

**THE  
LAW OFFICE**

A NOVEL OF EXPLOITATION

**ALSO BY RON CARPOL**

*FUBAR*  
*A Novel of Deception*

# THE LAW OFFICE

A NOVEL OF EXPLOITATION

RON CARPOL



CONNOR & JAMES BOOK PUBLISHERS  
LOS ANGELES

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To Elizabeth

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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And with appreciation to those many writers for such kind blurbs and reviews that still make me wonder if they were written while sober.

Second place is for the first loser.  
—Kurt Stafford



# THE FIRST DAY

Saturday, February 15, 2003



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# 1

**12:10 P.M.**

**NO GODDAMN LAWYER EVER TOLD ME GOOD NEWS. INCLUDING** my father who got right to the point.

“Kurt,” he said, sitting across from me at an outdoor table with his three crooked law partners at Trump’s golf course in Palos Verdes. “By this coming Friday, if you don’t repay me the eighty-three thousand you stole, you’re going to be starting a ten-year stretch in Leavenworth Penitentiary.”

All the slugs of tequila that I pounded on the mountainous ride up here shot up from my stomach into my clenched jaw. I gripped both armrests and struggled to stand up. Then I raced to the bathroom and I puked up my guts.

\* \* \*

Seconds after I staggered back to the table and plopped down on the chair, my father continued with a smile, really seeming to enjoy this one-way conversation.

“And did you forget that this Friday is also the last day to file court papers against Lyman or he’ll get the entire five million whether he’s your grandfather’s bastard kid or not?”

My stomach tightened as I looked up at the clouds drifting over Catalina Island before looking back at my father and nodding. “I know.”

“So what’ve you done about it?”

The handle on the vise that gripped my insides twisted tighter. “This morning I talked to the lawyer who beat my phony rape case.”

“And?”

“And when he wanted ten grand to start I told him I was meeting you here at eleven to get a loan from you.”

Almost spitting the words, he said, “That’s funny.”

“I don’t have any money to pay the guy.”

“What’s the rape guy’s name?” Jerry-the-Jockey asked.

“Leon Nuppi.”

They all burst out laughing.

“I think I read he was disbarred or at least suspended,” Greyhound George said between choked laughter.

“Yeah,” Speedy Sam said, “for tipping off the cops on crimes that deadbeat clients admitted to in order get a better deal for richer clients.”

“So what’s wrong with that?” I asked. “Sounds like a good idea.”

“Only about a thousand ethical violations,” Greyhound George snickered. “Before paying Nuppi, you better find out if he’s got his license back.”

“Wouldn’t he be a better lawyer with no license since he could do whatever he wanted with nothing to lose?”

Greyhound George cocked his head and nodded, smiling. “Actually, yeah.”

“Now that you’re cut off at age twenty-seven,” my father challenged, “what’re you going to live on?”

“Not getting a job, that’s for sure. Last month I opened my own business selling counterfeit concert and sports tickets.”

“To who? Most tickets are sold online now.”

“Suckers standing at the end of long ticket lines.” I smiled. “They never knew they all bought the same tickets until they get to the front of the line.” I laughed. “By that time I’m already on the freeway.”

The other three also smiled, nodding with obvious admiration.

“This scheme won’t last,” came my father’s typical encouragement.

“I also sell forged autographed photos of celebrities and sports stars.”

My father’s face stayed sour. “You’d better keep plenty of ink in your counterfeit ticket printer.”

Greyhound George raised his open right palm toward my father. “Karl, wait a minute. I think you’re getting carried away with your threats.”

My body tensed. I could hardly believe this scammer stood up for me.

My father’s mouth snapped open. “What’re you talking about? He stole eighty-three grand from me!”

Greyhound George looked over at Speedy Sam and Jerry-the-Jockey. “Look. I don’t want to get into this family squabble. But if Kurt was my kid, I’d be damn proud of what he pulled off.”

“You out of your goddamn head?” my father snapped. “Proud of what?”

“All the things you’ve been telling us about Kurt for months: hiring somebody to take his college entrance exam, paying somebody to do his assignments, bribing and/or extorting teachers for passing grades, threatening the fraternity guys to vote him in.” He looked at me and nodded with his chin. “This kid’s an operator. He’d do well in our firm.”

“You in school this semester pulling the same shit?” Speedy Sam asked with a big smile.

“Sure. Why not? I want to be a lawyer like you guys.”

Staging car accidents and getting quack doctors to fake injuries in medical reports and then settling the claims with insurance companies made all four of them millionaires.

“Well, so far, you showed a lot of drive and determination,” Jerry-the-Jockey added.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah,” Speedy Sam joined in, looking squarely into my father’s eyes that were opening wider by the second in obvious surprise. “Kurt’s goal was to finish a semester of college and get into the fraternity in order to get the \$5 million inheritance. And

he did it, didn't he? What the hell else do you want from him? We do the same thing in our firm every day—try to win every case at any cost no matter what we got to do.”

My father's dentures were clicking a little, like when he gets excited. He looked at his three partners, one at a time, shaking his head before he spoke.

“If you guys are fucking with me, you succeeded. If not, you're all full of shit.”

Greyhound George raised his open palm again. “Karl, your kid showed a lot of ingenuity. I bet he pays you on time and also gets a good settlement in the wills case.”

“Yeah, well, you want to bet?” my father snapped, scowling. “I say he fails.”

“How much?” Greyhound George asked, giving us the full view of his Bugs Bunny choppers.

The other two were all smiles, too.

“I want in,” Speedy Sam said.

“Me too,” said Jerry-the-Jockey. “So Karl, what's the bet?”

“Ten grand even money says he fails.” He paused for a second for emphasis and turned toward me. “Like always.”

“Even money is bullshit,” Greyhound George answered. “Give me some odds.”

“OK, 5-1.”

“If you got such a good bet,” Jerry-the-Jockey said, “why don't you make it 10-1? Ten grand from each of us.”

“Wait a minute,” my father said. “To make a lousy thirty—which won't even last a weekend in Vegas—I got to put up nearly a third of a million dollars? You guys crazy?”

Speedy Sam looked at me. “Ever see your father pussy-out before?”

“Nope. And if I wasn't sitting here and heard it, I wouldn't believe it. He—”

“OK, OK,” my father interrupted. “The bet's on.” Then my father looked at me.

“You check your fax machine last night or this morning?”

“No. Why?”

“Your future depends on it.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I faxed you two important documents last night.”

“What are they?”

“One could get you the five million.”

“And the other?”

“It’s your ticket to Leavenworth.”

\* \* \*

After peeling out of Trumps’ parking lot, freaked-out about what I might face next Friday from both threats, I raced down the mountainous curves between shots of Don Julio when some reckless-driving bastard in a green Honda shot out of a side street, zigzagging right at me! I spun the 4Runner around, still nearly getting broadsided while the Honda fishtailed into a skid, finally stopping when the rear end slid like a hockey puck, slamming into a yellow fire hydrant.

The bright sun was in my eyes like a searchlight so I couldn’t see the runt driving the Honda too well. But the guy got out of his car, briefly checked the rear bumper, and tore-ass out of there.

Still enraged by my father’s threats, I slammed down the gas pedal and took off around another curve. A second later I swerved across the centerline, suddenly facing about a dozen orange-and-black-shirted bicycle riders who raced towards me in formation before breaking rank, steering in every direction away from me. I slowed down when my phone rang while fighting the wheel to get on the right side of the road.

A familiar-sounding, raspy voice spoke as fast if he was applying for a scholarship to an auctioneering school. “This is Greyhound George. I don’t want your father to know I’m calling.”

“What’s up?”

“Since me and the others each got a chance to win a hundred grand on the bet with your father, we want to help you win. It’s not the money, we want to kick your old man’s ass.”

“Fine with me.”

“Our lawyers conference this week is at the Ritz-Carlton in Marina del Rey. I understand about half a mile away is some restaurant called The Warehouse.”

“I know the place.”

“Meet me there at the bar tonight at seven and bring your file. We got a few ideas that might help you win.”

\*\*\*

Luckily my father forgot to cancel my AmEx card, so I got the maximum ten grand advance before I headed towards my Santa Monica apartment to get my father’s fax surprise.

The beach traffic slowed down to a crawl when my phone rang again.

It was Carmen, a simpleton from my Film Appreciation class who lived on the barter system. She traded pussy for pot.

“Can I come over later? My mother’s keeping Olivia for a few hours.”

“Sure.”

“Around eight?”

“Fine.”

“Got a few surprises for you,” she purred.

But what I didn’t know was that her surprise would make my father’s threat of ten years in Leavenworth seem like a summer vacation.

\*\*\*

Sure enough, the tray in the fax machine had two papers in it. I scanned each page quickly. Except that I couldn’t understand what the hell I was reading.

One paper was from Bank of America written in \$500-per-hour legal bullshit about the bank paying my parents for the loss. Even reading it twice between glances at the porn on the big-screen TV showing Jenna Jameson giving some lucky guy the thrill of his life, I didn’t understand what the paper meant.

The other paper was a photocopy of part of a legal article discussing DNA using words that sounded to me like voodoo.

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# 2

**2:35 P.M.**

**IN HIS EARLY 50s AND DRESSED A BROWN SUIT BY SEARS'** fashion designers, Nuppi was sitting behind the desk of his well-worn Venice office upstairs from a tarot card reader who probably gave better legal advice than him.

"Now what?" he mumbled before closing his eyes and leaning so far back in his big chair that maybe he wanted me to give him a shampoo or a facial.

I grabbed the folded faxes from my back pocket and smoothed them out before gently sailing them like a Frisbee across the desk where they landed on top of some yellow-highlighted obituary notices.

"My father sent these to me yesterday. What do they mean?"

He picked up the one that said Victim Complaint Form first and breezed through it in about five seconds.

"This says that your parents want the bank to repay them the eighty-three thousand you stole and by doing so, your parents agree to cooperate with the FBI in prosecuting you for bank fraud." He paused. "What this means without saying it is that you'll go to prison."

"You mean like Leavenworth?"

"Exactly."

"For how long?"

“Probably five or ten years. Depends on the judge. There’s a Jap judge downtown we call Hirohito Henry who usually gives white guys twenty years for anything.”

“Jesus.”

He sat up and looked into my eyes. “What’s this about?”

“My father said I forged a bunch of my mother’s checks and used her ATM card for over eighty thousand and gave me a week to repay it or I’d go to prison.”

“Can you pay the money back in a week?”

“Hell no. Eighty-three grand?”

Then he checked the other fax for about ten seconds, the DNA article.

“This is about a DNA expert. Why’d he send you this?”

I shrugged.

He read for another half minute before he looked up at me. “Author’s famous, from UCLA.” He rubbed his nose that had a drinker’s rose color tint. “You got Lyman’s lawsuit here?”

I reached for the small file that was rolled up in my other back pocket and handed it to him. He read it for about a minute before he looked up at me.

“So Lyman, your adopted cousin, claims his DNA lab matches his blood with your grandfather’s bloody Marine shirt proving he’s your grandfather’s bastard son entitled to the whole five mil and you’re just the grandson so you’re fucked. That sum it up?”

“Unfortunately, yeah.”

“So what do you say about it?”

“He’s full of shit.”

“What evidence do you have to disprove him?”

“Nothing.” I paused. “But I just know.”

He grabbed an open bottle of Coors that rested on the credenza behind his chair and choked down a couple of swigs while I tapped on the edge of his desk.

“So what do I got to do to win?”

“Simple.”

I immediately stopped playing woodpecker. “What?”

“Prove he’s not the bastard son.”

“How do I do that?”

“Show the DNA match is wrong. That their lab expert made a mistake.”

“You ever hear of their lab?”

He checked the paperwork again before shaking his head. “No. Probably just a bunch of Hindu chemists who got together since they couldn’t afford a down payment on a Subway franchise.”

I swallowed hard. “So you’re saying that I got no chance to win unless their lab is wrong?”

He nodded. “That’s about it.”

I patted my right front pocket again, making sure my ten thousand didn’t go for a walk somewhere. “How much you charge for this?”

“Ten grand to start and I’ll do it the day you pay me.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

He smiled. “Yeah. Frame Lyman for something serious like rape or child molesting to take his mind off you and onto his own problems. Maybe he’ll settle fast to get rid of you.”

Now this guy was talking like a real lawyer, the way my father’s firm practices law.

“Does Lyman know you’re going to fight him for the money?”

“No. He’s a real pussy. And dumb as shit, besides.”

\* \* \*

“This is Kurt Stafford,” I said into the DNA expert’s message machine while still in Nuppi’s parking lot that resembled an outdoor trash can. “Saw your DNA article in the law magazine. I may have a case—”

“Hang on, hang on,” came an exhausted female voice breathing rhythmically. Too old for sex, she sounded like she was on a respirator.

I quickly identified myself again.

“What kind of case?” she asked, taking measured breaths.

For the millionth time I quickly summarized the DNA problem.

“What lab did the analysis?”

“Some Hindu rug-riders. I think it’s called SALT or something like that. In San Jose. Ever hear of it?”

“Of course. And you’ll lose for sure.”

I couldn’t believe it. “Why?”

“Their lab has never been wrong.”

I patted my right front pocket. “How much you want to make sure that the other side *is* wrong?”

“What? That sounds like a bribe.”

“Not really. What I want from you is something to show the other side that they should settle the case with me or risk losing everything.”

“Mister, there’s nothing so far that you’ve said that even sounds close to reasonable.”

Fearing she was about to hang up, I blurted into the phone, “Can I at least fax you the small file and their DNA report? And of course I’ll pay you for your time.”

“I don’t want your money but OK, I’ll look at it. Fax it over. Contact information is in the article. Send me your lawyer’s contact information too.”

“And my father’s a famous lawyer. He’s got a lot of money.”

“Fine. Fax me his contact information too.”

“How much is the cost?”

“Right now, free. But the more you talk, the quicker I’m going to hang up.”

\*\*\*

Since I still had a few more hours before I had to meet Greyhound George, I decided to drive to the UCLA campus and walk in on this science bitch unannounced since I knew I could convince her to help me. Above the doorknob to her office was a welcoming sign that must’ve had me in mind:

DR. LEAH D. SAMUELS, Ph. D.  
BY APPOINTMENT ONLY  
NO EXCEPTIONS

“You have an appointment?” challenged some plain-looking

brunette about thirty sitting at a computer table facing the doorway with a mouth full of silver caps and metal bands.

I instantly hated her arrogance. "Do your braces prevent an oral sex life?"

Her face flushed crimson. She didn't answer but under a pale blue dress, her knees quickly clamped together like she was pressing a dollar bill between them.

I mimicked her charming greeting. "Dr. Samuels here? I faxed her some important documents this afternoon that she wanted."

The edge stayed in her voice. "She doesn't meet with anyone without an appointment. You really should leave now."

Pretending to ignore me, her eyes stayed glued to the monitor. But I knew how to get her attention. "My family's rich."

She didn't answer. Her only movement was to part her knees a couple of inches.

"My case that I need Dr. Samuels for, I'm getting five million dollars."

Not only did her knees part a little further but the hole in the crotch of her see-through pantyhose flashed me some beaver!

My eyes riveted on that bull's-eye.

"Five million dollars?" she asked with a smile, her greed faking instant charm.

"Yeah."

"What do you need Dr. Samuels to do for you?"

She must've liked my story because while she pretended to be interested, she kept her knees wider apart like a couple of bookends. Until Dr. Samuels showed up. Then the beaver show took an intermission.

"Who're you?" challenged this haggard-looking old lady wearing a white lab coat who was standing in the doorway leaning against the doorjamb. She looked at me like I was a thief caught in the act.

"Kurt Stafford," I answered, trying to match the receptionist's fake charm. "You told me to fax you my file and I did. And since I was at UCLA to apply for law school, I thought I'd drop in to see what you thought about my case."

With tubes in each nostril coming from a single tube connected to a breathing pump on a portable stand on wheels, the sound in the room was a constant whooshing, like ocean waves crashing on the shore. She wheeled this gadget to a chair by the door and sat down gently.

She looked at the secretary. "Rebecca, what's the matter with you? Even if he can't read the sign outside," she said, pointing to me, "I expect that you can. Why didn't you tell him to leave or call security?"

Her face got pink but she didn't answer. Instead she just looked down, closing the final curtain on the beaver show.

I figured that I had to get Dr. Samuels' attention immediately with the line that always worked. "I can get you a lot of money."

She squinted at me through blue-tinted lenses on metal-framed glasses like she was checking a bug through a microscope, obviously not falling for my dangling promise of riches.

"Do you have an appointment?" she snapped.

My eyes scanned the three windowless walls, all jammed with plaques, certificates, autographed photos and a bunch of diplomas before I looked back at her.

"You a lawyer too?"

"Yes. I don't practice but I keep my license current."

"Oh. Anyway, like I said, I can get you a lot of money."

Her lips pinched like she was sucking on a lemon but she took the bait. "How?"

"I'm inheriting five million dollars from my grandfather and my cousin is trying to cheat me out of it, claiming that he's my grandfather's bastard kid."

She stretched out her right arm with its open palm facing me like the Nazi salute. "Stop! Did you phone me within the last hour?"

"Uh, well," I stammered. "I guess I did."

"Look. To get rid of you once and for all, summarize your story in less than sixty seconds. Then I'm calling security." She took a deep breath, ran her hand through her mousy-gray hair and exhaled slowly. "So what do you want from me?"

"To prove that the DNA lab is wrong."

"And SALT did the comparison. Is that correct?"

“Yeah, whatever the hell that stands for.”

Her lined face looked pained as she held onto the edge of a table for support. “That’s the most famous DNA lab in the United States. Probably even the world. Whatever they conclude, they’re right.”

“Shit.”

She finally smiled a little. “Trying to prove SALT is wrong is impossible. You know who hires them?”

“Who?”

“The FBI, the CIA, the Department of Justice, the LA and San Francisco and Sacramento District Attorney’s Office, the State Attorney General’s Office, and probably every other state government in the United States. Oh, and Scotland Yard and Interpol too.” Her breathing became even more forceful. “Now get out or I’ll have you thrown out.”

“OK, take it easy.”

“Something else,” she said in a firm voice. “Under no circumstances are you ever to return to this office or I’ll have you arrested by LAPD.” Her eyes held mine. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah. But I don’t know why you’re so touchy?”

“Because even if I took your case, which I won’t, I don’t do personal business on campus with private parties. That’s the reason for the sign on the door.”

“OK. I understand. I apologize. I didn’t know that. But at least will you read what I faxed you?”

While Dr. Samuels glared at Rebecca, I reached into my right front pocket, pulled out the envelope with the ten grand, and slid out a handful of hundreds, fanning them in this cripple’s face.

“Can I at least pay you for today?” She didn’t answer immediately but Rebecca’s dark eyes got wider, never leaving Benny Franklin’s portraits. Then I added, “And for maybe looking at my papers if you have a chance.”

“I don’t want your money or your file.”

“Will you at least keep the file in case you change your mind? We’ll both get rich.”

“Fine. I’ll use it to start my next barbeque.”

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# 3

**A FEW MINUTES BEFORE SEVEN I WAS CARRYING AN ENVELOPE** containing another goddamn copy of the court papers as I walked up the wooden-planked entrance to The Warehouse Restaurant in Marina del Rey that looked like a movie-set version of a loading platform full of cargo crates on a dock in the South Seas.

My eyes scanned the bar where a bunch of sailboats were visible behind the huge windows facing the marina when I spotted Greyhound George seated in the corner at the end of the bar holding an olive-weighted martini and joined him.

“Heineken,” I said to the anorexic-looking blonde bartender who must’ve thought that tattoo ink would make her look even thinner.

After a fast ‘hello’ I handed him the envelope.

He put on his glasses, opened the envelope, and slid out the loose unorganized papers, trying to angle them so the slivers of light over the bar would let him see good enough to read. Then he flipped the pages over slowly.

“What’re you looking for?”

“The names of Lyman’s lawyers.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll help us decide how to blackmail them.”

I liked this guy more and more.

A split-second later he pointed to the list of four names, all Asian, on the top left corner of the first page that had the court's filing stamp on the right corner. Then in one word he summed up his thoughts.

"Shit."

"What's the matter?"

"The Chink Bridge Club."

"What?"

In one gulp he finished his mostly-empty glass and signaled to some tattoo artist's best customer for another one.

"They're the most politically-connected Asian law firm in San Francisco." He paused and looked at me. "They've also got a branch here in Newport Beach. For the last month or so, the papers have been saying that their senior partner, a guy named Welton Hong, is going to run for the State Senate and has a strong chance to win."

"So what do I care?"

"So maybe we can somehow blackmail him into quickly settling the case so his reputation and that of his law firm stays clean."

"Great. How we going to do that?"

He smiled. "Hong is always posing in the papers and on TV as a great family man, even showing off a bunch of kids and grandkids. I bet we can squeeze him from that angle."

"Great."

"And there's something that you can do to help, too."

"What?"

"Intimidate your cousin."

I used Nuppi's strategy. "Like framing him for rape or child molesting?"

He playfully punched me in the shoulder and smiled. "Exactly."

Framing people must be a required class in law school.

"What if my father finds out you're helping me?"

"I forfeit the bet and have to pay your father's losses if you win." From his inside jacket pocket he pulled out a small cell

phone and handed it to me. "This is a throwaway. Only use it to call me."

"Thanks."

"I got one too." He handed me a business card. "My number is on the back. All other phones are traceable."

I gulped the last inch of beer down as he checked his gold Cartier watch.

"Nearly seven-twenty. Got to get back to the conference. Giving a lecture at eight." His lips broke into a smile. "It's on how to avoid legal ethics problems."

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# 4

**CARMEN MOANED A LITTLE IN THE CENTER OF MY BED WITH** short, spurting breaths but always squirming away from me, not fully into what I had in mind for her: secretly making her a porn star.

Finally, when the hidden camera lens that was mounted inside a stereo speaker on the wall had her dead-on, I grabbed Carmen by the ponytail and not too gently, guided her head where it should be. The wings of a colorful tattooed dragonfly on the back of her neck seemed to flap a little to the rhythm of her head-bobbing movement, directly on target.

Seconds before I almost finished, while still gripping each of her hips, she pulled away from me, sitting up stiffly. “Not without protection. I warned you on the phone about that.”

“Don’t have any.”

She smiled with those pale brown lips and a deep dimple in her left cheek. “There’s a few in my purse.” She paused for a second and glanced around the dimly lit room. “It’s in the living room. Why don’t you get it? And while you’re up, bring me another Diet Coke, please.”

I climbed off the bed without answering.

When I got to the living room, I picked up her brown Gucci purse, probably a knock-off because of the less-than-perfect

stitching around the edges, and opened it. Pushing away her wallet and a bunch of make-up and other crap on the bottom of the purse, I located two foil-wrapped Trojans that were nearly buried under a mound of loose pot stems and seeds and crushed leaves.

Out of curiosity, I rifled through the wallet. Besides a partly-curved, twenty dollar bill that had white powder clinging to it that a fast taste-test unmistakably proved was coke, guess what else I found? Squashed between her Visa debit card and a Costco card was an American Express card; the silver one. And whose name was on it? Stephen R. Pomeranz—my fucking uncle—Lyman’s adopted father!

What the hell was going on?

I swiped her driver’s license and the American Express card, knowing I’d think of a better use for them and dumped them in the kitchen silverware drawer. Seconds later, I walked back to the bedroom.

“Here,” I said, standing next to the bed, holding the Trojans and a dripping cold bottle of Heineken in one hand and handing her a near-freezing silver and red can of Diet Coke with the other hand.

As soon as I crawled into bed she began slowly fondling me. Her voice purred, sexy and dreamy, breaking the silence in the room from the soft hum of the white ceiling fan blowing around the pot smoke in the air.

“Word around school is that you inherited millions of dollars from a relative but somebody else got the money instead. Is that true?”

I flinched at her question. “Uh, no.”

Her touch became more sensual. “So you’re getting all the money?”

“Oh yeah. Absolutely.” My breathing rate was increasing by the second.

“When?”

“Soon.”

“But I don’t understand why everybody says you lost out on it.”

"I'm telling you, I'm getting it back."

"How?" she asked softly. "You got a plan?"

"Yeah." Her hand job was now at its sensual best.

"What is it?"

"Confidential."

"You get the Trojans?"

"Yeah."

"Let's do it now," she said in a husky voice. "Put one on."

Seconds after I was ready, she plopped down on me, bending forward with our noses nearly touching, pumping up and down like a chili-peppered pile driver. It didn't feel as good as riding bareback but at least I wouldn't have to appear on *Maurry* next year for a DNA test to see if I had to support a future low-rider for the next two decades.

But little did I know that risking it on *Maurry* might've given me better odds than what this deceitful bitch would do to my future.

\* \* \*

### 11:15 P.M.

That skank was gone when I woke up alone in bed and good riddance to her. No guy could keep up with her except maybe an acrobat.

My head felt groggy. Needles and pins stuck to my brain like I had a rose bush growing in there. I was still tired but too nervous to sleep and started thinking about Carmen again. The last thing I remembered was that she forced me to wear a rubber the second time also. Where'd they go? I don't know where the first one went and the last one wasn't still on me and I couldn't find it in the bed. I guess she probably threw it down the toilet.

A fast glance around the room showed that at least she cleaned up the place a little. The ashtrays that held the tiny remains of the stubbed-out roaches were wiped clean. The beer bottles were gone too but not the empty cans of Diet Coke.

Then I noticed the Nike shoebox—the one that I kept pot

in—was gone from the top of the chest of drawers. That greedy bitch must've stolen the pot and the box too.

Since I ran out of new videotapes before Carmen came over, I used the second half of the only tape I had. The first half secretly taped me and this high school girl who came to my door a couple of years ago selling magazine subscriptions to raise money for her school trip. Wanting to see Carmen's performance, I walked over to the back wall and while removing the video camera, I jabbed a finger on a nail sticking out of the speaker box. I opened the tape door. The tape was gone. That bitch must've stolen it too.

I wanted it back. Fortunately since she was so dumb, it probably wouldn't be too hard to con her into getting it. But I had to act damn fast. Then I remembered the ten grand in my jean pocket! I grabbed my jeans off the floor and squished the front right pocket. Empty! She stole my life savings! *That thieving motherfucking cunt!*

Gasping, I stumbled back to the living room, noticing with terror the calendar behind the kitchen door with tomorrow's notation handwritten with a bold red marker. Over the date was the number 6, the number of days I had left to repay my father or face the other nearly impossible option: smuggling enough duct tape into Leavenworth to cover up my asshole for more than thirty-six hundred days.

My head kept pounding like it was ready to explode.

Again, the ugly stone fortress in the middle of flat cornfields that I pictured to be a carbon copy of Alcatraz came to mind. I tried to blot out that horrifying sight by wandering over to the front windows for a relaxing change of scenery. A tiny pie-shaped evening view of the ocean was sometimes visible by moonlight. I slid open both large windows, letting the breeze blow in through the screens. But as soon as I looked outside onto the street I gasped!

From inside the tinted windows of a dark green Honda parked under a streetlight at the curb across the street came a red, laser-type light beam shining directly on my chest!

I dropped to the floor instantly with a clunk that hurt both

knees. Then, nearly getting rug burns on my knees and both palms, in jerky motions I slid along the rug underneath the windows making damn sure to keep below the bottom window level. Straining my neck by swiveling it around to check the walls, the dancing laser dot disappeared a minute later. But I still stayed face down, glued to the rug like a pancake for what seemed like half an hour. Then I slid to the side of the windows, crouching up slowly, and sneaked a quick look outside.

Nothing outside moved at first. Then suddenly the Honda took off, but not before I spotted a fire-hydrant-yellow dent on the rear bumper. Just like the car that tried to wipe me out this afternoon. I don't know what the guy wanted from me or how he even found out where I lived. Maybe he was hiding somewhere to gun me down the first chance that he got me in the crosshairs of his scope.

A sharp pain like from a javelin pierced my right side. As fast as I could, I staggered into the bathroom gasping, feeling a sudden flash of diarrhea coming on. I carelessly bumped one knee against the cabinet under the sink and then looked up, seeing Carmen's double-underlined message on the mirror printed in curled, light-brown lipstick. Her correctly-spelled words proved at least that she went to a good kindergarten: **FUCK YOU.**

\* \* \*

While my problems roared around my brain like an out-of-control roller coaster, two loud bangs against my front door broke the silence while I was still staring at Carmen's artwork.

"Some Jap chick with a gun stopped us downstairs!" Vysell yelled as soon as I opened the door and let him and Batman in.

I gasped and slammed the door shut before I could spit out any words. "What're you talking about?"

"It's a guy," Batman insisted in a reedy voice that sounded like Bob Dylan's. "On the sidewalk."

"It was a girl," Vysell insisted.

I looked at Batman. "Which was it?"

He shook his head. "Thought it's a guy. Not sure now," he said, never stringing more than four words together in a sentence. "Hair sticking straight up. Like Rod Stewart's."

"Probably a bulldyke," Vysell offered. "Flashing your photo. Asking if we knew Kurt Stafford."

A chill ran through me. "What picture?"

"Like the ones of each active on the wall of the fraternity house dining room."

"That's when she pulled the gun?" I asked hurriedly,

"Kind of."

"Did you see a fucking gun or not?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I saw a gun butt stick out on her hip from under her shirt."

"How do you know she wasn't a cop? Working undercover?"

Both guys flinched a little before clicking eyeballs for a few uncomfortable seconds.

"Never thought of it," Batman said.

"So what'd you guys do then?"

"Somebody that lives here," Batman said. "Right then. Unlocked the front door. We ran in. Slammed it shut."

While both guys now seemed more interested in Jenna Jameson's non stop, steamy TV performance, another red laser beam shot into the room through the screens, darting from my chest to Batman's neck and then to Vysell's forehead before stopping on Jenna's claim-to-fame. Then a gunshot blasted it!

We all hit the deck like dead weight, with pain shooting up both my knees again.

"Let's get out of here!" Vysell yelled, hurriedly crawling toward the front door with me and Batman following him like Army trainees slithering under live bullets on a rifle range.

We scampered down the stairs and escaped out the side door, ducking down behind a bunch of trash dumpsters. The Honda was gone. Minute after minute passed until nearly half an hour went by. Nobody came or went from the apartments on either side of us or from across the street and barely any traffic drove by.

"She's gone," I said. "Let's check for any more damage upstairs."

\* \* \*

Broken glass from the big TV was everywhere.

“Look over there!” Batman exclaimed, pointing to the photos of Derek Jeter and Brad Pitt on the back wall, each with a bullet hole blasted through their foreheads. None of the other photos were hit.

As fast look around the apartment didn’t show any more damage.

“Should call the cops?” Vysell asked.

“Hell no! I don’t want no cops here. There’s not much damage anyway. Omar’s still a security guard at Best Buy so I can replace the TV cheap enough. And I got extra photos in the closet.”

I was so desperate for money that maybe going to Leavenworth was safer than trying to prevent this sniper from trying to kill me. Right then my cell phone rang from somewhere in the room screaming out UB40’s *Red, Red Wine*.

“Yeah,” I growled into the phone after winning the scavenger hunt, finding it between the couch cushions after five rings.

“This Kurt Stafford?”

“Yeah. Who the hell’s this?”

“Leon Nuppi, your lawyer.”

“Talk slower. The reception’s terrible. I got an awful headache. A sniper just tried to kill me! And my phone’s running out of power. Now what do you want?” I fumbled for one of the two roaches in the sand-filled ashtray on the coffee table resting on the pile of *Soldier of Fortune* magazines.

Nuppi’s voice was getting more and more excited. “Got a business deal for you. You can make a lot of easy money. Fast.”

“How fast?”

“Immediately. Probably tomorrow.”

“How much?”

“Thousands.”

I was instantly alert. Then the phone screen started fading. “Hooters on Second Street in fifteen minutes!”

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# 5

**WE GOT TO HOOTERS BEFORE NUPPI SO IT WAS TIT-CHECKING** time, trying to decide which little honey in their skin-tight orange outfits and shimmering pantyhose traded the most blowjobs to a nerd plastic surgeon for new double-Ds.

About five minutes later Nuppi came hurrying in.

“This guy, Stanley Castle, he’s in your fraternity, right?” Nuppi asked in a slightly slurred voice, immediately sliding into our booth.

“Yeah, but so what? He’s a closet faggot.”

“Not any more. He’s being arrested right now for lewd act with a minor and felony drunk driving with injuries. Serious charges. He could get ten years.”

I choked, thinking that me and Castle could be cellmates for the next decade.

“So who cares about Castle? What’re you telling me this for?”

“Castle was high on pot and booze driving around while getting a blowjob from a 16-year-old girl. He hit a speed bump and nearly got castrated by her teeth. His car plowed into a bag lady jaywalking whose injuries are bad.”

“Wow.”

“But that’s not important. This is: he was driving a nearly-new Corvette registered to him. His folks got money?”

“They’re millionaires. In the liquor business in Cleveland.”

“Jesus.”

“But who cares? Just tell me how do I make money off Castle?”

His voice picked up speed, getting more and more excited. “Get Castle to hire me and I’ll give you a third of whatever his parents pay me. A ‘finder’s fee’ is what they call it.”

I couldn’t hide my disappointment. “Shit,” I muttered, seeing money that I desperately needed being flushed down the toilet. “Castle of all people.”

His face instantly paled. “What do you mean?”

“Castle hates me. Him and his whole family think I ruined their daughter’s wedding.”

Both Batman and Vysell started laughing, obviously knowing what was coming next.

“Why?” Nuppi asked.

I laughed thinking about it. “Well, all the guys in the fraternity, we were all invited to his sister’s wedding reception at The Beverly Hills Hotel. On each table there was a throwaway camera so the guests could take pictures of each other during the evening. Afterward, somebody from the wedding party collected the cameras and they would have the film developed for the wedding scrapbook.” I started choking and laughing again.

“So what’s so funny?”

By this time, my only two friends in the world were gagging and choking with laughter.

“Well, during the stupid cake-cutting ceremony, I grabbed the camera off the table and took it into a toilet stall in the bathroom and smoked a joint. Then I got a hard-on, aimed the lens at it, clicked the shutter, and off went the flash. Then I casually walked back to the reception and set the camera back on the table and acted like nothing happened.”

“So?”

I burst out laughing at the memory of this great stunt that would probably get me into the College Fraternity Hall of Fame. “So when they developed the pictures, the whole family freaked seeing some guy with a hard-on in a photo.”

Nuppi laughed as hard as we did. “That’s funny as hell.”

“Then, when the family showed all the pictures to Castle to see who the guy was, naturally he recognized me immediately.”

“How?”

“Well, since I was drunk and high and not thinking too clear, the careless angle that I held the camera reflected the flash off the shiny toilet stall door—like a mirror—and showed me taking a picture of myself.” I started laughing again.

“You’re right. I’m sure his family doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

I faked a little enthusiasm. “Maybe I can still get Castle to hire you anyway.”

“How?”

“Bring me to the jail with you and I’ll guarantee that he hires you.”

“What’re you going to do? You’ve got to be discreet.”

“Discretion is my middle name.”

“It’s my law license you’re playing with. I want to know what you’re going to say to him.”

“I’m going to threaten him with hiring you or getting what Watson got.”

“What’s that?”

“Watson’s another idiot from the fraternity that went to jail for statutory rape for screwing a consenting 17-year-old college girl. The first night there a bunch of shaved-head gangbangers made him go down on a lot of them.”

“Scary.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I’ll get Castle scared shitless.”

Nuppi’s eyes lit up and he nodded. “Yeah. Good plan.”

“And he loves all that *Godfather* shit—winning as dishonestly as possible. I’ll promise to bribe the judge and the DA and scare the witnesses into not coming to court.”

Nuppi looked around like he wanted to make sure nobody but us heard him before he nodded with a smile getting wider by the second. “Yeah.” He stood up, still smiling. “Nine tomorrow morning at the Santa Monica jail. Don’t be late. And wear a suit and shirt and tie.”

# THE SECOND DAY

Sunday



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# 6

**8:15 A.M.**

**THIS BOTTLE BLONDE WHO LIVED DOWN THE HALL FROM ME** was about to get off the elevator with her two little brats just as I was about to get in.

“Some handsome, lumberjack-looking man like those in truck commercials on TV,” she said, nearly glowing, “he was downstairs in the parking lot shining a flashlight in your truck early this morning. I saw him when I went to the laundry room.”

Clearly on the wrong side of forty, I think her name was Minka. Staring at her spaghetti-like, stringy hair, I didn’t answer.

“He asked me about you,” she continued, with a tiny sneer on her colorless lips.

I flinched. “What’re you talking about?”

Not wanting to get my blue suit dirty, I stepped back while her two fighting brats—the shorter one didn’t look fully white—pushed each other out of the elevator and into the hallway before the little bastards changed the sport and started kicking each other.

“Like I said,” she continued, smiling slowly while looking over my shoulder at the wall as if somebody was holding cue cards up there for her to read, “he could stay overnight with me anytime.”

“What’s he wearing?”

She paused and looked over my shoulder again, waiting for the wall to help her answer. “All I remember is his seventeen-inch biceps popping out of his olive T-shirt, nearly bursting the sleeves.

“How do you know his biceps size?”

She shook her head slightly, pressing her lips together. “I can tell how many inches a guy’s got.”

“I’m five-nine,” I said. “Was he taller than me?”

She smiled. “I already told you. He was the size of a real man.” Her eyes located my crotch and she smiled faintly. “I’m sure everywhere.”

“How tall?” I snapped.

“At least six-one, six-two. And strong-looking. Not like you.”

“What’d he weigh?”

“Had about fifty pounds more muscle than you.”

I wasn’t sure if I could resist much longer from punching her out.

“How old is he?”

She closed her eyes, seeking the answer to her prayers. “About my age, early to mid-thirties. Nowhere close to forty.”

Good thing I wanted information or I would’ve laughed in her face.

“What color hair?”

“Dark and thick.”

Unfortunately this bitch sounded believable as hell. Now there was a least two killers out there looking for me: this lumberjack and the bulldyke.

I tried not to sound nervous but that was impossible. “You know what he wanted?” I babbled in a cracked voice.

The goddamn answer must’ve just flashed on the wall again as her neck bent upwards a little to look over my shoulder to read it. “No.” Then she looked right at me. “Only that he came over to me and pointed to your truck and asked if I knew you.”

“He use my name?”

Her smile got bigger, obviously realizing that I was getting more and more alarmed. “Yeah.”

“So what’d you tell him?”

“Nothing much. I just said you live down the hall from me and you’re a rude, arrogant prick.”

“Thanks for the great reference. You tell him anything else?”

“Oh yeah. That you’re the most racist person I ever met.”

“Know why he was asking about me?”

She shook her head. “No. And I don’t care.”

“Anything else about him you remember?”

Her eyes hit the wall again and got a little bigger as if she was daydreaming while her smile now seemed frozen on her lips. “Only that he was a cop.”

My stomach nearly exploded! I finally must’ve fully shown my fear because she suddenly flashed her widest motherfucking smile revealing dirty crooked teeth that probably last saw a dentist when all her body hair was the same color.

“Why’d you think he was a cop?”

“His SWAT boots. But it don’t matter what they look like,” she answered, toying with a small gold cross hanging from a thin gold chain around her neck. “I can smell cops anywhere. I was married to one for six years. He was a SWAT guy too. Wore the same boots. In fact, I’m living here partly on his pension.” Then nostalgia took over again and her eyes had a dreamy look. “Yeah, for the six years we were married, at the same time for five of them—”

Suddenly she stopped talking and stared at the swarthy-skinned kid, clearly two shades darker than the other one, before finishing the sentence.

“—for five of them, I fucked his sergeant.”

\* \* \*

Nearly doubling-up from nerves, I slowly headed the truck out of my underground garage. As I inched toward the sidewalk, a dark blue Suburban lurched ten feet from its parking place at the curb, stopping directly across the driveway blocking my exit! Right then, the electric gate was closing behind me, pinning my 4Runner across the sidewalk!

I was too scared to move; even to unlock the seatbelt and run away.

My heart was pumping like a roaring generator when I saw

this guy that perfectly fit Minka's description, even to wearing the black SWAT boots. He slowly opened his door and get out and glared at me. Definitely the cop-type even if wasn't a real cop. My right heel involuntarily started tapping the floor non-stop, almost rhythmically, like it was battery-controlled.

As if he had all day, this linebacker-size guy took slow, deliberate steps toward my fully-open driver's window that was now only about ten feet away from him. I was too nervous to close it. I just sat there motionless except for the heel-tapping as SWAT Boots approached me slow as hell while I waited to die.

He swiveled his neck around from side to side, looking up and down the empty sidewalk. A heavy rectangular gun butt stuck out of the side waistband of his jeans. But no matter what, there was nothing I could do about it. I was scared shitless and pinned in there by the seatbelt, still too terrified to unclick it and bolt out of there.

Seconds later he was standing next to the open window. He dipped his head inside and grabbed my left ear, pulling my face around toward his, almost making our noses touch. Then he let go just as quickly.

From his back pocket, he removed a white sheet of paper folded in four squares. When he unfolded it, he turned the paper over, flashing it to me for an instant, revealing a photocopy of the photo of me that hung on the dining room wall in the fraternity house. Same photo that the bulldyke showed to Batman and Vysell last night.

"You're looking for my brother," I said unevenly.

His dark eyes were expressionless. He didn't answer but at least I knew that he wasn't here to kill me or he would've done it already. Meanwhile, my left heel joined the tapping with my right heel as I sat in the car sounding like I was the percussion section of a rock band.

I tried acting as carefree as possible despite my stereo heel-tapping. Then my teeth started chattering. Finally I broke the terrifying silence in a voice that almost squeaked. "You want my brother."

His eyes tightened and his jaw clenched as he whispered in

an even voice, "I'm going to ram you and your truck into an 18-wheeler, head-on."

I almost puked but gasped instead as SWAT Boots grabbed my neck with his right hand, just above the unbuttoned collar of my white dress shirt, squeezing hard, nearly cutting off my breathing. A second later he loosened his grip a little while I gasped and choked, twisting around for more air. Then a tiny blade from a small knife appeared in his right hand. I felt powerless, like one of those spastics who're seat-belted in a computerized wheelchair. Suddenly SWAT Boots lightly slid the gleaming knife blade across the front of my throat, leaving a burning, red-lined necklace with trickling blood as a souvenir.

Rationing his words, SWAT Boots muttered, barely above a whisper, "Drop the case."

I couldn't answer even if I wanted to. My chest pounded like I got hit with a sledgehammer and my throat felt like I swallowed a bag of salty cotton balls. But then, somehow, I got bold and mumbled, "I'm calling the police for threatening to kill me."

"Do it. And I'll be out of jail before you get out of intensive care."

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# 7

**THE SANTA MONICA POLICE DEPARTMENT OVERLOOKED THE** 10-Freeway at the ass-end of an attempted art deco City Hall building on Main Street, whose lawns were trampled by the endless crowd of derelicts in search of any form of alcohol in the trash cans.

After Nuppi identified us as Castle's lawyers to a receptionist who knew him, we were buzzed into the jail with the heavy metal door sliding open to a loud, brassy clang before it slid shut behind us with an even louder metallic boom.

After walking down a winding, disinfectant-smelling hallway, and then around a couple of corners that resembled a maze, we suddenly faced the six-foot-wide, metal-barred jail door.

Inside were about a dozen losers milling around this three-sided, gray, cinderblock-walled room where the stench of body odor, piss, and puke, were barely concealed by the wretched stench of shit.

Castle, with his eyes open and looking shell-shocked like a long-held-captive POW, was seated at the end of a stone bench near the bars with his elbows leaning on his knees while his chin rested on his closed, clenched fists.

I was staring at his face, with its glazed, red-rimmed eyes and a completely hopeless expression, before he recognized me. The pocket of Castle's white Tommy Bahama shirt, with its

bright red hibiscus flowers, was ripped and there was a long tear under a pocket of his tan cargo pants. And he was only wearing white socks on his feet. Everybody else there was wearing shoes.

Then our eyes met. His dejected look changed to anger real fast. I had that effect on people.

“What the fuck are you doing here? Get out!”

I pointed to Nuppi, whose body suddenly froze when he heard Castle’s welcome greeting that I completely ignored.

“This is Mr. Nuppi,” I said matter-of-factly, “the lawyer I work with who beat my rape case. We’re here to bail you out.”

With that magic word—bail—the rest of the herd scurried up to the jail bars looking at us expectantly, like we were going to hand out a birthday cake to everybody with a hacksaw blade hidden inside of it.

Castle’s upper lip snarled defiantly. “Why you helping me?”

As Nuppi walked away, around the corner, I opened on cue with the jackpot attention-getter, changing around a little some of my father’s great dialogue from yesterday. “You’re facing ten years in San Quentin Penitentiary,” I said in a loud, clear voice like a real lawyer, inwardly shaking at the sound of the word *penitentiary*, “for getting a blowjob from a 16-year-old girl.”

Castle’s new fan club, with their sudden big wide smiles, let out hooting, cheering, screams of approval, complete with clapping, high-fives, and knee-slapping.

“But by hiring us, you’re not going to San Quentin.” My voice rose a little for dramatic effect, exactly as Nuppi directed. “Instead, you’re getting out of here right now!” Then I added even louder, “And never coming back because we guarantee to beat the case!”

Even before I finished the sentence, the gawking audience was totally silent again, hanging onto my every word, even though I didn’t know what the hell I was talking about. But so what?

Nuppi’s logic at Hooters was absolutely brilliant. “If we get paid, we win. Castle’s shit-out-of-luck anyway.”

Castle might’ve hated me but he wasn’t stupid. His always-

cocky attitude was somehow put on hold temporarily.

“How do you know I’ll get out right now and beat the case?” he asked suspiciously.

“Because the gypsy you splattered like a bug on your windshield, she won’t be around for the trial.”

His voice stayed tense. “How do you know?”

“If she doesn’t die in the hospital, which you better hope she does, we’ll get her all the way across the country on a Greyhound and threaten her with death if she returns.”

With more cheering applause from Castle’s cellmates, the corners of his lips formed a tiny smile. It was easy to see that his sadistic mind absolutely loved the idea since his mouth slowly broke into a big, toothy smile. But then, barely seconds later, his eyes got distant, obviously tuning me out, and his smile vanished, replaced with a scowl. “Yeah, so the old lady’s taken care of. But what about the girl? Is she going to disappear too?”

I had all the answers down pat, better than a carnival bark-er. “Nope. It’s not necessary. She won’t show up either since I’m threatening her parents that if she does, we’re posting your arrest report on the Internet letting the world know that she went down on you.”

These jailbirds, with their yelling, hand-clapping, and feet-stomping, absolutely roared with approval at this great plan.

Castle, with his lips pinched together nearly forming a straight line, nodded his dumb head up and down. And then like his emotions were controlled by a light switch, his eyes lit up and he broke into a big smile, no doubt loving my brilliant legal strategy.

But then, for whatever reason, Castle’s smile faded again and I could see uncertainty in his dull eyes. My patience ran out. But I needed his fee kickback or I might be handcuffed sitting next to him on a jail bus watching him get off at San Quentin while I took the full ride to Leavenworth.

“You know what to expect in San Quentin?” I snapped. Before he could answer, I answered for him. “All the gangs there—every goddamn one of them—the Mexican Mafia, the Crips, the Bloods, the Aryan Brotherhood and every single faggot

there which includes most of the guards too—you know what they're going to do to you all day, every day, for the next ten years?"

I paused as Castle took a half step backward, staring at me with his mouth halfway open. His head shook a little from side to side. "What?" he mumbled.

I took a deep breath and screamed out my worst threat, terrified that unless he hired Nuppi that I might get what I was threatening him with: "They're going to rent out your asshole to other convicts for twenty-five cents an hour!"

Castle's face flashed albino white. He tried to speak but sputtered and gasped instead; only bits of spit dribbled out of the sides of his mouth. I knew I finally got him where I wanted him. His still-pale, rigid body looked lifeless.

A second later Castle broke his silence with his glowing rating of my theatrical performance. "You're full of shit."

\* \* \*

"Keep threatening him," Nuppi said to me when I joined him for advice around the corner behind the guard booth. "Make the threats worse."

\* \* \*

*I'll ram you and your truck into an 18-wheeler head-on.* Those words from Minka's new wet dream this morning kept playing non-stop in my ears. And it was scaring the hell out of me.

Before returning to Castle, I twisted around in the corner of the jail corridor and phoned Greyhound George for advice, clueing him in fast about SWAT Boots' threats and getting sliced, the bulldyke, and maybe another sniper.

His response wasn't too encouraging.

"Shit."

"So now what?"

"We've got to take the initiative and harass Hong's family worse than what they're doing to you."

"Like what?"

He laughed. "Leaving live snakes in his daughters' apartments should get them to call their father pretty fast so he'll offer you a settlement."

\* \* \*

Facing the bars again, standing in front of what I hoped wouldn't be a jury of my peers, Castle's piercing eyes still flashed anger. Then some hard-looking guy about sixty, with tight, Marine Corps Drill Instructor eyes and a boot camp haircut that added to his military bearing, pushed Castle aside with one hand and stared down at me.

"Mister, you're good," he said with some kind of Latin accent, before he started sneezing, doing a poor job with the palm of his left hand covering his flattened nose. Wearing a worn wifebeater with a brown stain at the top that probably wasn't from a Starbucks double latte, he extended his muscular right arm through the bars and opened his right palm toward me. "Give me card."

I reached into the breast pocket of my suit coat where I stuffed a bunch of Nuppi's business cards with his name and phone number scratched out and replaced with mine just above the words Attorney at Law. I handed this guy one, figuring that if any of these jokers called me, maybe I could farm them out to another lawyer for a bigger cut than Nuppi was offering.

"What's your name?" I asked this human Mack truck, who had sandpaper cheeks and hair spouting out of his nostrils like a Boston fern.

"Che."

"How do you spell it?"

"C-h-e."

"Where you from?"

He thrust his left forearm toward me and with his right forefinger, he pointed to the tattoo of an unfamiliar flag—a white star inside a red triangle next to a few blue and white stripes. "Cuba," he said, pronouncing it *koo-buh* between sneezes.

If I didn't think this guy was for real, I'd have sworn that he was doing a great Al Pacino imitation of Tony Montana in *Scarface*.

“Why you here?” I hoped it was for robbing Tiffany’s or at least hijacking a Brinks truck.

He shrugged his hulking shoulders with deltoids that nearly touched his earlobes and smiled. “Noise. Apartments next door. Stopped it with AK.”

“An AK- 47 machine gun?”

“Yeah.” He stared at me, and between sneezes asked, “How long you lawyer?”

“Over ten years. Worked on the O.J. Simpson case with Johnnie Cochran.”

Everybody seemed impressed with that great reference. Except Castle. He started to laugh.

I walked over to him and whispered, “Shut up or I’m going to toss a tube of Vaseline in here and let the guys start on you even before you hit the jail tonight.”

I went back to Che. “You charged with murder?” I asked hopefully.

“Attempt,” he grunted. “Cops broke in, grabbed me. Stole other three guns too. Fourteen more hidden in locker.”

This character was almost too dangerous to deal with even though his story was a great example of self-help.

“How much is the bail?”

“Hundred thousand. Boss’ll put it up. What’s your amount?”

“Twenty thousand to start,” I blurted out with no idea why I came up with that amount. “Cash only. No checks.”

“Boss said OK for bail and lawyer.”

“Pretty generous.”

“Told him if he don’t, I kill his two girls when I escape.”

Christ, the longer I heard this guy talk, the more I knew he’d be perfect to get my ten grand back from Carmen.

“Call me when you got the money.”

“OK.”

“But after the twenty grand, there might be a few other things I need your help on.”

“What things?”

“Nothing too much. Maybe just talk a few people into doing the right thing for me.”

Like Carmen, the sniper, SWAT Boots, and the bulldyke for

starters. Maybe even Lyman and his lawyers too. All of a sudden I felt like *The Godfather* with Che as my new one-man army.

He nodded. "Sure."

"When can you get the money?"

"Tomorrow. Maybe tonight." He rubbed his nose again which was now rose-colored. "I'll win, right?"

"Sure. Absolutely for certain."

His jet black eyes bore holes through mine. "You better."

\* \* \*

Castle, who moved in behind Che again, was waving both hands at me like a cop directing traffic. Maybe he was finally ready to hire Nuppi.

I checked my watch before I pointed to the left end of the bars. "Over there. I want to tell you one last thing. In private. It's damn important."

"OK, OK."

I faced him again, checking the time like a train conductor. "Fee is twenty-five grand. Up front. And ten more for the bail bondsman." I looked at my watch again even though less than five seconds passed since my last time-check.

Castle didn't flinch at the price at first. He was silent for a few seconds before he challenged, "Why so much?"

And as if I had to catch a plane pretty soon, I looked at my watch again before I announced my wonderful legal strategy to Castle in a loud, firm voice. "Fifteen thousand for the lawyer. The other ten is to grease the cops and the DA and the judge and to bribe all the other witnesses. That's how I how guarantee victory."

For a couple of seconds this putrid-smelling jail cell was silent. Then the herd squeezing against the bars facing me erupted again—this time even louder—into a rousing, roaring, cheering section. I guess among convicts, besides escaping from jail, bribery was the next most respected way to beat a case.

"Right on!" said a blond kid with cornrows who was crowding next to Castle. "You're the *man*."

I suppose eating bologna sandwiches, an orange, and a cookie

forever with these new friends probably didn't seem like much fun to Castle since he only thought about the money for about half a minute.

"OK, OK."

"It's almost ten-fifteen," I answered. Then I pointed to the scratched-up, black pay phone that was on the near wall inside the cell. "Call your father collect right now and have him wire Nuppi the money. It should be here by noon and you'll be on the street within an hour. And by dinner time the whole case will be gone like a bad dream."

I peeled off an inside page from my yellow legal pad that Nuppi wrote a lot of numbers on, and as Nuppi instructed me to do, I handed it to Castle. He took the paper like it was covered with anthrax.

"What's this?"

"Tells where to send the money to. The first line of numbers is Nuppi's bank's routing number and the other was Nuppi's bank account number. Give the numbers to your father and tell him to give it to his bank. They'll know how to send a wire transfer."

"But if Nuppi doesn't get the money before noon the deal's off." I checked my watch again. "You got a less than two hours. If he don't get the money by then, you're going to the County Jail on the early afternoon bus." I paused again and smiled, loving what Nuppi told me to say that would absolutely freak Castle out. "And you know what to expect there?" I asked real friendly like.

"What?" he mumbled, with concern creeping into his voice and onto his face.

"Double header. You'll get cornholed all afternoon and then tonight you get what Watson got."

His body jerked. Probably picturing my great sperm-swallowing description, terror finally shone his eyes, replacing his shitty attitude.

"Maybe my father'll get me a cheaper-priced lawyer."

"Go ahead. Get one. But you'll never get out of here," I lied. "The arresting officer, one of the guys who's getting paid off, already wrote Nuppi's name on your file so the cops won't let

anybody else in here to see you. And by noon, you're wearing a *rat jacket*. You know what that is?"

He was tense again, with his lips pinched together, probably still thinking of how to avoid swallowing a sperm-waterfall.

"Uh, no. What is it?"

"You know what word will be rubber-stamped in big, bright red letters on the front of the manila file folder with your name on it containing all your jail paperwork that will travel with you from jail to jail to jail and then finally be there with you when you and your swollen, bloody asshole arrive chained and handcuffed on the bus at the entrance to San Quentin?"

"What?" he grunted, sounding like a frog.

"INFORMANT." I paused for effect. "Know what that means?"

"What?" he gurgled.

I paused, laughing to myself at his stiff-as-a-statue, trance-like appearance, taking in deep breaths with his wide-open mouth like he was desperately sucking up the last of the room's available oxygen.

Then I continued, sounding like an undertaker at a burial. "When they take you down to the County Jail in a few hours, you'll be put into the rat cell—for informants—since you'll be wearing a rat jacket because of the rubber-stamped word INFORMANT on the front of your jail file jacket. And then after a while you'll be taken for a shower to clean up where some gang guy will pass his gang initiation test to prove he's not an undercover cop and he'll try slit your throat since you're nothing but a fucking jailhouse snitch."

Again, his face was the color of a marshmallow. He seemed petrified and stayed that way even though it took an eternity to get him into this state. I was excited thinking that maybe this bullshit extortion scam might finally work, knowing that I could use it over and over again on other suckers.

"OK, OK, " Castle blurted out, "I'll, I'll call my father right now. I hope he'll pay you."

I twisted around, turning my back to the bars looking like I

was leaving when I heard the voice of one of the other caged losers calling out, "Lawyer! Don't leave! Please!" Then this clean-cut young kid who looked like a male model for Polo spouted off the magic words that were probably the highlight of every lawyer's wet dream—and the only thing in the world I cared about right then. "I can get you a lot of money!"

\* \* \*

"I'm Lawrence," this thin, chiseled-faced guy said, elbowing Castle back away from the bars like a Roller Derby blocker.

He had dark hair frosted on top, a deep dimple on his left cheek and probably known as Florence of Arabia in every gay bathhouse in America.

"You sue rich people for illegally kicking somebody out of where they're living?"

"Sure. I sue everybody for everything. And I guarantee to win every case."

"Great. I need money fast."

Welcome to the club, asshole.

"So tell me what happened. Why'd you get kicked out?"

"For blowing up my lover's kitchen."

"How?"

"Sealed off the kitchen door and windows with Scotch tape, turned on the oven and all the burners on the stove, let the gas escape for over an hour and then," he paused and smiled, "I reached around the corner from the hallway into the kitchen and threw a lit match in there seconds before the damn place exploded."

He laughed and I joined him, picturing some jerk Scotch-taping his own atomic bomb together.

"Yeah, you got a great case for a bad eviction. You got any money? What do you do for a living?"

"Work part time. For a free-lance mortician."

"What the fuck is that?"

"My boss, Marcus, he's known to a lot of Mexican gangs as *The UPS Man*. They call him before they kill somebody and want him to be at the scene and take the body away in his own

private limo that he had painted dark brown so nobody'd think his passenger's dead. Then we take the dead guy back to the mortuary and we cremate him."

Was I hearing this psycho right? Doubtful, but so what?

"How much money can you get me immediately?"

"I can steal some cash at the mortuary. I know where they keep it. They steal it from the pockets of dead people. And their jewelry too."

"Cash only."

"Maybe a few thousand. That OK to start with?"

This was too good to be true. "Can't you steal more?"

"Yeah, probably."

I gave him one of my doctored-up business cards and got his contact info. "Call me as soon as you've got money. We'll meet and start this case immediately."

"Thanks, man."

I checked out Castle again, who was still jabbering and cackling into the phone. He was the live fish on the line. I couldn't afford to let his deal fall through.

My forehead was sweating. Even the back of my neck felt damp to the touch. And the front of my neck still stung from that fucker's razor slice. Then to my relief my phone rang with the call I've been waiting for.

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I turned my back on these jailbirds and walked to the farthest wall away from the bars. "Dr. Samuels. Thank you for calling me back. When can I see you?"

"First of all, I don't think much of your attorney, Mr. Nuppi," she answered, breathing deeply and rhythmically with the hum of her respirator in the background. "He's lucky he's on probation from the state and didn't get disbarred. And for that matter, I don't think much of you."

I was too shocked to answer.

"And something else. Your father. He's worse than your lawyer and you combined."

"He's rich. That makes us good people."

It sounded like she laughed. “And worse than anything, if that’s possible,” she continued with no enthusiasm at all in her voice, “I don’t think much of your case.” Now the background noise from her side of the phone picked up again, sounding like pounding surf. “I read the whole file. And did some independent checking.”

“So? I got money.”

“I don’t want to touch this case.” She sounded happy to tell me this. “Especially after making some phone calls,” she said in a nearly-humming voice before she paused like she needed to catch her breath.

“Who’d you call?” I asked, trying to keep her on the line.

“SALT, for one,” she said, not trying to hide her hostility. “The lab that did the DNA test. They absolutely guaranteed me that the young man’s blood is as close to an absolute 99% DNA match with the blood on the Marine shirt. So that’s it.”

“But it’s not a 100% match,” I whined.

“Ninety-nine is as high as a match gets. And this is it.”

“Wait! No matter what anybody says,” I blurted out before she could hang up on me, “there’s got to be a major problem with the DNA.”

She couldn’t hold back her laughter, which came in little spurts and picked up speed. “So what’s the problem?” she asked, sounding like an elementary school principal talking to a disobedient kindergarten student.

Hurriedly I explained, “At least three people—a bulldyke, some sniper, and a guy with SWAT boots—”

She burst out laughing. “You sound like a writer for *Saturday Night Live*.”

“I’m serious. SWAT Boots sliced a ring around my neck.” That got her.

“What?”

“You want me to come over now and show it to you?” I offered. “Guy said he was going to ram my truck into an 18-wheeler head-on.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really. Then he said, ‘drop the case.’”

“That’s it?”

“There’s more. The sniper blasted my TV with a sniper rifle from somewhere across the street.”

“What?”

“Yeah. And two more shots crashed into the wall next to me.” She was silent. “They even had a photo of me and were showing it to my neighbors.”

“You got proof?”

At least I got her attention. “If Lyman’s got such a near 100% case against me, why does he need people to threaten to kill me if I fight him?”

She was silent for a few seconds. “What’re the names of these people you claim did this to you?”

“How the hell do I know?”

“Any clues?”

“No. All I know is what I told you. Except the SWAT Boots guy drives a dark blue Suburban and the bulldyke drives a green Honda with a yellow dent in the rear bumper.”

“That’s all?”

I was getting impatient. “None of them volunteered their names.”

“Don’t be sarcastic,” she snapped.

“OK. I’m sorry. But I know I’m telling you the truth. Wait a minute. Something else. The bulldyke in the Honda, she tried to run me off the road when I drove back down the hill from Palos Verdes yesterday after that meeting with my father. Almost ran me into a herd of bike riders and over the side of the mountain.”

“Got the license number of either car?”

“No. But I’ll get them soon. Especially the Suburban.”

“How?”

“I’ll keep looking behind me when I’m driving.”

“I’ll tell you what,” she said, exhaling heavily, “if you can get me identifying information on the people or the cars, I’ll look into it. Otherwise, it’s good-bye right now. Permanently.”

“But —”

Sickened by her rotten attitude, I stumbled back to my captive audience. Castle was still jabbering for his life on the phone while Florence was waiting for me.

“Please don’t forget about me,” he pleaded.

“Don’t worry.”

I looked around at the rest of the fish in the tank and nodded at the blond guy with cornrows, wearing the inevitable red, white, and blue Tommy Hilfiger tank top and matching baggy shorts that hung from the bottom of his balls nearly to his ankles. Red and black Air Jordan’s covered his feet. Like what I’ve seen Castle wear.

I looked at shoeless Castle again. He was still babbling away on the phone with his free hand making choppy, jerky movements, this time even more animated like he was conducting a goddamn orchestra.

“You got to pay him!” he cried into the phone.

This audience of past and future felons were loving Castle’s little pussy performance, all laughing like they were watching a great stand-up comedian.

“Please, please,” Castle pleaded, sounding absolutely hysterical, the pitch of his voice rising with almost each word. “I got to get out of here before they take to the County Jail this afternoon. They’ll kill me there thinking I’m an informant. ... Then take the goddamn money out of my trust fund, OK? ... So then advance it now and I’ll repay you when I’m twenty-two. I’ll put it in writing!”

Seconds later he twisted around, snuck a quick look at me with disgust on his snarling lips, and then turned back away from me again so I couldn’t hear any more of his whimpering, sniveling, one-way conversation.

Castle’s problem was nothing compared to another problem that I couldn’t get out of my mind: getting the stolen money back from Carmen immediately. And the video. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that the girl in it was selling magazine subscriptions to pay for her senior prom for the *next* year. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen when I filmed us. Maybe even fifteen if she was a good student and skipped any

grades. If the cops could find her, this would be a statutory rape case that would stick. Shit! Then I thought of the eighty-three grand I had to raise in six days to repay my father.

Finally Castle slammed down the phone receiver on the silver hook making a loud, ringing clang, surprisingly not breaking the phone. All eyes in the cell turned to him.

He looked over at me with fire in his eyes. "Money'll be wired to Nuppi's bank before noon, you cocksucker. And you better deliver what you promised."

Relief flooded my body. My voice was casual, matter-of-fact. "Don't worry. We will."

Wow! Just like that! My cut was a little over eighty-three hundred! Not bad for a couple of hours worth of con man work like a real lawyer.

I addressed these morons again. "You guys, everybody come here." I grabbed a bunch of cards from my pocket and started passing them out. "Here's my get-out-of-jail card. Like you see me doing here, I get results."

"I'll call you, man," Cornrows said, taking my card with his right hand that had the letters FSU tattooed on the back of it. "You're the slickest talking lawyer I ever heard."

"What're you charged with?"

"Burglary. I break into apartment houses in the daytime. It's only second degree if I'm caught."

"Smart."

"How much you want to start?" he asked, scratching his ass.

I had absolutely no idea how much to quote him or even what his case was about. "Listen, this is what to do: immediately pull more crimes and hock the rest of your stolen shit. When you've got ten grand, or at least five-cash only-call me. We'll meet immediately and get started."

"Cool. You'll hear from me before dinnertime."

"Fine."

"My crime partner also needs a lawyer. Can I bring him along too?"

"Sure, but tell him to bring cash too."

"Same amount as me?"

“Yeah.” Instinctively, I looked over at Che, who must’ve been listening to me and Cornrows.

“Soon I’m out. Boss wants family alive.”

I shivered as I scribbled his contact info on the yellow pad.

I was surprised that Castle stayed quiet while I was talking to the other guys. I motioned over to him. “Come here.”

As he faced me, breathing his rancid breath in my face between the bars, I whispered, “You better not bad-mouth me to anybody here or we’ll undo the bail and you’ll stay here. And I’ll know if you did if the rest of the guys don’t greet me like a conquering hero when we come back to get you out.”

Then I nodded toward the Cuban hulk, Florence of Arabia, and Cornrows. “Especially them.”

“OK, OK,” Castle answered in a sing-song voice. “Just get me out of here. Please. And hurry.” Then he proved it was my last threat that worked as he correctly used the jailhouse lingo: “I don’t want to wear a rat jacket.”