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## The Mazemakers

There was no doubt about it. The view of the gardens from the dining room stank. Not that it looked much better from any other room but his guests almost always saw it from this one. Shadows covered what few blossoms there were for most of the day even when the sun was directly overhead leaving several dozen burnt orange patches of dead leaves in the hedges to stick out as its most prominent feature. It was pretty damn embarrassing, especially for a man who had enough money to buy out the whole neighborhood and cover it in a greenhouse if he wanted to. Something had to be done about it. He picked up the phone, hit the speed dial and started counting the rings. His new secretary picked it up right after the second ring rang. Not bad, he thought. That was six times in a row she'd gotten it by two. The last secretary's personal best had been three, which was reason enough to get rid of her.

"Yes Mr. Marks?"

"Get me a landscape architect. Make that five architects. No bullshitters either. Check out their backgrounds. Top-notch schools, impeccable references, all that crap. I'll pick the best one out of the lot. Let them know they're going to have ten acres to work with and I'm thinking a maze or two would be a good idea. Something to keep the kids out of the way when I'm trying to talk to their parents."

"Very well sir. When would you like me to schedule them?"

"One a day starting next Monday morning, 8 sharp. Tell them to bring their best drawings with them too. I'm not going to waste any time waiting around for them to get back to me."

"Yes sir. Will there be anything else?"

"Yeah, find a grade school near here and sponsor a fifth grade class in the company's name. We're going to need some little lab rats to check out the mazes so I can be sure any kids I care about will be duly impressed." He hung up the phone and looked back out the window. "If this doesn't work

maybe I'll just pave the damn thing over and put up a Walmart. People sure seem to love that place."

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When Monday morning came the doorbell rang right at 8:00. Standing on the other side of it was a man who looked liked he'd missed the changing of a few generations. Wearing a faded blue headband and jeans of the same color, he had the air of a lost hippie about him. The long gray hair pulled back into a tight ponytail cemented the image.

"Don't tell me you're one of the architects," Marks said, the door still only halfway open.

The man was clearly used to provoking that kind of reaction, although most of the time it was delivered with a little more tact. "I've got a lot of little pieces of paper on my office wall that tell me I am so I must be," he said, hiding his irritation. He didn't believe in anger. "My name is Jackson Glaze. Someone said you wanted to turn your garden into the kind of place people won't forget. If you do then I'm the man you're looking for."

The beat-up old Volkswagen with faded flowers painted all over it sitting in the driveway behind him sure made some kind of statement. Marks wasn't convinced it was a very bright one though. "Come on in and show me what you've got," he said, reluctantly opening the door the rest of the way. He headed down the hall to the dining room, leaving Jackson to close the door himself. Marks was no man's doorman.

A space had already been cleared off on the dining room table and Marks motioned to it. "Lay out your drawings there. That way we can see the garden at the same time and get a better idea about how your plans will change it."

The changes turned out to be significant. The centerpiece would be a new ninety by nine hundred foot long reflecting pool flanked by a pair of mazes on each side. Sitting areas would be built on two islands, one a third of the way across the pool and another two thirds of the way. The islands would be connected to the shore and each other by crescent-shaped bridges lined with black ironwork railings. The railings themselves would be trimmed

at the height of their arches with flower boxes brimming with dark red blossoms. A second set of bridges would lead from the sides of the islands to the entrance of each maze. These too would be adorned with the blood red blossoms. All in all it was a man's garden, the kind that suited Marks.

"We might have a winner here right out of the gate. What did you have in mind for the mazes?"

"Children's mazes are my specialty. A good one will have the children walk out feeling like they've really accomplished something. It should boost their self-esteem and make them feel like they can handle anything the world throws at them. In other words, the maze should make them a success."

"What about the ones who can't find their way through it?"

"That'll never happen."

"Why not? At least one of them is going to be stupid enough to keep going around in circles."

"Sure, given a choice they might. That's why we don't give them one. These mazes have left turns, right turns, circles, double S curves, long straight runs - everything but a spot where they have to choose to go one way or the other. As long as they keep walking they'll make it out the other side."

Marks raised an eyebrow. "No choices? How's that going to make them feel successful?"

"The path will be so long they won't even notice." Marks eyebrow stayed raised. "Trust me. This is my specialty. I guarantee the kids will come out feeling better about themselves."

Marks thought about it for a second and then held out his hands. "Do you see any dirt under these fingernails?"

Jackson gave him a puzzled look and then looked at the hands. "No."

He flipped his hands palms up. "Any calluses?"

"No."

"That's right. These aren't workers hands. There's no dirt or calluses on them because I do two things, and only two things, better than most people. First, I make money. Second, and this is the one you'll be

interested in, I spend it on things worth buying. Give me the pool and one maze. If the kids come out of it feeling great then you win and I'll buy your whole package. If they come out thinking it's stupid then I'll give someone else a shot at building the other mazes and make sure your reputation takes a hit. Have my secretary hire whoever you need to get this done. How long will it take?"

"About two months, give or take a couple of days."

"Make it one month give or take nothing and I'll double your commission."

Jackson smiled. "One month it is then."

After he left Marks put in a call to his secretary. She picked it up on two rings again.

"Yes sir?"

"Re-schedule the other architects. Send them out on the first Monday of each month starting next month. Tell them mazes built for children are all I'm going to want to see. Even if Jax's maze turns out to be a flop I'm still going to keep the pool."

"It's good to hear he lived up to his reputation sir, at least partly. Will there be anything else?"

"Yeah. Set it up so that as soon as he's done we can bus those fifth graders over here on a field trip. Say it's in honor of someone famous who came from around here. You'll have to dig up a name that's suitable. And arrange for some clowns and some kid-type food. It might not be a bad idea to give the YMCA a contribution in exchange for sending over a couple of teenagers to act as activity directors too. I'm not good with kids and don't intend to learn how to be either."

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The new pool and maze were done in a month as promised and Mrs. Carpenter's fifth grade class showed up to take part in the celebration of the newly declared 'Carl Smith day', a day created to honor the local hero who had saved countless lives worldwide by inventing the white lines that ran down the middle of the road to keep traffic separated.

"Well Jax, are you ready to put your maze to the test?" Marks asked, watching the kids from the top of the first bridge. He wanted to stay well away from all of the noise the kids were making as they played on the rides he'd had brought in for the occasion.

"They'll love it. You'll see."

"I'll let you know what I see when they come out the exit."

Jax went over to Mrs. Nelson and had her gather the class together in front of the maze. He wouldn't let them go in it though until they had been properly prepared for it.

"Guys, this maze is like nothing you've ever seen before. It's got so many twists and turns in it that you might get fall-down dizzy before you get out. Stick with it though and you will get out. In fact, you'll come out right here." There were two doors, side by side, in the tall hedge wall of the maze behind him. He pointed to the one on his right. Then, pointing to the one on his left, he went on "This is the way in. We're going to give you a headstart. After a few minutes your teacher and I will follow you in. That way if someone gets lost they won't have to worry. We'll find you. Is everyone ready?"

Jimmy Rollins, who had never been known as a quiet boy, yelled 'YUP' and ran right in. Billy Weeks and Lester Zimbowski let his answer speak for them and raced in after him. The rest of the group followed, some quicker than others, until only Jackson, Mrs. Nelson and Christine were left standing at the doorway. Christine rarely kept up with the class. She was an on-the-edge kind of child - far too slow to keep up with her peers in school but not slow enough to be sent someplace else.

"Don't you want to go in?" Jackson asked.

"No."

"Christine has excellent hearing," Mrs. Nelson said. "She can come with us so she can tell us when she hears someone calling out that they're lost. That way she can help us find them. Will that be okay Christine?"

"Yes."

"Good." She moved towards the door and gently led Christine in ahead of them. "Let's stay together now. We've got to show the rest of the class how to make it through this maze."

Christine smiled up at her. "Okay."

Once everyone was inside Marks came down off the bridge and leaned against a railing near the maze's exit. He wanted to hear what the kids had to say when it was fresh on their minds. He also wanted to hear it in their own words instead of having Jackson translate their thoughts for them.

Jimmy was the first one out, as expected, quickly followed by Billy and Lester. They seemed caught off guard by their sudden emergence. "That's it?" Jimmy said, looking back and forth between the opening he'd just come out of and the one he'd gone in through twenty minutes ago. "I'll bet no one built a maze like that before because they knew it'd be pretty stupid. You can't get lost in it." He noticed Marks standing there. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"Seems to me it was just a way to trick you guys into getting a little exercise. I tell you what, since I don't like tricks like that why don't we trade your exercise in for some sitting-down-in-front-of-the-TV game time. Go get a piece of paper and write down your name and the best video game you don't have yet. I'll see that you get it. And if you don't have a game machine to play it on say so. I'll get you one of those too."

That made them happy. They ran back to the party area to find some paper to get their wishes down on. Marks had to make the same promise to each child who came out of the maze so they'd stop complaining about it. All except for Christine. She seemed amazed when she came out.

"We made it!" she shouted back to her teacher. "We really made it."

Jackson came out behind her with a big smile on his face and let Mrs. Nelson take Christine back to the group before congratulating himself. "See, I told you they'd love it."

Marks rolled his eyes. "One out of twenty-eight loved it. Make that two. You and her both seemed to come out with the same mental boost. It'll be hard for the next architect to do worse now that you've set the bar so

low." He turned and started to walk away. "Wrap up the party and show yourself out. You can be sure more people will hear your name now."

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The next architect who showed up at his front door came with a suit, tie, and air of superiority that rivaled Marks' own. It was a welcome change. "Mr. Marks," he said, giving the slight, sharp nod required from a civilized man. "My name is Dr. B.F. Bell. Your secretary said you needed a new maze for your garden."

"She was right. Did you bring me some drawings to look over?"

"Only one. That's all you'll need."

Marks took a closer look at him. "Just one? You're pretty confident in yourself aren't you."

"Confidence has nothing to do with it. Science is the key. It only deals with facts and the facts in this case point to one answer, not twelve."

"Well then, if nothing else at least you won't be wasting much of my time. Come on in and show me what your answer is."

"Not *my* answer," Bell said, "*the* answer." He walked fast enough to put himself side by side with Marks before they reached the dining room, making it clear that they were at the very least peers. The drawing he'd brought made something else quite clear too, he and Jackson had definitely gone to different schools.

"Alright," Marks said, "convince me this maze is exactly what I'm looking for."

"Easily done. You're looking for children to come out of it feeling so successful that they'll keep bragging about how smart they are to their parents, which in turn will keep you on their parents' mind as someone who knows what's he doing. Correct?"

"Almost. I don't want to see any fake success crap. The last architect thought giving the kids no choices so they couldn't possibly fail to find their way through the maze would be a surefire way to boost their self-esteem and get them bragging. That only worked for the dumbest of the bunch."

"He must have been one of those touchy-feely types. Can't stand them myself. If it takes nothing to win then the game isn't worth winning. I say make the game hard and force them to win. In this maze the children will have to make plenty of choices. They won't get more than 10 steps into it before they have to make the first one. It's right here." He pointed to a spot just inside the maze. "They'll have to decide whether to turn left or right. That makes the game hard to win. Knowing what they'll decide is how you force them to win."

"You know which way they'll go?"

"Of course - behavior is a science. Every one of them will turn right, even the left-handed ones."

"What makes you so sure?"

"That's what people do. It's such a common behavior that even the police are taught that if they lose sight of someone they're chasing then they should take the first right they come to because that's where the bad guys would go. There's a lesson in that for you. If you're being chased, take your first left once they can't see you and you'll get away. It also comes in handy at amusement parks. Go to the rides on the left side first - the lines will be a lot shorter."

Marks found himself intrigued, a behavior he immediately suspected Bell would have predicted. "Okay, show me some of the other choices they'll have to make and tell me what you think they'll do."

"The next choice comes here," he said, using his finger to trace the route they'd take through the maze. "Both paths will be short but one will climb upwards while the other drops down. They'll all take the downward path - it's easier and more fun. Then comes the aisles of scent, sweet-smelling carnations and roses on the left versus foul-smelling pitcher plants on the right. They'll all go left. It goes on and on like that. Several high steps on one side or a net they can climb on the other? They'll take the net. A long aisle near the end or a short one? They'll take the long one because it looks like an easy way to make a lot of progress. So you see, the

choices are there for them to make and brag about. They'll never know it was the animal in them and not their brain that got them through."

Marks slowly nodded. "Sounds like it might work. Go ahead and build it. You've got a month to get it done. My secretary will get whatever you need. Let's hope your science is as good as you think it is."

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Exactly one month later a school bus carrying Mrs. Carpenter's fifth grade class drove up the long driveway leading to Marks' house and stopped beside the walkway that wound around one side of it to a tent the YMCA had set up for the party. This time they were here to celebrate 'Warning Label Day'.