The other two called him Fly. He wore a black leather vest, chaps, and a blue bandana folded wide over his red hair worn low just above his eyes—like them Latino gang bangers. He was a burly sumbitch, 'roids muscular with veins thick as garden hose, prison forearms splashed with clean ink—real professional shit, not those cheap-ass prison tats you get for a can of pruno and a pack of Marlboros. He had a fire engine red goatee and blue eyes that stared right through ya. Boy reminded me of a bully who whooped on me when I was in junior high.

"Depends if you got the shit," Mason shot back.

Now, there are moments in one's life that test you and you find out toot-sweet what you're made of. Well, this was one of those times, and even though I was sure we was gonna die, I managed to keep my shit together. I believe that's the Webster's definition of grace under pressure.

Bottom line was these guys were businessmen, and after a few tense moments, Fly sat down and signaled to Gopher to go in the bathroom. He came out with a Publix grocery bag, which he set in front of me and rolled down the sides where there were a couple of bricks of packed white powder. He popped open a stiletto, reached in, carved out a chunk of crystal, and handed it to me. It smelled something awful—a good sign—and then I bent it real good and it snapped clean in two like a carrot. Definitely not bathtub ice.

I looked over at Mason, smiled, and nodded. Now just give them the money, I thought, and we can blow the fuck on out here. Mason unzipped the top of the backpack and reached in with his hand.

He looked over at Fly, and with the seriousness of a preacher on Sunday morning, said, "You guys take a check?"

Fly and the other two had puzzled expressions before Mason started laughing. Fly actually began to chuckle his self, and Gopher and Thor followed his lead. It seemed to break up some major tension, and I even started to laugh.

Fly, shaking his head and laughing, looked at Mason and said, "You are one crazy motherfucker, you know that?" Hell, got my vote.

Mason still had his hand in the backpack and was laughing. "Oh man, you think that was crazy?" He then lifted his hand out of the backpack holding his gun, pointed it at Fly's head and I'll be damned if that boy didn't pull the god-damned trigger. The corner behind Fly splashed a purplish red with bone and brain matter, and then he slumped down in his chair all natural like. Gopher and Thor must have been as shocked as me as they stayed frozen in place, their eyes wide with the knowledge that they may very well be taking their last breaths of oxygen on God's green earth.

"Fuck Mason, what are you doing?" I managed to blurt out.

Gopher was the first to move as he launched toward the bathroom where his gun must have been, but he was far too slow as Mason squeezed off two rounds and hit him square in the back, both slugs through and through with blood misting across the bullet holes in the mirror. For a moment I saw my cracked reflection and all I could think was that I was getting a little grey. Weird where your head goes in times of crisis, or when boys is getting blown away.

By this time Thor had managed to pull his head out his ass and grab his own piece, and out the corner of my eye I saw him raise the gun and I instinctively swung my arm down across his. He held on to the gun and swung it and his meaty hand straight into my chest. Knocked me back yonder about three feet with my ass flat on the floor. He leveled the gun at my head when three shots rang out—boom boom boom—hitting Thor in his chest, knocking him back against the wall and bustin' up the plaster before he slid down to the floor, crazy Joker grin and all.

Mason stood still with the smoking gun in his hand. Behind him on the television, Lucy and Ethyl made a mad dash to grab them candies off that damned conveyor belt.

Now, there was no excuse what Mason done to them boys, it was an act of the devil, pure and simple. But what really got me was that Mason failed to let me in on his bloody little plan, and that just ain't right. I may be old school, but what he done is some serious shit that I wanted no part of.

I see Mason through the mist walking back from the car holding the backpack.

"We're gonna split the cash and drugs," I say to him. "And then I don't want to see you for a while."

He looks at me, then down at the ground.

"Look at me Mason. What's the matter?"

"There's no cash. Never was. Remember that weekend I was in Vegas?"

Any doubts I had up to this point that his little rip-off thing was a spur of the moment deal quickly fly out the win-

dow.

He's really starting to fidget now. I look down at the ground because I can't bear to look at him.

"Come on Donnie. Don't be like that. Say something."

"What you want me to say Mason? You just keep fucking up. I don't think you realize how bad this is. Cops don't give a shit about bikers, but that slaughter back there's something they can't ignore. They ain't geniuses, but hell boy, my retard cousin could piece this together, and it's just a matter of time 'fore they figure it out, and I want to be as far away from you as possible when they do."

"Dumbass cops can't trace it to me," he says.

"Well I ain't even as worried about the pigs as I am about what those boys' friends are gonna do. I think you just need to take off. Here's the keys. Take the car and the drugs, I don't give a shit, just get the hell out of here."

"I thought you'd be happy Donnie? Sure, I blew the five large, but I got us the shit. We cut this up we got way more than five grand. We'll all be set for a long time."

"What do you mean by we'll all?"

"You know, you, me, Suzy. We can all take off..."

"You ain't going nowhere near Suzy partner. You don't think she tells her big brother everything? She showed me the bruises Mason. I can almost forgive you all the other shit. Not this though. Just take off."

No matter what crap went down between Suzy and me, she was still my kid sister. Mason never had no close kin and he just couldn't understand that.

"Look Donnie, I don't know what she told—"

"Shut your ass up. Now you're just being pathetic. And I changed my mind. Leave the drugs. Take the car, but leave the goddamn drugs. Now get on outta here."

I turn my back on him and look out over the water with the moon all shining on it. The river is raging something fierce. Damn I love this place. I close my eyes and let the cool mist wash over me, the water drowning out all but the sound of Mason pulling back the slide on his gun. I turn around.

"Your sister always was a whiny, lying bitch Donnie." He's pointing the gun at my chest. "That's why I needed to slap her around a bit. Never thought she'd go crying to you though, the way she was always telling me what a shit you were as a brother. And personally, I've always thought you too much of a pussy to be a good crook. Just never had that killer instinct. And you know what else I heard? That you got passed around good when you were in the joint up in Raiford. Didn't even fight back, did you Donnie?"

"Aw Mason, I had such high hopes for you. Why couldn't you just have jumped in the car and taken off? Now you've ruined everything."

I slowly raise my left hand holding the magazine to his gun as I hold up my right hand with my own piece. I fling the magazine in the river. He checks the chamber on his gun. I reach into my front pocket and pull out a lone bullet. He looks at me. Shock, recognition, surrender—you know, all them stages and what not. I let him get a good look at the bullet before I toss it at his feet.

Mason doesn't go for the bullet. He doesn't even try the gun. He drops it at his feet into the wet grass, falls to his knees, and tosses me the backpack.

I walk up to him and press the barrel of my piece

against his temple.

"Mason?" I say to him.

He looks up at me, and despite his many and numerous shortcomings, or maybe because of them, I don't pull the trigger. 'Sides, truth be known, I ain't never kilt no one and I ain't gonna start now. That's one thing Mason was right about.

Instead, I smash the butt of my gun down hard against the bridge of his nose. He falls back passed out like Otis on a Saturday night in Mayberry. I can see by the headlights he's bloody but breathing. When his ass comes to—to quote Ricky Ricardo—he's got some 'splaining to do to some very nasty folks, at which time I will be lounging in my casa in Mexico. His ass'll wish he was dead.

But that sounds like a Mason problem, not a Donnie problem.

I walk over to the edge of the levee and it starts raining. I can hear the river as it rips away at the red clay along the banks and whittles down the jagged rocks. It's like the water's cleansing me somehow...drowning out my past...absolution if you will. I kinda feel like that ol' boy in Shawshank, you know, when he drags ass out that goddamned sewer pipe.

I take one last look at Mason 'fore I toss my gun in the river. Boy's gonna have one helluva headache. Then I pick up the backpack and hop in the car.

I'm headed south. Think I'll start in Key West. Sounds like a good place get lost for a while—cheap motel, bottle of Jack, a party girl. Hell, Mason'd love that.

I guess he was right.

Damn shame he won't be there.

Yeah, real goddamn shame.