

PAUL LEVINE

ILLEGAL

A NOVEL



Illegal

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ONE

Judge Rollins drew a handgun from beneath his black robes, pointed the snub-nosed barrel at Jimmy Payne's chest, and said, "Who you pimping for, you low-life shyster?"

Payne gaped at the revolver.

This cannot be happening.

The judge gestured toward the stacks of hundred-dollar bills on his desk. "C'mon, Payne. You're not smart enough to dream this up on your own."

They faced each other in the judge's chambers, a tranquil refuge of leatherbound books and walnut wainscoting. Payne felt his knees wobble. "I swear, Judge. I just represent the defendant, Ramon Carollo."

"Not like you to defend human traffickers. I remember the hell you raised when those wetbacks got barbecued in a trailer truck."

"I like to call them 'undocumented aliens.' "

"Why? They from Mars?"

The judge vaulted out of his high-backed chair. Quick for a big man. Silver hair swept straight back, like feathers on a snow goose. Shoulders as wide as a bookcase.

"Take off your clothes, Payne."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I swear I'm not wearing a wire. You can pat me down."

"Strip!"

Payne wasn't sure he could. His joints seemed rusted shut.

"Now!"

With jerky motions, Payne kicked off his shoes, unhooked his belt, and dropped his trousers.

"You bring me nine stacks of hundred-dollar bills, fifty to a stack." Judge Rollins motioned toward the open briefcase on his desk and did the math in his head. "Forty-five thousand dollars."

"That's the offer," Payne agreed.

"Odd amount. Like it was supposed to be fifty thousand, but some half-assed bag man skimming five off the top."

"No, sir." Payne lowered his tie and slipped out of his shirt. "Forty-five is all I've got to spend."

"No sale, shitbird."

"I thought it was worth a shot, Your Honor. But let's just forget the whole thing. I'll put my pants on and—"

"Drop those undershorts, too." The judge waved the gun like a king with a scepter.

Payne pulled down his red-and-white boxers with the Los Angeles Clippers logo. He preferred them to the Lakers purple-and-gold shorts, not for the colors, but because he favored underdogs.

"Now turn around and spread your cheeks."

"No way, Judge."

"Do it!"

At thirty-seven, Payne was in good shape. Flat stomach, decent chest, a sinewy runner's body. He spun around and bent over. "Like I said, Your Honor, no wire."

Judge Rollins gazed off. "I don't know whether to shoot you or arrest you."

Jimmy straightened and turned around. "Just let me go, Judge. There's a lot of good I can do out there."

"Out where? You're Jimmy Payne. Royal Payne. You cut corners. You represent undesirables. You piss people off."

"Honestly, Judge. I'm gonna change my life."

"People don't change, Payne. They just get old and die. Sometimes, they don't even get old."

Payne stepped sideways toward a set of shelves decorated with framed vanity photos. Judge Rollins with Mayor Villaraigosa, Senator Boxer, some local bigwigs, and a pretty young woman in a pink sash, the Rose Bowl queen, maybe. Alongside the photos, the scales of justice. Bronze. Heavily tilted heavily to one side. One more step and Payne could grab the scales by the blindfolded lady and take a swing at the judge.

"Freeze, sleazebag." Rollins pulled back the hammer of the .38. As the *click* echoed in his brain, Payne thought of his son, Adam. Ten years old. Loved baseball. Cheeseburgers. Surfing. A boy needs his father.

Just how the hell did I get into this?

TWO

One hour before he stood, naked and terrified, in the chambers of the Honorable Walter Rollins. Jimmy Payne stood, clothed and angry, glaring at a wooden pin some sixty feet away.

The five-pin.

Payne hated the five-pin nearly as much as he hated Cullen Quinn, his ex-wife's fiancé. And there the damn thing stood—the pin, not Quinn—smack in the middle of the lane, taunting him. For most bowlers, the five was the easiest spare, but for Payne, the ten-pin—that loner at the right edge of the lane—was the gimme. The trick, he knew, was not being afraid of dropping into the gutter.

Payne's second ball whooshed past the five and *thwomped* harmlessly into the pit, leaving the pin standing.

Damn. Even Barack Obama could have made that spare.

So could Payne's son. He thought about taking Adam bowling this weekend. His eleven birthday was coming up, and the boy already threw a decent little hook.

Payne checked the counter behind the ball rack. The stranger still stood there, watching him. He had shown up around the third frame, sipping coffee from a Styrofoam cup. Blue shirt, striped tie, thickly knotted, cheap tan suit that needed pressing. Hair that might have been blond once, now turned the yellowish brown of a nicotine stain. A gum chewer, with jaw muscles dancing; a face of angles and planes; a cold stare. A cop? Homicide, maybe.

Not a problem. Payne hadn't killed anyone. He hadn't even represented a murderer in a couple years. Bar brawlers, check bouncers, hookers from the Sepulveda Corridor. He could really use a good murder trial right now. Or a personal injury case with fractures to weight-bearing bones. Even a nasty divorce would do. Lacking any decent cases, bowling alone on a weekday morning provided a break from bill collectors and anger management classes.

Payne hoisted his Hammer Road Hawg from the ball return and settled into his stance. Sensing movement, he glanced over his shoulder. Wrinkled Suit was headed his way. Payne considered challenging the guy to three games at ten bucks a pin.

"Morning, J. Atticus Payne."

Keeping the ball at hip level, Payne turned to face the man. "Jimmy. Jimmy Payne."

"Your Bar card says 'J. Atticus.' "

"My parents were hoping I'd grow up to be Gregory Peck."

"Nah. They named you 'James Andrew.' You changed it. Not legally, of course. Just made it up and put it on your driver's license, which also says you're six feet tall, when you're really five-eleven. You make up a lot of shit."

Grinning now, *Gotcha*. Like he was Sherlock Fucking Holmes.

"Some people think Atticus fits," Payne said, thinking of his ex-wife, Sharon.

"*What slimeball you gonna walk today, Atticus?*"

That was before she started calling him "the respondent." When Sharon divorced him, her bill particulars included his reputation for sleazy behavior.

"Respondent has engaged in a pattern of professional activity that is a source of embarrassment to Petitioner, a police officer."

If he'd been different, Payne wondered, if he'd made more money and been more respectable, he'd lunched at the California Club instead of Hooters, would Sharon still be his wife?

Nah, that wasn't the issue.

"*You weren't here for me when I needed you, Jimmy.*"

"Why do you lie so much?" Wrinkled Suit asked.

Payne shrugged. "I'm a lawyer."

"You rolled a baby split in the third frame. The three-ten. Very makeable. But you hit the 'Reset' button, erased the score, and bowled again."

"That a crime?"

"What kind of guy cheats when he's bowling alone?"

"Maybe a guy who wants a second chance."

"To do what? Tell a client to flee the jurisdiction?"

"Who the hell are you?" The man reached into his jacket pocket and flipped open a vinyl wallet with an L.A.P.D. badge and photo I.D.

Payne read aloud. " 'Detective Eugene Rigney. Public Integrity Unit.' Kinda wussy, isn't it? Not a cop, mean, compared to Robbery Homicide. Or SWAT."

He turned toward the pins and took his four-step approach. A high back swing, a wrist-snapping release, a fluid follow-through. The ball skidded on the oil, dug in, and hooked hard left into the pocket. A big mix, the clatter of rolling logs. The skinny neck of the six-pin kissed the ten, pushing it over like a wobbly drunk.

Strike! Take that, Mr. Public Integrity.

Rigney didn't look impressed. "You gotta do something for me, Payne."

"What?"

"Bribe a judge." The cop looked at his watch. "And you've got one hour to do it."

THREE

Payne plopped his Road Hawg into its zippered bag. "I'm out of here, Rigney. Go bribe the judge yourself."

"Do you have a client named Molly Kraft?" the cop asked.

Payne stopped in mid-zip.

Molly Kraft. Oh, shit.

"Child custody," Payne said. "Her husband molested their daughter."

"You never proved it."

"The husband's lawyer had a better shrink."

"So you told Molly Kraft to take off with her daughter in violation of a court order."

Rigney pulled a little cop notebook from his suit pocket. He read aloud in a monotone that could put a jury to sleep. It was all true. Payne had bought airline tickets for Molly Kraft and her daughter and sent them off to Puerto Vallarta to keep the girl away from her abusive father. Bored by endless sunshine and numbed by rivers of sangria, Molly sneaked back across the border four days ago, and got arrested in San Ysidro.

"She flipped on you, pal," Rigney said.

Shit. Is it any wonder I hate my clients?

"Molly Kraft's gonna testify to the Grand Jury right after lunch. Once she does, I can't stop the indictment."

"And now you can?"

Rigney didn't answer, letting Payne sweat. Smart.

Payne liked people who were good at their jobs. Perjurers. Pickpockets. Pain-in-the-ass cops.

Several seconds passed. There was only one other bowler in the place, way down at lane thirty-two, the falling pins echoing like distant thunder.

"Do you know Judge Walter Rollins?" Rigney said at last.

"Van Nuys Division. Didn't make partner at one of the downtown firms, so they bought him a seat on the bench."

"That's it?"

"Rollins is condescending to lawyers, bullies his staff, and sucks up to the appellate court. He also doesn't like anyone smarter than him. Which means he has very few friends."

Then there was the business with the car. Payne remembered a day when he was stopped at a traffic light on Lankershim near the In-N-Out Burger. He'd looked over—looked down, actually—from his perch in his Lexus SUV, and there was Judge Rollins, glaring up at him from his Mini Cooper. As if thinking:

"Payne, you asshole. You don't deserve that fine machine with its G.P.S. whispering directions in your ear like a thousand-dollar hooker."

Truth was, Payne leased the Lexus to impress his clients, especially car thieves.

"Rollins is dirty," Rigney said, then told Payne about Operation Court Sweep. A sting operation. Joint task force of L.A.P.D. and the feds, which Payne figured would have cops shooting one another in the dicks off.

"I don't have a case in front of Rollins," Payne said, "so if you're looking for someone to set him up—"

"We've got the case."

"Forget it. I'm not a snitch."

"Your choice, Payne. But know this: By tonight, either you or Walter Rollins will be behind bars."

FOUR

Jimmy drove west on Ventura Boulevard, speaking to his ex-wife on the cell. "Sharon, do you know a dickwad named Eugene Rigney?"

"Public Integrity," she answered. "Corruption cases."

"That's him. Can I trust him?"

"Rigney's a hard-ass who lies under oath to get convictions. What are you up to?"

"A little this, a little that. Mostly bribery."

"I'm serious, Atticus."

"Me, too. How's Adam doing with his math?"

"Jimmy, don't do that! I asked you a question. How are you mixed up with Rigney?"

"Late for a hearing. Gotta go. I'll pick up Adam early for baseball Saturday."

"Jimmy, dammit!"

He clicked off and slowed at the intersection of Beverly Glen. On the seat next to him was a cheap briefcase containing fifty thousand dollars in cash.

"Strike that, Madame Court Reporter. Forty-five thousand."

At the traffic light at Coldwater Canyon, he'd grabbed one of the stacks of bills and slid it under the floor mat in the backseat. If Judge Rollins would roll over for fifty thousand, why not forty-five?

And don't I deserve something for bringing down a dirty judge?

The sting was a mousetrap intended to snap the necks of corrupt judges. Offer cash to reduce bail or dismiss the indictment or, slimiest of all, give up the name of an informant so the defendant could have him killed. So any guilt Payne felt at being a snitch was lessened by the knowledge that Judge Walter Rollins, if he fell for it, was willing to be an accessory to murder.

Our legal system is incompetent and corrupt, Payne thought. A time-wasting, money-sucking three-ring circus of lazy judges, brain-dead juries, and officious clerks in courthouses where there's not enough parking or decent places to eat lunch.

"Why'd you have to make it a human trafficking case?" Payne had asked Rigney.

"What difference does it make?"

"I repped those Mexicans in the tractor-trailer case."

"I know all about it. You got held in contempt. Ethics charges. Anger management. The whole nine yards."

"So would it make sense that I'd represent a guy who doesn't give a shit if the migrants live or die?"

Rigney shrugged. "What do you care? Another case, another peso."

Jeez, how depressing.

If the legal system were a frozen pond, Payne walked too far on ice too thin. Wearing combat boots and stomping his feet. In the tractor-trailer case, the ice broke. Traffickers brought three dozen Mexicans through a tunnel from Tijuana to Otay Mesa in San Diego County. As soon as the migrants popped out of the ground like bleary-eyed gophers, armed *vaquetóns*—street thugs working for the coyotes—jammed the new arrivals into a trailer truck. The Mexicans were headed for a slaughterhouse in Arizona, where they had been promised jobs pulling intestines out of dead cows and ripping their hides off with pliers. Where the migrants came from, this was considered cushy work.

The driver, an American who would be paid \$6,000 for the run, stopped in El Centro in the California desert to visit his girlfriend in her air-conditioned trailer, conveniently stocked with ice-cold beer and a queen-size bed. Afraid that the migrants would scatter if he let them out, he kept the

locked in the back. The sun, perched high in the August sky, blazed orange as a branding iron. The metal truck became a convection oven. No one heard the migrants' screams or their prayers to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Tongues swelled. Arms flailed. Limbs locked in spasms. The stricken watched long-departed relatives float by in the darkness. As the hours passed, bowels exploded like mortar shells. Mouths frothed, eyes bulged, brains melted. Eleven people died.

The government promised permanent residency to the survivors if they would testify against the coyotes and the driver. Trial was had, convictions obtained, miscreants jailed. By then, pale new faces manned the desks of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Office. Tough regulations were enacted, lest any *campesinos* from Chihuahua were working for Osama bin Laden on the sly. Even though the survivors had kept their end of the bargain, a tailored suit from Washington yanked their papers and scheduled them for deportation.

"Government fraud, deception, and outright lies!" Payne told the press. "Mafia hit men get better treatment."

Payne subpoenaed a dozen skinny-tied government types. Not just I.C.E. officials. Mayors. State senators. Governors' aides. Demanded to know who cut their grass, washed their cars, changed the kids' diapers. Proved the hypocrisy of the entire system, or so he thought.

"Mr. Payne, you will refrain from this line of questioning."

"Why, Judge? Because a Honduran woman cleans your toilets?"

"That's enough, Mr. Payne!"

But it wasn't. Payne turned to the table of government lawyers, cleared his throat, and belted out a passable rendition of Tom Russell's "Who's Gonna Build Your Wall?"

Who's gonna cook your Mexican food,

When your Mexican maid is gone?

The judge banged his gavel and shouted, "You're in contempt, buster!"

Forty-eight hours in a holding cell. And a \$5,000 fine.

On the brighter side, Payne won the case. Unwilling to risk any more toxic publicity, I.C.E. reversed its decision. Payne's clients got permanent residency.

Now, driving along Ventura Boulevard to the courthouse, Payne planned the rest of his day. Hit the gym, grab some lunch, pick up Adam for a game of pitch-and-catch. But first, there was a judge to bribe.

The day was already steaming. The sidewalk cafés, with their forlorn potted palms, were deserted, except for the Coffee Beans, Starbucks, and Peet's, where wannabe screenwriters pounded their laptops, dreams of Oscar statuettes, A-list parties, and Malibu mansions warping their brains.

It was a short drive to Van Nuys, Payne's favorite venue for justice to be miscarried. The Lexipol spoke then, the pleasant but distant female voice instructing him to *"Turn right in two hundred yards on Van Nuys Boulevard."* She didn't bother to thank him for the five grand under her floor mat.

Payne followed instructions and headed for the courthouse, thinking this wasn't so bad. He was a decent enough liar. He'd get out of the heat, do his civic duty, and pocket five grand. What could go wrong?

FIVE

"You think I'm stupid?" Judge Rollins aimed the gun a few inches north of Payne's shrinking testicles. "Your wife's a cop."

"Ex-wife."

"I remember. She shot you."

"An accident," Payne said. "She was aiming at my client."

"That how you got the scar on your leg?" Gesturing toward a ridge of purple tissue on Payne's bare thigh.

"No." Payne reflexively touched the spot. Beneath his fingertips, fastened to his femur, was a metal plate and five locking screws. "Got the scars in a crash on the P.C.H."

"Jesus, Payne. Bad luck sticks to you like flies on shit." A fuzzy thought came to the judge, and he squinted like a sailor peering through the fog. "What I don't get, is why you think I'd tank a case."

"Not tank it, Your Honor. Just give me the identity of the C.I."

"That's even worse!" The judge was reddening, his tone growing angry. "I give up a confidential informant, your client will have him killed."

I messed it all up, Payne thought. Career. Marriage. Life.

I can't even bribe a crooked judge.

Payne's hands trembled, his fingers jerking like piano keys. He made a vow.

If I get out of this, I really will change.

"Your Honor. I gotta tell you the truth about what I'm doing here."

Judge Rollins waved the gun toward the stacks of hundred-dollar bills. "The money speaks for itself."

"That's the thing, Judge. Ramon Carollo—"

"Is scum. And so's Pedro Martinez. Fuck 'em both."

"Who?"

"Pedro Martinez, for Christ's sake. The C.I. I signed the warrants. I oughta know."

Payne wasn't sure he heard correctly. "You just gave me the informant's name."

"You paid for it, didn't you?" The judge lifted his robes and slipped the .38 back into its shoulder holster. He swept the stacks of currency into a desk drawer like a croupier cleaning up chips. "Sorry I scared you. But with the Grand Jury running wild, I take precautions."

Payne moved robotically. One leg, and then the other, into his boxers. He had trouble believing what had just happened. He was going home, and the judge was going to jail.

"Martinez has a house on the beach in Rosarito, just south of the border," the judge said. "Plus a condo in La Jolla. He shouldn't be hard for your people to find."

My people, Payne thought, will be busting down your door and putting you in handcuffs. He finished dressing in silence and made for the door.

"Take care of yourself, Payne," the judge called after him. "And next time, make it the full fifty thousand."

An hour after fleeing the courthouse, Payne's hands were still shaking. Either that, or a 5'10" trembler had rocked the Chimney Sweep, a windowless tavern squeezed between a Lebanese restaurant and a discount dentist in a Sherman Oaks strip mall. Payne wrapped a hand around the leaded base of his glass, trying to steady it, but the Jack Daniel's swirled between the ice cubes like molten lava through porous rocks.

"Good work, Payne," Rigney had told him on the phone, minutes earlier.

A pimp high-fiving a hooker, Payne thought, cheerlessly.

"I knew you'd make a great bag man." Rigney's laugh jangled like steel handcuffs.

Bag man.

In Payne's mind, other names floated to the surface, like corpses after a shipwreck.

Snitch.

Rat.

Shyster.

If word got out, no client would ever trust him. And word *always* got out. Gossip was the coin of the realm in the kingdom of justice.

He drained the sour-mash whiskey, slipped a small vinyl folder from inside his coat pocket, and removed a business card,

J. ATTICUS PAYNE, ESQUIRE

Rigney had nailed it. Not even the name was real.

Payne bummed a pack of matches from the bartender, set the card on fire, watched it disintegrate into ashes drifting into a bowl of peanuts. No ashtrays. You had to cross into Mexico to smoke legally these days. He lit a second card, stared into the orange flames. Why not burn them all?

The only other patron at the bar was a TV writer who had been unemployed since they canceled *Gilligan's Island*. Camped on his stool as if he had a long-term lease, the guy's faded T-shirt read "*Say It Loud. Say It Plowed.*"

Payne hoisted his glass, saluted the fellow, and took a long pull. The liquid gold delivered warmth without solace. He struck another match. Immolated another card, inhaled the acrid smoke, let the flame burn until it singed his fingertips.

Two hundred miles southeast of the tavern where Payne planned to drink the day far into the night, just outside a cantina in Mexicali, Mexico, a wiry twelve-year-old boy named Agustino Perdomo stood with his mother as city traffic clattered past. The boy had caramel skin and hair so black and thick that women on the street grabbed it by the handful and cooed like quail. Tino's eyes, though, were a startling green. A teacher once said he reminded her of *verde y negro*, a local dessert of mint ice cream topped with chocolate sauce. Boys at school started calling him "*verde y negro*" with a light smacking nastiness. It took a flurry of fists and a couple bloody noses to convince the boys that he was not a sweet confection.

Marisol, the boy's mother, was sometimes mistaken for his older sister. The same smile, the same hair with the sheen of black velvet. But the boy did not inherit his light, bright eyes from her. So above wide cheekbones, her eyes were the color of hot tar.

Glancing from side to side as if someone might be spying on them, Marisol handed her son the business card. He ran a finger across the embossed lettering and read aloud, "*J. Atticus Payne*"

Esquire. Van Nuys, California."

~~"That is Los Angeles. Mr. Payne is a very important man. One of the biggest lawyers in the city.~~

"So?"

"Put the card in your shoe, Tino."

The shoes were new—Reeboks—purchased that morning for the crossing.

"Why, *Mami*?"

"If anything bad happens and I am not there, go see Mr. Payne. Tell him that you are a friend of Fernando Rodriguez."

"But I am not his friend. I don't even like the *cabrón*."

His mother raised an eyebrow, her way of demanding: "*Do as I say.*" The stern look would carry more weight, Tino thought, if she weren't the prettiest woman in Caborca.

He was used to men complimenting his mother on her adorable son. He knew it was their way to get close to her, smiling wicked smiles, panting like overheated dogs.

"Fernando Rodriguez sits on a stool at La Faena, drinking tequila and bragging about things I has never done," Tino said.

"And what were you doing at La Faena, little boy?"

"¡*Mami!*"

Why did she have to baby him? Maybe that's how it is when you're an only child, and you have no father to toughen you up, often at the end of a leather strap.

Tino decided not to tell his mother that the barman at La Faena was teaching him to mix drinks and that blindfolded he could already identify several tequilas, both reposados and añejos. They were going to try some *blancos* next week, but then, Tino's life changed in an instant. What his mother called "*nuestro problema.*"

Our problem.

Even though he caused the problem. It all happened yesterday, as quick as the chisel that drew the blood. Then, last night, they packed everything they could carry and ran for the bus, traveling north from Caborca to Mexicali.

As for Fernando Rodriguez, he was a *campesino* with bad teeth who returned from *El Norte* driving a shiny blue Dodge Ram with spinning wheel covers. Rodriguez claimed he bought the truck almost new, in Arizona, after working a year in a dog-food processing plant. Tino was sure the *cabrón* stole the Dodge, along with the ostrich-skin cowboy boots he liked to park on a table at the cantina.

Rodriguez boasted of one other thing that happened to be true. He did not die when he was crammed into the back of a sixteen-wheeler with thirty-five other *mojados* who crossed the border two summers earlier.

Tino could remember every detail, as Rodriguez told the story nearly every evening. The truck had stopped somewhere in the California desert, baking in the sun. The people tried to claw their way out of the locked metal doors, leaving patches of scorched skin and trails of blood. Rodriguez swore that he saw a woman's hair burst into flame. No one at the cantina believed that, but one thing was certain: Eleven Mexicans died inside that truck.

Still, Tino could not understand why Rodriguez would be acquainted with one of the most important lawyers in Los Angeles, or why he'd returned to Mexico, passing out the business cards of such an *abogado brillante*.

"When we get inside," his mother told him now, "if the coyote asks why we must cross over tonight, say nothing."

"Ay, *Mami*. I know what to do."

"I will do the talking. You will be quiet."

He let out a long sigh, like air from a balloon. No use arguing with his mother. No way to make

her understand that he was the man of the house. Now he wondered if his actions back home—criminal, yet honorable—were somehow intended to prove his manhood to his mother.

Marisol turned toward the street. An army jeep snaked through traffic, a soldier manning a .50 caliber machine gun. The drug wars, which were only stories on television in Caborca, were very real here. Yesterday, a local police station had been attacked with grenades and rocket launchers. When they had arrived after midnight, the army was sealing off the bus station.

Now Marisol placed an arm around her son's shoulders. "Let's go, Tino. Let's get out of this godforsaken country."

SEVEN

Marisol had never met the coyote, but she recognized him immediately.

Shiny, tight black pants, tucked into pointy boots. Wraparound reflecting sunglasses and black felt *Tejano* hat, he looked like a low-life gambler at a cockfight. His black shirt with pearl-colored buttons was open halfway to his waist, and a heavy gold crucifix dangled in front of his hairy chest. His face was pitted with acne scars shaped like tiny fishhooks.

The man called himself "*El Tigre*," although this tiger had a paunch pouring over his turquoise belt buckle. At the moment, he was using his fingers to dig into a platter of deep-fried anchovies.

When he saw Marisol and Tino approach, *El Tigre* wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. The other hand was wrapped around a bottle of Tecate. Nodding, he said, "Do you have the money?"

"We have two thousand, three hundred dollars cash," she answered, taking a seat. "All my savings."

He took a swig of the beer. "Not enough. It is three thousand dollars each. And no discount for the little one."

Tino bristled and started to speak, but his mother kicked him under the table.

"We will pay you the rest when we cross over and can borrow the money from my aunt," she said.

El Tigre's mouth creased into a smile, displaying an array of gold-lined teeth that had taken on a greenish hue, as if covered with algae. "Your aunt? Why does everyone have an aunt in *El Norte*? I bet she's a rich woman with a mansion in Phoenix."

"A nice house in Torrance, California. My uncle owns a gasoline station there."

Marisol was weaving her story out of threads plucked from the air. True, she had an aunt, a miserly woman who had married an American and refused to return to Mexico, even for her sister's funeral. The last Marisol knew, her aunt lived in Torrance, where she managed a trailer park. But that was ten years ago, and Marisol had no idea where the old crow lived now.

Marisol did not like to lie. Her father taught her the value of honesty and hard work, and she tried to live up to his standards. As a young girl in Hermosillo, how proud she had been of him. In his crisp, clean jumpsuit with the Ford Motor Company logo, he looked . . . well, like an *Americano*. Proud, too, when he told her how he had refused an Anglo supervisor's request to falsify inspection records on Lincoln Continentals.

"I told him I'll rot in hell before I lie to the company!" her father thundered.

Soon after that, the supervisor arranged for Edgardo Perez to be fired. Her father, Marisol knew, was a courageous and honorable man. And, ultimately, a tragic one.

"*Sometimes, Papi, it is all right to lie.*"

"I promise I will pay you," she told the fat and sweaty coyote. "I swear on my father's grave." Neglecting to mention that her nonbelieving father never attended church and the only time Edgardo visited Mexico City, he spat curses in front of Catedral Metropolitana. On the other hand, Marisol's mother attended Mass every morning. It made for interesting discussions over dinner. Marisol's beliefs fell somewhere between the two. She knew her Bible but was not blind to the failings of the Church. She sensed a spirit greater than her own and prayed it would protect Tino and her. Especially now.

"I do not give credit," *El Tigre* said. "But maybe we can work something out."

He placed a plump hand on Marisol's bare arm. She wore a short-sleeve white peasant blouse with two buttons undone. The pig was studying the rise and fall of her breasts. Nothing new. Marisol was used to men pawing her on job sites. She had learned to accept this fact of life. Only when the

abuse became intolerable—a hand slipped down her pants—did she retaliate. Her father had taught her how to throw a punch with a turn of the hips and a straight, quick arm. In her experience construction sites, a balpeen hammer worked even better.

"Why the rush to leave Mexico?" El Tigre asked.

"Family matters." Keeping it vague.

"I cross tonight and come back tomorrow. Why not stay here a few days, and we can get to know each other better."

"We go when we want!" Tino piped up.

El Tigre scowled. "You go when I say."

"Maybe we cross by ourselves," Tino shot back.

"Tino, quiet," his mother ordered.

"Mami, I could build a raft, and we could float up the New River."

El Tigre burped a beer-and-anchovy laugh. "The river is full of shit, and so are you, *chico*."

Marisol winced but did not reply. There were times to kick a man in the kneecap and times to appeal to a slightly higher region. She softened her look and let her eyes water. "Your charges are so high."

El Tigre launched into a defense of his prices. He had expenses. Lookouts and guides and vehicles and drivers. Stash houses on both sides of the border. Bribes to the *judicales* and the *federales*. Protection money to the *mafia de los coyotes* because he was a freelancer. Then there were the risks.

"¡Pinche rinche por todas partes!"

Fucking cops everywhere.

Marisol did not appreciate the profanity in front of her son, but for now she must try to get along with this foul and repulsive man.

"If you get caught, they just send you back," El Tigre said. "But for me, it's prison. Or I get shot by bandits. Or vigilantes. The Minutemen. Patriot Patrol. All those *gabachos* with guns. And now, the U.S. Army. The Border Patrol knows what they're doing. But the soldiers! Scared kids who think we're all drug runners."

"Instead of the humanitarians you are," Marisol said, evenly.

He did not catch the sarcasm, rambling on, boasting of his knowledge of the Border Patrol's motion detectors and TV cameras, infrared binoculars, and drone aircraft. How *La Migra* had beefed up patrols. Ford Expeditions, like always. But now on horseback, too, with Indian trackers from Arizona. *Vaqueros y indios*. Cowboys and Indians. Just like in the movies.

"If the wind is right, the Indians can smell your burlap sacks a mile away," he claimed. "You need someone who knows what they're doing. I don't lose people in the mountains or leave them to die in the desert."

Marisol leaned over the table, exposing even more décolletage, showing the line where the dark, sun-burnished skin gave way to the softness of her crème de cacao complexion. She put a wistful note in her voice. "But if you are going tonight, and have room for two more, I promise to pay you later."

El Tigre wiped beads of sweat from his forehead, then drained the rest of his beer. He seemed to be weighing the options, using his limited brains and his even more limited morals.

"I won't disappoint you," she said, spicing her words like chiles in hot sauce.

He took a pen out of a shirt pocket and scribbled an address on a paper napkin. "The stash house. We leave at midnight. Bring the money you have. We will work out the rest."

He smiled a gold-capped grin, the contented look of a wolf contemplating a lamb.

EIGHT

Sleep. Dammit. Sleep!

Maybe it was the oysters, Payne thought.

From the Chimney Sweep, Payne had moved to the Oyster House, a neighborhood saloon in Studio City.

Dinner alone.

Sitting at the bar. A dozen oysters, a spicy cioppino stew, two Sam Adams drafts, and the complimentary peach schnapps the regulars receive.

Payne would have liked to have shared dinner with a woman. But who?

Maybe Carol, a former client who loved shopping at Saks on Wilshire, but skipping the inconvenience of paying. Was she out of jail yet?

Or Polly, a kosher caterer in Brentwood who specialized in festive circumcision brunches. Her business, Prelude to a Bris, was booming.

Or that woman who owned the cat condo in Rancho Cucamonga. Hair in a tabby-colored shade, big hoop earrings. Jeez, what was her name? Well, if he couldn't remember, it must not have gone too well. And now that he thought about it, hadn't Cat Lady had a funky smell?

What about Sharon?

Her scent was warm and sweet. A fresh peach from the tree. And they always had great sex, though it tapered off after she'd shot him. Not that he wasn't willing, once the anesthesia wore off.

Sharon had been aiming her nine millimeter at Lester Koenigsberg when she winged Payne. Unhappy with Payne's handling of his divorce case, Koenigsberg was holding a knife to his lawyer's neck, threatening to slice his jugular. Hardly the reaction Payne expected after disproving Mr. Koenigsberg's allegations that Lester had a violent temper.

Payne was semi-grateful to Sharon for saving his life. But why a detective in Consumer Fraud who even needed a gun was beyond him.

He listened to the paddle fan turn, *clickety-clacking*.

C'mon, sleep!

He adjusted the pillow under his gimpy knee. Ever since the crash on the P.C.H., the leg wouldn't straighten completely.

Sleep, dammit, sleep!

The bed was just too damn big when you're alone. A cruise ship with one passenger.

The house was a one-story, two-bedroom California bungalow with a small porch devoid of furniture. The faded green stucco could use a fresh coat of paint. The dreary 1950s kitchen smelled of mildew, the low-pitched roof leaking during winter rains. The perfect home for the unhappily divorced man.

Payne flicked on the night-table lamp, made from a bowling pin, and stared straight into Sharon's face. An eight-by-ten glossy, taken on Mammoth Mountain. A ski trip, the background a heaven of powdery snow. Sharon's cheeks pink from the cold, Adam bundled in a parka.

Smiling. Laughing.

Old times. Good times. Short times.

Oak bookshelves lined one wall. Scott Turow and George V. Higgins. Crime stories well told. Payne didn't like those courtroom novels where the lawyers were heroes. Too unrealistic.

No, it wasn't the oysters. Or the lonely bed. Or the choking memories. The day was still with him, and all the days before that. A ton of crap had floated down the stream since the crash and the divorce.

C'mon, think happy thoughts.

~~Adam playing baseball. The worst part of the divorce was spending nights without his son. At least Sharon was decent about it. He could see Adam practically anytime he wanted.~~

Payne gave up on sleep, grabbed the TV remote, and turned on Channel 56, home of *Twilight Zone* and *Hawaii Five-O*. Payne loved the classic shows, even though he wasn't born when they first aired.

The TV flickered on, and there was a young James Garner with an even younger Tom Selleck in *The Rockford Files*. Selleck was Lance White, the perfect detective, solving cases without breaking a sweat, pissing off Rockford, who usually got beaten up and tossed into jail, before turning crud into gold. Payne identified with the Rockford character, except his crud always turned into more crud.

At a commercial, Payne flicked to one of the movie channels. *The Big Lebowski* was just coming on, great opening scene, a tumbleweed at the mercy of the wind, blowing from the desert into Los Angeles. The *shit happens* philosophy of life. Who could argue?

He'd seen the movie the first time with Sharon, who didn't share his enthusiasm for a wacky story about a stoned slacker. Sharon was both a good cop and a dogooding cop, someone who believed the words carved in the granite of the courthouses.

Equal Justice Under Law

Yeah, spend an hour with Judge Rollins, and try singing that tune.

Payne vowed he wouldn't flip to Channel 9. Cullen Quinn's late-night show would be on. He'd been railing about the Mexican border and encouraging the yahoos to shoot all illegals on sight. It wasn't just Quinn's politics that upset Payne. The broad-shouldered, blow-dried bastard was recently engaged to Sharon and had given her a rock so humongous it would make Paris Hilton blush. To Sharon's credit, she seldom wore the engagement ring, explaining that a cop's jewelry shouldn't be worth more than her car.

Payne kept his promise for a full twenty seconds before flipping to the Satan of the Airwaves.

"We're going the way of the Roman Empire." Quinn leaned toward the camera, his silvery blond hair frozen in place. "The Romans opened the gates and the Goths came storming in. With no respect for Roman culture or language or customs, the Goths burned Rome to the ground."

Quinn paused and lifted his chin, as if daring his viewers to take a poke at him. "Did you see those Mexican protesters in the streets? 'Open the borders!' And those weren't the Stars and Stripes they were waving. Those were Mex-i-can flags."

"Mex-i-can" sounding vile, the way you might say "roach infested."

"¡La Reconquista!" Quinn boomed in his broadcaster's baritone. "That's what the illegals want. To reconquer *their* land. And we're handing it right back to them. Welfare and schooling, all paid for by *you*, my friends. Their children bring lice and bedbugs into our schools. Our hospitals and prisons overflow with illegals, infected with hepatitis, TB, and chingas."

Chingas, Payne thought. A new one on him.

The big mug seemed to have put on weight. His neck bulged out of his shirt collar. His crooked nose, product of a Golden Gloves fight, actually looked good on him. Made him less of a Ken doll. The son of a Philadelphia butcher, Quinn was a lifelong pal of Sharon's oldest brother, Rory. Both boys had hung out at the Police Athletic League gym, where they would beat each other senseless in the ring. Quinn went on to Villanova and claimed to have fought classmate Howie Long to a draw in club boxing. Long became a collegiate heavyweight champion and, later, a member of the pro football Hall of Fame. Quinn became the mouth that roared on Los Angeles radio and television.

Payne watched as Quinn gestured with a meaty hand.

"And still the wetbacks pour in, thousands every day. Millions on the way. The barbarians are inside our gates, my friends, and our walls are tumbling down. And who's benefiting from this

invasion? The big growers like Simeon Rutledge, owner of Rutledge Ranch and Farms. When was
Washington crack down on—"

Payne hit the "Mute" button and studied Quinn. With his face tinted orange by makeup, he looked like a scowling pumpkin. He wore a gray Italian suit so finely tailored it disguised the fact that he was beginning to resemble a whale. His designer shirt seemed to be silk, in that trendy off-purple all the rage for the next fifteen minutes or so.

Every night, the same rant. Like being stuck at a dinner party next to a guy complaining about his hemorrhoids.

Just what does Sharon see in this bozo, anyway?

But then, what did she see in me?

Earlier today, Payne told Judge Rollins he was going to change. Of course, a man will say a lot of crazy stuff when he's staring into the barrel of a gun. Had he meant it?

Sure, but just how do I do it?

Payne's eyes grew heavy. With the fog settling in, his mind sorted through a variety of possible weekend plans.

Take the hydrofoil to Catalina.

Bring along Heidi Klum.

Reread the Travis McGee paperback that began: "There are no one hundred percent heroes."

The ringing telephone jarred Payne. He fumbled for the handset.

"Yeah?"

"You stupid shit. You asshole. You total fuck-up."

Payne was fairly certain it wasn't a wrong number. "Judge?"

"I knew you were a sleaze," Walter Rollins said. "But I didn't know you were a rat."

"Judge, I'm sorry, but—"

"Shut up!"

"C'mon, Judge. You're the one who took the bribe."

"I said, shut up! I don't have much time."

Over the phone, Payne heard the judge's doorbell ringing.

"I felt sorry for you, Payne. Everybody did, after that lousy luck you had. But stuff happens. People deal with it."

"I don't want to talk about—"

"Just 'cause your life's shit doesn't mean you have to drag everyone else down the sewer."

Again, the doorbell, the chimes as insistent as machine-gun fire. In the background, Payne heard a man shout, "Police! We have a warrant!"

"Judge, calm down. The state's gonna offer you a deal. You're the first one busted. That puts you in a great position. I'll bet if you resign the bench and cooperate, you could avoid prison—"

"Bullshit. It's over for me."

"The state doesn't want to try the case. They want to work something out."

Payne waited but there was no reply.

"Judge . . . ?"

A thunderclap. The unmistakable sound of a gunshot. Then the soft thud of a body hitting the floor.

Where is that sack of greasy onions, that sorry excuse for a man who calls himself the Tiger?

Marisol looked out through the broken window, one hand on Tino's shoulder. She would not let the boy out of her sight until they were in the United States. Her worst fear was separation, some horrific event that would pry them apart.

It was after midnight. Of course, El Tigre was late. She supposed it was too much to ask that he display a solid work ethic. Punctuality. Attention to detail. Basic competence. Like Americans.

The thought made her smile. She was beginning to think like her father.

She sat, cross-legged, in an adobe mud house that smelled of raw sewage. The stash house was located in a grim neighborhood of shacks with corrugated metal roofs. Outside, naked children played tag deep into the night. Undernourished dogs rooted in garbage cans, and chickens pecked at the dirt ground.

The street was unpaved. The people were unwashed. The cars were skeletons sinking into front yards. The shade trees had long since been chopped into firewood.

Marisol could not wait to say *adios, Méjico*.

Not that she thought the streets of California were lined with rosebushes or paved with bricks of gold. She believed Father Castillo, back home, who warned that the route to the U.S.A. was a trail of thorns through a cemetery without crosses.

But just listen to the others, clucking like roosters. *Campeños* in straw hats, a Guatemalan family with their woven sacks, a teenage love-struck couple from Ensenada, the girl pregnant. Hopelessly naive in their dreams of the promised land. One woman claimed that everyone in San Diego was a millionaire with a swimming pool, a German car, and a Mexican maid. A middle-aged man smelling of tobacco and sweat boasted that a job waited for him in a fish cannery and that he would own an almost new Chevy Silverado by the end of the summer. A Guatemalan man, his dusty feet in torn huaraches, said that he was headed to the San Joaquin Valley to pick crops. He called it "Garden of Eden."

Marisol knew that the American Eden can be a garden of bones, that peasants like these often never reach those fertile fields. And those who do? She had heard stories that some growers were kind and decent to the migrants. Others treated them like oxen without the yokes.

She had heard talk of construction jobs in Phoenix, where thousands of homes were being built by rich Americans. But then later, others said the jobs had run as dry as the wells of her village. What did she know for certain?

A cousin from Jaripo had crossed last year. His mother told Marisol he picked grapes for twenty cents a tray. How many grapes in a tray? How long to pick them? She could not even guess.

So yes, there is work. Farms and factories. Restaurants and hotels. Drywall and roofing. Logging and demolition. Fisheries and meat-packing plants. But first, they must arrive safely.

They are the *pollos*. The cooked chickens. Men like El Tigre are the *polleros*, the chicken wranglers.

Marisol again thought of her father and wondered what he would say to her now. He was one of those Mexicans who loved the *idea* of America, insisting that Marisol learn English. Some of her earliest memories were watching *Sesame Street* on American television, after her father salvaged a satellite dish from a trash pile. Edgardo Perez even required her to read the English translations of Mexican authors.

"Papi, doesn't it make more sense to read Carlos Fuentes in Spanish?"

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