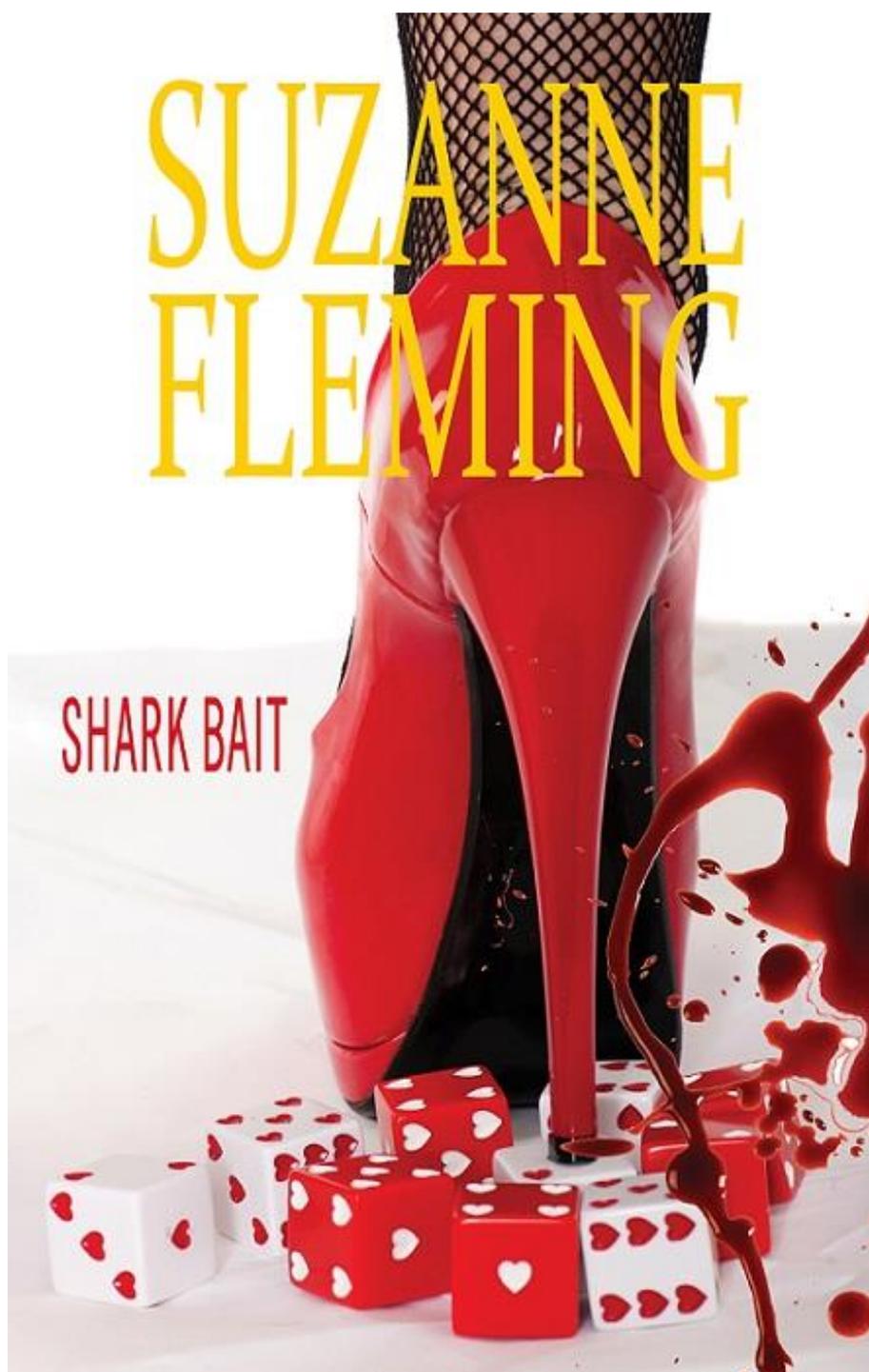


SUZANNE FLEMING

SHARK BAIT



SHARK BAIT

by

SUZANNE FLEMING

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Revised storyline and major editing.

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FOR MY BEAUTIFUL GRETTEL

“If you don’t own a dog, at least one, there is not necessarily anything wrong with you, but there may be something wrong with your life.”

Roger A. Caras

“No one appreciates the very special genius of your conversation as much your dog does.”

Christopher Morley

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SHARK BAIT SYNOPSIS

When successful financial consultant, Duncan Scott's business partner, Jake Collins, was murdered Scott's name went straight to the top of the prime suspect list

In life, Jake's passions had been women and gambling. When his debt rocketed to half a million dollars, the casino boss, Danny Brewster, applied a blowtorch to get his money back.

Investigators, Tony Vascelli and Tim Newman, traded sleep for heavy-duty coffee, as they sifted through the evidence of a blood smeared jacket and a threatening letter sent to Jake a few days before his death.

Vascelli and Newman finally strike gold, when one of Brewster's prostitutes takes a savage beating and her loyalty to the casino boss turns toxic.

Shark Bait demonstrates the past is never erased and events lurking beneath murky waters will often float to the surface to confront people who think they've wiped their history- slate clean.

Cover by Amy Boers

SHARK BAIT

CHAPTER ONE

Duncan walked into town. He could have driven the three kilometres to the business centre, but he needed time out to rearrange his perspective. His brain was revving in overdrive as he tried to make sense of the events that had taken place during the past weeks.

He had not expected to be so messed up by the stuff that happened after he stormed out of Truscott's office. It should have been clear-cut. Over. Finished. He should have just moved on with his life. What life? He didn't have a life. He had a mess that kept getting messier.

Two marriages down the drain. A business partner who swam in the deep end with killer sharks. Two kids who only made contact when they wanted something, usually money. Now a murder investigation and he was a prime suspect.

He knew he had nothing to do with his partner's death, but the police had other ideas. Of course, the fact that he had been to Jake's apartment the morning of his murder did have a bit to do with the police zeroing in on him. And the fact he and Jake had had a very public falling out in a bar that was packed with lawyers and paralegals, made the coppers very interested.

But hey, just because a man made a house call to tell his partner to clean up his act, that didn't make him a murderer. The cops were keen to nail someone and shut the file. The press was all over it.

Jake had some bad-boy friends, and that made for great copy. Some smart-arse reporter had already tried camping on the front patio and taken shots of Duncan's cliff-top house. Seeing the guy, with a telephoto lens the size of an elephant's trunk had really pissed him off. "Hey jerk. Yes, you asshole. Piss off and don't come back." he'd yelled.

His outburst did not faze the journo. Abuse was an occupational hazard. It went with the territory, so it was like water off a duck's back. "Take it easy pal. Just doing my job." He had what he

came for, so what the hell, moving on was fine by him. He hitched the camera over his shoulder, and sauntered down the grass track, towards the road.

Duncan watched and yelled, at the exiting jacket. “You’re all blood sucking arseholes.” The jacket gave him the finger. Duncan burned with rage, “Bastard” he mumbled.

CHAPTER 2

Halfway into town Duncan left the roadway, scrambled under the guardrail, and sat on a rock ledge. He watched the sea rolling in and the waves breaking on the sandbar below. The steady rhythm calmed him and slowly his head began to clear. His mind did an action replay of everything that had happened since the police paid him a call.

The visit had been from Senior Sergeant Tony Vascelli, and a fresh-faced young constable, named Brady. They had wanted to know why he'd gone to Jake's on the morning he was killed.

The words still rang in Duncan's head. He recalled every one of them. "To give him a letter," he told the officers with attitude.

"A letter? What letter?" Vascelli growled, interrupting Duncan's account of his activities leading up to Jake's death.

"A bloody pay-up-or-suffer type of letter. Jake's best mate from the casino sent it special delivery."

Vascelli, an old timer, looked cynical. “A letter of demand you say?”

“You might call it that.” He replied, his voice hardened by anger. “I’d call it a threat.”

“A threat?”

“Yeah. A threat like, you’ve got less than 30 hours to deliver the cash. All of it. Or else.” He snorted with disgust. “The autograph was Danny Brewster’s.”

“Danny Brewster? The casino boss?”

“That’s the one.”

“How much cash are we talking about?”

“Half a million.”

“Do you have any idea what this money was for?”

“Oh, come on Sarge.” Duncan had said. “Brewster’s the craps-table king. He has the power to write the loans and extend them if he’s feeling in a good mood. If he’s having a bad day, he releases the hounds on any poor sucker who has missed the payment due date.” Duncan didn’t miss the eye movement across the table. It told

him the lawman agreed.

“Brewster’s letter wasn’t a love note. Straight up the line. You owe. You pay. Now.”

“So why was the letter sent to you and not your partner?”

“The courier came to the office. Jake wasn’t in, so I signed for it.”

“And did what with it?” “Put it on Jake’s desk.”

“You said you took it to his apartment to give it to him.”

“I did. But not until the next day.” The officer frowned but waited for Duncan to explain further. “Look do you guys want to sit down?” He motioned toward the chairs around a small conference table at the end of his office.

“Sure, we don’t want to rush this.” Vascelli had said his grey eyes hardening. “People tend to forget details when they tell their story in a hurry.”

Duncan waited for them to take a seat before he continued. “Ok. Let’s go back to the beginning.”

“Good idea.” Vascelli said. Duncan knew the detective wasn’t missing a thing. He could almost see the brain cogs whirling inside the guy’s head. Vascelli had probably listened to thousands of stories before and instinct told Duncan the old boy could sort wheat from chaff as fast as a computer crunched numbers. He was right.

CHAPTER 3

The waves rolling in sharpened Duncan's memory. He remembered Sergeant Vascelli settling back in the chair and studying him while he spoke about the letter Jake had received before his death.

The older man had been storing Duncan's every expression and word, while the rookie's attention was frequently diverted by the great view outside the conference room. It was easy to see the young officer was impressed by the seventeenth-floor vista and was probably trying to guess how much Duncan was worth.

The monthly equal profit share from the business was a nice round figure. But, when the two fancy homes each former wife scored was subtracted, along with the annually

adjusted, monthly mortgage and alimony payments, the number changed drastically.

If the loans to grown up children, that would never be repaid, were factored in, and his half-share of lease payments for the office furniture, state of the art equipment, and the Range Rover, were also taken into account, the bottom-line result was nothing to get excited about.

His ex-wives lived in houses big enough to accommodate three families. While Duncan lived in his parents cliff top house; the place where he had spent his childhood and much of his adult life. He inherited the house two years earlier when his parents were both killed in a car accident.

A tragedy. The result of heavy rain, fog, and another vehicle, travelling at high speed on the wrong side of the road. When the police told Duncan of his parents' death, he felt like a light suddenly went out. It had not been easy for the officer who broke the news to him either. Frank and Judy Scott were his best friends. In twenty years, they had rarely missed a Friday night Bridge game together. He was their son's Godfather.

Senior Sergeant, Tony Vascelli, cried when he told Duncan his parents had been killed. He'd hugged him and called him son. His steel grey eyes dulled with the pain of losing his best friends and being the one to tell their only child.

Duncan listened to the surf crashing on the rocks. The loneliness he'd experienced since his parents died was intense.

They had been his best friends too.

CHAPTER 4

About a year after his parents' death, Duncan gave up his rented town apartment and moved back home. Ten years had passed since he had last lived there. He had an exceptional childhood. Great parents. Great mates.

At eighteen he'd moved out to go to college and returned at twenty-two. Stayed for a few years, then moved out again after his first marriage. Following the divorce, he moved back, remarried, divorced again and returned after divorce number two. Funny, but he really liked living there. To him it had always been home. It is where he feels safe.

He loved the old house. His dad had been proud of all the finishing touches he'd made to it over the years. His dad had been a banker, and a damn good one, but his real talent was making magic with wood.

His father always said it kept him in touch with reality.

His mother claimed his dad could turn any old piece of wood into a work of fine art. The furniture and the staircase Frank Scott had built, stood in silent testimony to his great craftsmanship.

Duncan's thoughts returned to the interview with the police officers. Vascelli had been impatient to get the facts. When Duncan paused for a moment, he almost barked, "Go on. You were telling us about the letter."

"Well, as I said, a courier brought it to the office; I was standing at the reception desk when the guy came. The guy said he had a special delivery for Jake Collins. The receptionist said he wasn't in but told him I was Jake's partner. A partner was fine with him, so I signed and took the letter. I got my file, went into Jake's room, put the letter on his desk, and went back to my own office."

"What time was this?" "About ten thirty I guess."

"Then what?" Vascelli asked. His voice lost a bit of its hard edge.

“I worked on financial forecasts until around 1 p.m. I remember the time because Penny, our practice manager, came in to tell me she was going to lunch. She had a bundle of letters with her.

She said she had opened Jake’s mail and wondered if I would check to see if any of it needed urgent attention. She said she’d be back at two and would take care of it then.

She left. I gave the letters the once over. Found nothing that couldn’t wait a day or two. Well, all but the one on the bottom of the pile. That one needed immediate attention.” He didn’t wait for the other man’s prompt, “This baby was on classy paper with the casino’s logo in the left-hand corner.

It was typed, short and straight to the point:

TIME’S UP JAKE

\$500K by 3 p.m. tomorrow.

You know the drill.

Danny B

PS. No hard luckers please.

The Sergeant had moved forward in his chair. He had clearly been interested and said, “Tell me more.” Duncan had obliged.

“We have an in-house system of attaching envelopes to the back of all the letters we receive. To check dates if we need to. I flipped the letter over, and the envelope was the same special delivery I’d signed for earlier.”

“Who opened it?”

“Not me, but when Penny came back, she asked me if I wanted her to action any of the mail stuff. I showed her the special delivery envelope and asked her why she’d opened it.

She said she didn’t realize she had. She explained she had taken Jake’s mail into his office, sat at his desk, and used his slicer to slit the back of all the envelopes.

She said she must have picked up the one I’d put there earlier, without realising it. As always, she attached the envelopes to the letters, and then gave them to me.”

“Did she read the letter?” Vascelli asked.

“I don’t think so. She would have said something about it. Penny’s been with us for eight years. She knows more about the business than we do. She would have said something if she’d read it.”

“What then?”

“I read the note a few times and tried to phone Jake. He wasn’t home or wasn’t taking calls. I left a few messages on his voice mail. Told him he had a problem that needed urgent attention. A big problem. I told him to call me on my cell.”

“Did he call?”

“He hadn’t by lights out. I tried his number again just before I went to bed.”

“And that was, what time?”

“One-thirty a.m., give or take a few minutes.”

“Then what?”

“I slept until five-thirty a.m., had coffee, showered, dressed and phoned Jake again.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Not by phone. At seven I drove over to his apartment.”

“And he was there?”

“Not when I first arrived.”

“When?”

“Steady. I’m getting to it. I buzzed his intercom; it’s a secured building. There was no answer so I decided to sit it out in the car for a while. Finally, I went with a hunch and buzzed one of his neighbours. Cute. Young. Friendly. Big fan of Jake’s.”

“Does cute-and-friendly have a name?”

“Natalie. Natalie Jenkins.”

“Did Natalie answer?”

“She did. When I asked her if she knew where Jake was, she giggled and said, in her bed.”

“Convenient.”

“Very.” Duncan smiled at the older man, “One of the few perks of apartment living I guess.”

“Go on.”

“Well, in a nutshell. Nat called Jake; he came on the blower and said he’d meet me at his place. He buzzed me in and was waiting for me at his door.

I showed him the letter and asked him if he wanted to tell me the story behind it. He said no. Said it was none of my business. Told me I was his business partner, not his wife. He said he’d take care of it.”

“Did you two of you have words?”

“No we didn’t. We’d already had them the week before. There wasn’t anything else to add to what I’d already told him in the bar, so I left and went to work.”

“What time did you get to work?”

“About eight a.m.”

“Anyone else in?”

“Dawn. The cleaner.”

“Tell me about last week and the words you and Collins had.” Vascelli said.

“Not much to tell really. For a few months now, Jake hasn’t really had his eye on the ball. Late starts, long lunches, early exits and a few no-shows.

Some of his clients were not happy. They could never contact him. We lost two big clients last week.”

“That must have made you pretty angry.”

“Fairly pissed. Yes. Not my best week.”

“So what about the dust-up in the bar.”

“It wasn’t a dust-up.”

“What was it?”

“Last Tuesday Jake didn’t show for work. Penny phoned the apartment and a few of his haunts.

She tracked him down in the Trial Bar opposite the courthouse.”

“The place where the local legal boys let off steam after a hard day in court?” Vascelli asked, raising his right eyebrow and tilting his head.

“That’s the one.”

“And you did what?”

“I went there.”

“To the bar? To take him home?”

“No. To call him all the names I'd been practicing, in between the calls I took from clients. The clients who were busy tearing up our contract.”

Vascelli nodded. “Go on.”

“I found Jake in a dark corner, at the back of the Trial. It was around six p.m., so the bar was packed. Standing room only when I arrived.

I went over to him, noticed his glass was empty so I offered to buy him a drink. He declined.

I stood there checking him out.” Duncan sighed deeply before he continued. “Jake held his alcohol well, but I've known him long enough to read the signs. Withdrawn. Morose. Volatile.”

“Then what happened?”

“I just stood at his table, still sizing him up. He was jumpy.”

“Jumpy?”

“Edgy. Ready to lash out at anyone who pissed him off.” Duncan noticed Vascelli was taking notes.

“Go on.”

“I told him I needed to talk business. Asked if we could go somewhere quiet. He said he didn’t mix business with pleasure. Told me to phone the office and make an appointment.”

“What did you do?”

“I went to the bar, bought a beer and went back to Jake’s table. I promised myself I’d stay cool. I said, “Mind if I sit down?”

“I do mind. I told you to make an appointment.” He told me again. Jake wasn’t checking his volume needle. The louder he got, the more spectators he had. But they were civilised and didn’t stare. Most people tried hard to avoid direct eye contact.”

“How’d you handle it?”

“Took a few sips of my beer, and then tried a new approach. You know we’ve missed you at the office pal.”

“Sure you have.” Jake said.

“A few of your clients are pretty keen to talk with you.” I told him.

“Yeah, I bet they are.” The bar tender delivered a double Scotch. Jake took a swig and glared at me. “Well you can tell those pricks to get fucked. Tell them to get themselves a new man, because this one has had it with their whining and bitching. Tell them I ain’t jumpin’ hoops no more.”

That’s when I started to lose it. Not a lot, but the voice shot up a few decibels

“Hoops? Bullshit. You’ve never jumped through anyone’s hoops. You’ve always been the ringmaster.

You're the one who called the shots Jake. But not anymore my friend. You’ve dropped the ball big time. It's time you got a grip. Or you'll end up in this place full-time. As the glass-jockey.”

“Nasty.” The Sergeant shook his head.

“Maybe, but a fact. Jake was forty years old. It was time for him to grow up. He had lost two major accounts. Important clients had lost

patience with him. The rumour was out that his casino pals had pulled the plug on his credit, and to top it, his business partner had a bad day and was thinking seriously about going solo.”

“Did you tell him you wanted out?”

“It was still something festering in my brain. However, Jake’s attitude that night made it seem like a great way to go.”

“Ditch Jake and run the show.”

“I’d been running the show for the past six months, so a split would have only been a formality.”

“Go back to the bit about the bar.” Vascelli said.

“My shot about him ending up stacking empty glasses got to Jake. Maybe he had been dreaming of doing it solo too. Anyway, he told me to leave him alone. Said he was expecting a friend. I made a crack about his casino pals. He didn’t like it and he gave me a shove.”

“Tell me about that.”

“I think I said something like, friends care about each other Jake, and help each other out. From

where I'm standing buddy, you're on a luxury liner with a bunch of strangers."

Jake didn't agree, so he jumped off his stool and gave me a shove."

"A shove?"

"He grabbed me by the coat flaps. Up close and personal. Told me to get off his case. Then he let go of the lapels and pushed me into a group of suits.

That's when I decided it was time to leave. I apologized to the legal boys, straightened the jacket and started for the door."

Jake yelled "And forget about shedding the partner's contract pal. I'm not going anywhere. I heard it. Everyone in the bar heard it too."

"When he manhandled you, did you shove him back?"

"No. He took me by surprise. I guess I was just focusing on staying upright."

"Can you give us the names of people who saw the two of you?"

“Not really. I know the place was packed, but I wasn't there to socialize. I didn't check the guest list.”

Vascelli nodded to the rookie, “Try to pull together some names.” He turned back to Duncan, “And when was this again?”

“Like I told you already. Last Tuesday. Around six or seven.”

“And you got the letter when?”

“The following Tuesday.”

“And you took it to your partner's apartment when?”

“Wednesday morning about seven a.m.”

“You got to work at eight a.m.?”

“Yes. That's right.”

“And that was the last time you saw Jake Collins alive?”

“Very much alive.”

CHAPTER 5

Vascelli walked into the office the team was using as their workroom. Newman and his sidekicks were already there, busy with the whiteboard.

“How’s it going everyone?” he greeted his colleagues with a tired smile.

“Not bad. Yeah, not too bad.” Newman said, nodding slowly to reinforce the words. He was feeling mildly confident that they were finally matching some of the pieces of information into a it.

Not many, but some. There were still big gaps, but hell, two weeks wasn’t long to deal with the donkeywork.

Newman shook his head again, surprised by the fact that only two weeks had passed since they were called out to the fancy apartment with the great ocean views and enough electrical gadgetry to impress even Bill Gates and his R&D smart guys.

The Collins place almost made fingers obsolete. Laser sensors scoped you when you entered the room and turned on soft classical music and atmospheric lighting. Everything in the place was designed to create a mood. Especially, the breath-taking ocean panorama, which never failed to amaze everyone who was privileged enough to visit the penthouse.

When Collins wanted to block out the view, he pulled across the classy drapes that covered the huge expanse of living room glass. If he wanted the sea breeze on his face, he simply pushed back the glass panel walls, and stepped onto a super-sized balcony. It was designed to comfortably accommodate ifty guests.

The bedroom was as spectacular as the other rooms. When Jake climbed into the upsized bed, for sleep or play, he rolled back an off-white cover, to expose cream silk sheets. They were the same shade as the thick towels, and lampshades. Jake liked his accessories in rich cream tones.

Jake often said most people had no idea about good interior design, because they lacked a sense of style and sophistication. He liked things to be easy on the eye and soft to the touch.

CHAPTER 6

Vascelli strode into the room and smiled at his crew. Turning to Newman, he asked, “Any hot leads?”

“Just theories boss.”

“Theories are good.” Vascelli said.

“Not as good as set-in-concrete, fool proof evidence.” Newman slapped the table and gave one of the rookies a confident wink. “But we’re doin’ good. We’re doin’ real good.”

“Okay. So, what have we got so far?” Vascelli asked.

“Not a lot.” Constable Steve Turner pointed to the whiteboard. “Two business partners. Been together ten years. One good guy, one bad guy. Good guy still alive. Bad guy dead.”

“So you’ve got the live partner as a suspect. Anyone else?”

Turner leaned back in his chair and cupped his hands behind his head. He gave a long and heavy sigh. "Yeah. but can't break through the fortress walls."

"Who else have you got then?" Newman asked.

"Brewster." Turner said "Danny Brewster, the casino boss. Jake Collins, the dead guy, was into the casino for half a mill. Brewster sent Collins a pay-up message."

"What'd you get when you talked to Big Danny?" Vascelli asked.

"A nicely packaged, sterile statement, corroborated by half the town, the Queen, the Pope and the President." Turner said.

Newman went over to the coffee machine on the bench behind them, and filled his favourite mug. He plucked a Krispy-Kreme from the box Turner had picked up on his way to work.

Newman perched on the table and smiled. "Hold the line troops. We're gettin' there bossman. We're gettin' there."

Through a mouthful of fried dough, he handed out

a bit of verbal encouragement to the team, “We’re goin’ okay guys. It’s only been two weeks.”

“Brewster’s got a water-tight alibi of course?” asked Vascelli.

“Tight as a duck’s arse.” Newman said. “Locked in the counting-house all night. Didn’t leave until Thursday morning. The tough guys swore on their mother’s lives, that the boss didn’t leave the room.

All six of them kept Brewster company, until the time-release locks sprung the door at seven-thirty a.m. Just in time for Brewster to have a very public breakfast in the casino’s dining room.”

Newman shrugged. “Not a bad alibi hey? Went in at six-thirty Wednesday evening, spent the night locked-down until seven-thirty the next morning. Left the dining room at eight-thirty. Went straight up to his office at eight-thirty-five. We checked the elevator’s surveillance gear. His smiling mug filling the screen for a full four minutes. No stops. Went straight up to the eleventh floor.”

“No little boy’s room break during the night?” Vascelli asked. “Surely he had to take a leak. Someone must have left the room.”

“No need. The lock-up comes with full amenities. Completely self-contained. Toilet, kitchen, easy chairs. Separate king-size bedroom. For the big guy to take a nap, or whatever.” Brady chipped in.

“You sure there’s not a hidden passage?” Vascelli asked. He looked at each of them in turn.

“None the boys could find when they scoped the place.” Newman replied.

“Yeah, but were they really looking for a private exit tube?” asked Vascelli.

“Maybe not.” Said Newman with a shrug.

“Not good enough.” Vascelli kept his tone below a bark. Then he gave Newman a half smile, “Hey, instead of sitting here and getting our brains in knots, why don’t we go out and take a closer look at that cash-vault?”

He grabbed his coat from the hook and smiled, “This place is giving me cabin fever. I need a

change of scenery.”

“Sure boss. Anything to ditch the truckload of paperwork the chief’s screaming for.”

CHAPTER 7

“Morning Stan. Detective Newman and I would like to do another tour of the cash vault suite.” Vascelli did not wait for permission. He kept walking towards the passage leading to the casino’s administration office. Newman stayed close on his heels.

“Hey. You can’t go in there.”

“Want me to get a warrant Stan? Will not look good if casino staff don’t cooperate. People might think you’re trying to hide something.” Stan Stedman was paid to keep unwanted callers away. He looked confused. His boss was out of town, and he knew Mr. Brewster would not be happy to have the cops crawling over the place again.

“OK Stan, I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Detective Newman and I will go away, get a warrant and we

will bring back thirty of our best and finest. Then we will do this place over from top to toe. We want to talk to some of the patrons anyway. We might as well get it all done in one hit.”

Stan froze. Thirty cops storming the place would definitely not be good for business. He hit the side of his head with his hand, as if to knock out the vision.

“I’ll need to clear it with Mr Brewster.”

“Sure Stan. You do that. We’ll wait in the office while you get us cleared.” Vascelli pushed the swing door ahead of him, “Say hi to your boss for me. Tell him we’ll need to talk to him again tomorrow.”

“What for?”

“Can’t tell you Stan. Private stuff between Mr Brewster and me.”

CHAPTER 8

“Hi Julie. It’s Duncan.”

“Dunc.” He could tell she was pleased to hear his voice. “God it’s been ages. How are you?”

“Not bad. Not too bad.” “Where are you?”

“In Brentwood.”

“Really. Let’s get together and catch up.” “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“For god’s sake why wouldn’t I?” “Well, I don’t know. It’s been a while.”

“A year, a month, a day. Who cares? You’re here now, so when can we get together?”

“You tell me. I’m here for a few days. I’m free anytime.”

“Great. How about tonight? Where are you staying?”

“The Worthington. How about we have dinner, there’s a pretty good restaurant downstairs.” Duncan checked himself. He didn’t want to sound pushy, “Unless you’d rather go somewhere else of course.”

“The Worthington’s fine. It’s a great place. Their chef does lobster to die for.”

“Do you want me to pick you up?” Duncan asked.

“No, I’ll meet you in the bar. How about we make it six-thirty?”

“Can’t wait. See you then.”

Duncan put the receiver back in its cradle and smiled. He and Julie had been married for seven years. The wheels fell off when she met a New Yorker who had everything he did not have. Great looks, great personality, Armani style, and an oversupply of charm that women found irresistible.

Mike Truscott was the co-owner of a software company that designed and produced top class

digital games. Business was booming. Games had become a licence to print money.

The breakup had been civilised and Duncan and Julie remained friends. The New Yorker had a few bad habits he'd forgotten to tell Julie about. Cocaine. And other women. Mainly under-aged ones.

When Julie saw the big picture of Mike's life, she packed her toothbrush and got her old job back. This hadn't been too hard, because she was the best Day- Trader in the business.

Her old boss had been biding his time. He knew she'd call. He knew all about Truscott's night-time sports. Julie called her boss an asshole for not telling her before she got in too deep. He just laughed and said, "Love's blind. You wouldn't have believed me."

Julie knew he was right. She wouldn't have back then, but it hadn't taken her long to find out Mike Truscott was bad news. She quickly realised, staying with him would send her life into a downward spiral.

She moved back into the seaside house she had claimed as a reasonable property settlement,

when she and Duncan split the spoils.

Duncan had no problem handing over the keys to her. She'd been a great stepmom to the kids from marriage number one. Sure, it was only a part-time thing. School vacations twice a year, a few sleepovers and other stuff. She had done a great job with both kids. But an amazing one with Zac.

He had been a handful. Raised hell a few times. But Julie always managed to calm the waters. She even got Zac to finish high school and stage one of college.

Zac and Julie kept their friendship going, even during the Mike Truscott period. Zac was the New Yorkers biggest fan. Of course, the fast flow of money made a big impression on the kid too. Duncan tried to point out to him that beneath the glitz and glamour there wasn't anything of substance holding Truscott's value system together.

It was a major concern for Duncan, knowing Truscott was his son's hero and Duncan knew Truscott was a major league bad guy. Not someone he wanted his son to look up to.

Truscott was a Soapy stereotype. Smooth. Good looking. Snappy dresser. Charming.

Of greater concern, Duncan knew Mike was liberal with handouts to Zac. Truscott liked splashing money around to impress the lad. Duncan knew it would seriously damage the boy's development.

Mike got a real buzz from watching women fuss over the kid, when he took him into the casino. They petted him like a toy poodle. Zac radiated worship beams for them. However, Zac's real idol was the casino boss, Danny Brewster.

Brewster always made a point of inviting Zac into his office suite. He talked to the youngster about the great future that was awaiting him when he finished college.

Finishing college was not an option for Zac. He wanted the fast lane. He wanted the big bucks. He just wanted to get out there. And be with the same glamorous women who hung off Brewster like diamonds. In Zac's book, college was for losers. Smart people didn't do college. They did the big-time money scene.

CHAPTER 9

Zac joined Brewster's staff. Never made the fast lane but did join the goons the casino boss called "his lads."

Duncan had not heard from Zac for over a year, and that had only been for five minutes. However, long enough for him to hand over twenty thousand bucks. Zac needed it to pay off a gambling debt.

As the kid walked away, Duncan told his son, the money tree was dead; and the golden goose had flown south forever.

When Julie and Mike parted company, Zac stuck with Mike and called his stepmother an idiot. He said she was a fool to walk out on the life Mike gave her, for a shitty Day Trader job.

Duncan closed his eyes tightly and fought back tears. His son's values were a can of worms that made him blind and deaf.

And he was too young to understand that under the bright lights and seedy deals, poison festered. Zac didn't care that Mike snorted Coke. He thought it was pretty cool.

CHAPTER 10

They both arrived at exactly at six-thirty and laughed. Some things never change. Punctuality was a big deal for both of them. They kissed cheeks and went to a corner table.

“You look beautiful.”

“No chance Dunc. Never been. Never likely to be.”

“You must have a dud mirror.”

“Sure.” She sipped her gin and tonic and watched him over the rim of the glass. He smiled.

“Define beautiful. What is it?” He challenged her.

“Audrey Hepburn. Julia Roberts.” “Not only.” He

came back quickly. “Meryl Streep.”

“She’s not beautiful.”

“I think she is. She is,” Julie paused, searching for a word, “She’s striking.”

“OK. You look striking.” “Really?”

“Come on Jules. Beautiful. Striking. Whatever. You look great.”

“Thanks.” She felt great. She looked at Duncan, “You don’t look great.” She frowned her concern.

“Thanks.”

“Sorry. I just mean you look sort of worn out and frayed at the edges”. She looked into his grey eyes then reached over and covered his hand with hers. She could feel his tension. “Want to talk about it?”

He told her about Jake’s death. She had heard the news reports and said she was hoping he’d call. She thought it best to wait until he made the first contact.

“But don’t get me wrong. That doesn’t mean I haven’t been worried sick.” She bit her lower lip,

fighting back the tears that were close to the surface. “It must be hell for you Dunc.”

“It’s been a little rough. I’ve had better weeks.”

“Always king of understatement.” She said. Duncan could see how much she cared.

Julie leaned forward and lowered her voice, “Duncan we’re friends. Best friends. I care a lot. How can I help?”

He could not answer. He did not know what sort of help he needed. Suddenly he felt weak and vulnerable. He was not a wimp, yet he was now fighting back his own tears. For the second time that day. And it was only seven-thirty.

They talked throughout dinner. The lobster was excellent, but their taste buds were not working.

CHAPTER 11

The phone on his desk rang. “Duncan Scott here.”

“Hello Duncan. It’s Tony.”

“Hi. Sorry I missed you earlier.” He apologised to the Sergeant.

“Not a problem. I was just wondering if I could come over for a quick chat.”

“To talk about something in particular?”

“Well yes. The lab reports have come back. They’ve thrown up some new stuff.”

“I’ll be free in an hour. Is that okay?”

“Sure. See you then.”

Duncan pushed the keyboard aside. Suddenly he needed a cigarette. He had been off them for six months but knew he would be a pack-a-day man by evening. He flicked the intercom. “Hey Penny, do you have any cigs in your desk?”

“I do. But you’re not having any.” Penny’s voice told him she would work hard to keep him nicotine free

“Come on. I need one, big time.” He did not wait for her reply; instead, he marched down the corridor and headed for the front door.

“Okay. Here take the bloody things.” Penny called out as he passed her office. “Oh, stuff it. I’ll join you.” She said, throwing the pack at him.

They sat on the steps outside the back door.

“More hassles?”

“Vascelli’s got some new stuff. Wants to chat.”

“Any clue what it’s about?” “None.”

CHAPTER 12

Vascelli always looked like a TV cop, but today, compared to the sergeant, Colombo would have made the best- dressed list.

Penny showed him into Duncan's office. He slumped in the chair across the desk and looked hard at his godson. He had known this guy since infancy. He had even changed his diapers, Vascelli mused.

He knew the values Duncan's parents had passed on to him, and he believed the account of events as Duncan told them. Vascelli sighed heavily, reminding himself the evidence does not lie.

He rubbed his temples, and hoped it would get easier. Sure, evidence doesn't lie, he told himself, but it did not always tell the full story.

“Coffee Sarge?”

“Trying to give it up.”

Duncan looked at his parents' best buddy and felt

a pang of pity. He knew how difficult this case was for him. He also knew if he was any other law enforcement officer the Chief would have taken him off the case, claiming he was too close to be objective.

The Chief cut a deal with Vascelli. He could do the preliminaries, on the condition, they met every day to discuss the case in detail.

The Chief and Vascelli went way back. Every day was a workday for these guys. They talked on Saturdays while they watched their grandkids play football, or when they flipped steak on the outside hot plate, and after a baked Sunday dinner, while their wives swapped recipes.

Vascelli sighed. “Duncan the lab discovered Jake’s blood on a jacket they found here.”

“What jacket?”

“When the team scoped your building, they took away stuff from Jake’s office, and then they pulled apart everyone else’s space as well. You signed for the walk-out goods.”

“Sure I did, but I didn’t read the list. No one told me about a jacket.”

“They found it in the back of that cupboard in the staff room.”

“So, whose jacket is it?”

“Got your name on it.”

“I’ve never stuffed a jacket in the staff room. I’ve got a closet in my office.” He pointed to the corner; “I put my gear in there.”

“It’s best if we go downtown so you can take a look at it.”

Duncan groaned. “Okay, let's get it done.” They didn’t speak during the drive to the station. When they arrived, Duncan followed Vascelli into a small interview room.

The room had metal shelving along one of the sidewalls. Vascelli walked over to it and pulled down a cardboard archive box. He broke the seal and pulled out a clear plastic bag. Inside was a tweed jacket. Without speaking Vascelli handed the bag to Duncan.

“This is not my jacket.”

“It’s your DNA. You’ve worn it.”

“That’s news to me. I’ve never seen it before.”

Vascelli looked at the officer who was working the tape machine.

“I tell you. This is not my jacket.” He wasn’t quite yelling, but he was getting there.

“Okay. Settle down. Maybe you don’t own it, but you have worn it. Your hair is in the fibre and Jake’s blood is on the lining.” Vascelli paused, “We found one of your business cards in the pocket.”

CHAPTER 13

“Hi favourite stepmom.” Zac’s voice came cheerily down the phone line. “How ya doin’?”

Julie didn’t respond immediately. She was as surprised as ever to hear from Duncan’s son. Like his father said, he only called when he was in trouble or needed money.

“Hello Zac. It’s been a long time. How are you?” She cared. He was Duncan’s youngest child and she had helped raise him. She wanted him to have a good life. She never gave up hope that one day he would call to say he had found a decent job. Or to tell her he was back at college. He was a bright kid, even though he acted like a jerk. She wanted him to be happy. Today was no different.

“I’m fine Jules.” She heard him take a deep breath. “Jules, I was wondering if I could come and stay for a few days. You know, so we can catch up, spend a bit of quality time together.”

“What’s up Zac? Are you in trouble?” She hated herself for the comment. Why couldn’t she just be happy he had phoned? Why did there have to be a problem?

Zac let her comment slide. Sure, she’s not my real mother, but why can’t she just be excited to hear from me, he thought. Why couldn’t she say something like “Zac, how wonderful to hear from you? It’ll be great to see you. How soon can you get here?” He took another deep breath. Reality check. Why the hell should his stepmother get all excited about a call from her former husband’s whacked up kid?

Julie felt her body stiffen; she knew the signs and admitted that in her book, Zac and trouble went hand in hand. She forced herself to say, “Zac are you okay?”

“I’m fine Jules. Life’s sweet” she could hear the lie in his voice. “I got some time off and I just thought you might like a visit from your incredibly charming stepson.”

“Sure Zac. When do you want to come?”

“Well I’m already packed. There’s a bus this afternoon at three. I’d be there by eight.”

“Great. I’ll cook something special.” They were both on a role, playing the game like ace actors, “I’m looking forward to seeing you.” Julie said cheerily, covering the lie they both knew was below the surface.

Zac was relieved that she’d left the interrogation until later. He didn’t have time to go into details. He needed to check out. Fast.

CHAPTER 14

“We’ve got a problem boss.” Danny Brewster glanced up from the documents on his desk.

“Don’t give me problems Charlie. Give me solutions.”

“Yeah, well the solution is to deck the dumb kid. He’s a loose cannon boss. He needs to learn to keep his mouth shut.” Danny became interested. “He’s been shooting his mouth off again.”

“Saying what and to whom?” “The craps-pit bimbo”

“Tell me.”

“He’s been big notin’ himself. Mouthin’ off to impress the empty-head bimbo. Lying about his position in the food chain. He said he’s your best man. Helps you out when the trouble gets big. Big as murder.”

“And you know this, how?”

“The empty-head gets into bed with Vinnie. Vinnie listens, asks a few questions. Tells me.”

“Vinnie doesn’t like the kid. He’s scared he’ll lose his status. Thinks I might replace him.”

“Vinnie don’t tell lies boss. Vinnie’s straight.”
Danny laughed at the misnomer.

“A straight thug ya mean?” Still, Danny had to admit there was a code of honour amongst the tough guys. It was how they protected themselves. How they managed the food chain. Vinnie tolerated the kid because the boss liked him. Vinnie wasn’t anyone’s fool. He knew it wasn’t smart to upset the boss.

“Okay, what else?”

“Told the broad he was a trusted member of the inner-circle, with personal access to unlimited cash. Said a percentage of the club’s winnings went straight into his own slush fund. He said he used it pay off the cops when he had to.”

“Kid’s just trying to be a big shot. He likes the women.” Danny smiled, “Come on Charlie,

we've all been there. Big mouth. Big ego. Big impression. Give the kid a break. He'll get over it."

"Big mouth. Big trouble boss."

"Okay, I'll talk to him. Straighten him out."

"Let me talk to him boss. He'll take more notice of me"

"No way Charlie." Danny shot a warning at Charlie. "The kids okay. He'll listen. He's young, but he's not stupid." He could tell Charlie disagreed. "I'll talk to him tonight."

Charlie knew when to leave it alone. He nodded a few times, patted his boss on the shoulder and went back to the main gaming lounge. He was a troubled man.

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