

Crack!

“Damn Carol! Almost shot my eye out again. Second time tonight.” Franco blinked, dabbing yellow crab guts from his cheekbone with the side of his knuckle. Didn’t keep him from stuffing his face with the meat though. Pinched between her finger and the paring knife, Carol had blue crab meat to her mouth before he finished his sentence. She said, “Third time’s the charm.” She stuffed a mouthful home, careful not to cut her tongue. Dom said, “Hey Franky, it’s every man for himself here.”

“It’s Franco, Dom. Fran-*KO* or Frank. How many times I have to remind you? What would you think if I went around calling you Dommy?”

“Think you were my mother. It’s better ‘n Dummy, which I heard a lot of over the years.”

Dom picked up his can of beer with his thumb and pinkie, trying to keep crab junk off the can while he held half a gutted crab in the other hand. Drank his beer was from another planet where they didn’t have four fingers, just pincers like a crab.

Franco said, “‘Dummy.’ Bingo! Now you got it.”

Dom: “Fran-kee. Fan-koh. What’s the diff?”

Carols says, “Couple o’ vowels.” She slurped on her Bud. “And sometimes Y. Ah, but then we’re back to Franky. And you don’t like that either.”

Ignoring Carol, “You have no problem with Frank or Franco, when you’re pissed with me Dom, so why can’t you get it right now?” Dom said, “Cuz I ain’t mad at ya now and cuz you’ll always be Franky to me, just like Concetta’s ‘Sister.’ You still call her ‘Sister’ too and so does Carol, who give her the name in the first place, when she was just a toddler.”

“OK, *Uncle Dom*. But everybody outside the family calls her ‘Connie’ or ‘Cetta.’”

“Well, that’s better’n Uncle Tom. I don’t mind. Just so long’s you remember we aren’t blood-related. I’m only your godfatha.”

“Not about that. I’m talkin about me being Franco or Frank. You just like to needle me. Why?”

Dom sets his beer can down to pick meat out of his crab. He looks over to Carol. “Listen to him. Hell Carol, *he* don’t even know who he is. Can’t make up his mind. I always knew. He’s Franky.” Franco tossed his uncracked crab claw into the mountain of crab shells in front of him. “Sheeitt!” Focusing on her crab, Carol says, “Who’s on first?” Dom says, “Franky.”

Franco kicked the wooden chair out from under him with the backs of legs, wiping his hands with a brown paper towel as he stood up. “I’m going to take a leak. Gonna ask the girl for an order of crab cakes for dessert. OK? You both in, or you want some more hard shells?”

Dom said, “Your treat, right Franky?”

Franco nodded, clenching his teeth. “Yeah. Sure. Carol?” Carol nodded but kept eating.

“Crab cake sounds good to me too, Franky.” Dom grinned.

Franco threw the paper towel on the table. “Gee-zis!” He walked away holding his stinking crab hands out away from his pressed slacks.

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“Can’t you be nice Dad? Frank’s treated us to this expensive crab dinner at this fine restaurant. Here we are, out on the deck overlooking the Bay with the sun going down on the water, on this beautiful Ides of August Saturday evening, and you have to act like that. Why can’t you be nice to him for a change?”

“Why? Why the hell you think?”

“Oh no. Don’t start Dad. I don’t want to hear it. Please.”

“You don’t wanna hear it, hunh? How long’s it been, Carol? How long you been seein’ him now?” Carol shook her head, frowning. “Dad, please. What’s between Frank and me is between *us*.” Dom frowned. “*Us*? Well, as your father, I think it’s about time I dusted off my shotgun.”

“Dad, please don’t embarrass me in front of Frank. Please don’t.”

“He’s not good enough for you Carol.” Dom nods to her. “Big shot attorney now. His mom was a scrub woman. Always trying to keep his hands clean. Know why?”

Carol shakes her head; silent, her mouth full of crab. Dom says, “Cuz they’re usually dirty.”

“Come on Daddy. That’s not fair. Just cuz he’s successful doesn’t make him a crook. He’s worked hard to get where he is. Like his mom did. Frank pulled himself up by his bootstraps.”

“Yeah, but he’s a *criminal* lawyer. How could he do that? Go over to the dark side? Why’d he quit bein’ a prosecutor? He grew up in the neighborhood. I coached him baseball. I spent twenty-two years as a cop, catchin’ bad guys and eight more on and off contractin’ as an Eye for the state—what? Only so wise guys with law degrees like Franky can get ‘em off the hook?”

“Dad, we live in a free country. People are entitled to a good defense. You know that.”

“Big shot, treatin’ us tonight. Why? I’ll tell ya why. He wants us to do a job for him. He knows I’m retired now. Not semi-retired no more, but retired, retired. He’s gonna write this dinner off as a business expense. You watch. Drinking white wine from a glass and eatin’ hard shell crabs? Big shot! Who does that?” Carol shrugged.

“Different strokes for different folks Dad. Besides he hasn’t talked about business.”

“Not yet. He’s waitin’ for the right moment. Yeah. That’s why he took off. Don’t want to blow his top. He needs me for somethin’. Why else would he invite me here to this up-scale crab house in Annapolis with the two of you? He knows I want him out of your life. Fancy restaurant dinner with the both of ya? Fin and Claw no less. Be a third wheel? Choice table out here on the deck overlookin’ the Bay? Ever eaten here before?”

“Sure. Frank’s brought me here before. Maybe he wants to ask you for my hand in marriage like in the old country?” Carol grinned.

“Bullcrap. In the old country, they never ask in front of the daughter. That’s separate man-to-man stuff.” Dom picked at his crabmeat, shaking his head. “Besides, Franky’s already married.”

Carol, surprised. “To whom?” Dom flinched.

“His job. You’re wasting your time with him, Honey. How long you been seein’ him now?”

“You asked me that before?”

“Yeah, and you didn’t answer before.” They stared at each other for several seconds before Carol said, “Almost three years—on and off.”

“More off than on until the last few months. Hell, I know. Thinks he’s gonna find somethin’ better. Thinks he’s movin’ up in the world. Somethin’ better than *my Carol*? Dumb ass.” Dom smirked, shaking his head. “Who the hell else you know drinks wine with crabs besides him?”

“Daddy, please. Frank and I have an understanding.” She placed her wrist on top of his. He pulled away. “Understandin’, hunh? Yeah. Well, your mother, God rest her soul, and I had an understandin’ too. And her old man made sure the Church was in on it.”

“How do you know *I’m* not the one putting *him* off?” Her dad stopped eating. “Because I know *you* Carol. You’re just like your mother. God bless her.” He almost smiled.

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In the men's room, Franco had to rinse off his hands good before he could pee. Get red pepper on his pecker and he'd be in a pickle for sure that even Peter Piper couldn't pick. Been there and done that. Damn that Dom! Dom could always punch his buttons. Bad enough as it was without Dom being his potential father-in-law. But Franco needed Dom for the kid's case. The rainmaker that would pave his yellow brick road with gold. Carol too. They were both of them damned good investigators. Knew their stuff. Franco finished peeing, then washed his hands and face in the sink. "Be cool. Just be cool. You need 'em on this one Frank."

Dom strolled in to take his turn. "Just playin' with you Franco. Thanks for treatin'. D'ya order the crab cakes already?"

"My pleasure Dom. Yeah, I ordered them." Franco nodded, then strode back to the table.

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Carol was gone. The table was empty except for three mountains of empty crab shells. The busboy was cleaning them up now. Folding the brown paper, table cloth up over the shells, dumping the mess into a big deep, wooden tray and carrying them off. Franco stood against the rail beside Carol's empty chair to view the boats anchored there in the marina, his own Chris Craft Constellation among them. He pulled his Winstons from his pocket, lit one up, and tossed the match over the rail into the water. Glad Carol wasn't around to bug him about polluting the Bay. He leaned on the rail, drawing deep on his nail, while the help reset the table with a clean, red and white-checked cloth cover, rather than the brown paper reserved for hard shells.

His thoughts wandered ... If that kid screws up out there on vacation in Iowa, could ruin everything. Never should have let him go. How much trouble can he get into wearing a leg cast with his folks and Ryz'n there to keep an eye on him? Whoever took a vacation in Iowa anyway? Lake resort or not? Damn! That Ryz'n was something though. Just seventeen and a woman and a half already. Franco wondered whom he would draw as the trial judge. He'd settle for anyone, as long as it wasn't old man Higher. Langham Hardern Higher better know as Hang'em Harder and Higher. That old goat should have recused himself for good ten years ago. Odds were against him if he drew Higher. He knew that for a fact. He'd file a petition for a jury trial. Offer Dom his going rate sixty per day and expenses; Carol, her standard forty-five. Only five weeks to prepare; he needed two good pairs of legs on this deal, one on each coast. He'd keep Carol's legs on this coast with him. He spied Dom and Carol coming back. Finishing his cigarette, he flicked the butt into the water below. Hoped Carol hadn't seen that or she'd be on him again for polluting.

They sat down. The waitress brought their drinks. Two beers for the Davalones and a glass of white wine for him. Their server said their crab cakes would be out shortly. He nodded. They drank quietly for a few minutes. Franco tried to figure the best way to say what he had in mind.

Finally, Dom said, "So Frank! What's the deal?" Franco feigns surprise. "What deal?"

"The reason you brought me out here. Must be something special if Carol can't handle it herself. She's a first rate dick if you pardon the oxymoron. I ought to know cuz I taught her everything she knows."

"Well, now that you mention it..." Dom glanced at Carol as if to say *I told ya so*. Carol rolled her eyes. Franco said, "I've really got something for us this time." Dom feigned surprise.

"Something for *us*? Get that Carol? For *us*. Isn't that sweet?"

"Daddy, come on." Dom threw up his hands "OK, OK. Go ahead I'm listenin'." He lifted his beer and guzzled. Franco looked over to Carol. She said "Go ahead Frank."

“All right. Remember that grisly accident down in Surrettsdale end of June, six weeks ago?”

“You mean the one where the local news showed the two corpses fryin’ against the night sky?”

Franco nodded. “Yeah Dom. That’s the one.”

“Who could forget it?”

Carol said, “I musta missed it. What happened?”

Dom said, “The Buzzbee brothers. Two ex-cons, real bad boys, on a stormy night in a hot rod funny car didn’t make that dead man’s turn down there and crashed into a wooden power pole. Blew ‘em all to hell—fried to a crisp. Speculation, they’d been drinkin’. Terrible, except if it had to happen to anyone, they were the boys for the job.” Carol said, “So where’s the case in that?”

“Beats me.”

Franco said, “Well it goes a little deeper than that. So happens my client was involved. Sixteen-year old kid. Left the scene but came back a while later when the police were trying to clean up the mess and direct traffic. They wouldn’t hear—ah, here they are.”

The waitress delivered their crab cakes, three golden brown chunks of crabmeat, each looking like the top half of an golden softball, only piping hot and much more delectable.

“Hope they don’t have any shells.” Dom picked and prodded at his cake with a fork, turning up his nose as he inspected his cake, as if he smelled something bad. “I hate shells in a crab cake.”

Carol said, “Well Dad, if you don’t eat like a pig and sallow too fast you’ll be all right.” Franco dug into his cake. Dom and Carol joined him. Dom asked. “So what about the kid?”

“Well, a cop on the scene wouldn’t hear the kid out. [Chewing.] Told him to scram. Thought he was trying to sneak a peek at the accident, impress the girls with him.” Franco swallows.

“Girls?” Carol said.

“Yeah, a pair of teen honeys, too. They’re the only eyewitnesses we know of. Kid’s got a new girl now and she makes those two beauties look like dogs.”

“Really?” Carol arched her brow. “How old is *she*?”

“Seventeen.”

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about *her*. Even you would have better sense than to get involved with a girl that young.” Dom said, “I dunno. She’s past the age of consent, right Franco? Criminal lawyer’s gotta know that.” Franco sighed. “Look, this could be a great case for us.”

Carol said, “What case? You haven’t said anything yet that might interest the State’s Attorney.” Dom quipped, “But Frank’s interested all right. Big time interested. Aren’t ya, Fran-*kee*?” Franco grimaced. Carol asked, “Darby O’Halloran? He’s got the judgeship locked up. What does he care?” Franco shook his head. “No, his assistant.”

“Who?”

“Petros Perkouri.”

Dom put down his fork, cracking, “Oh no, that weasel? Peter Pecker? Since when?”

“He was appointed interim SA couple weeks ago when O’Halloran got that judgeship. Don’t you read the papers Dom?”

“Not unless I have ta. TV’s better. Bing-bam and ya got it.”

“Think I just got it.” Carol picked a piece of shell out of her mouth. “Yeah, me too.” Dom spit a shell onto his plate. Franco said, “Guess I’m the only one livin’ right.”

Dom said, “Vinny’s the only one livin’ right.”

“Funny you should mention Vince. He’s the one got me into this.”

Carol asked, “You’ve seen Vinny recently? How he’s doing? Still over at Holy Trinity?”

“Yeah, still there. This kid and the girl are in his parish, though the kid isn’t catholic. He’s Protestant. Seems just the girls in his life are catholic. [Chuckles.] Vince says the kid’s a one-man, virgin-wreckin’ crew over there. Said the kid thinks he’s following the golden rule, you know? Doing unto others by loving his neighbor and such, instead of committing mortal sin. The boy never heard of the term fornication until Vince explained it to him. Thought it was a venereal disease like celibacy.”

Dom cracked up. “Damn, what I wouldn’t give to come back as a Protestant.”

“Come back? Back from where?” Carol asked.

“Back from the grave—reincarnated.”

“We don’t believe in that either Dad.” Carol rolled her eyes again. “Neither do Protestants.”

“Always knew we got the short end of the stick. Sure as Hell, believe in mortal sin though. Ain’t that right Franco, or do ya?” Carol slapped her father on the arm. Franco ignored the slur.

“Anyway, Vinny’s the one who sent the kid to me. One of the girls with the kid that night recommended him to Vince. Said Vince could help. The boy doesn’t want his parents to know.”

“Well that girl did right. Vince can always help.”

“You still carry a torch for him, don’t you Carol?” She blushed.

“Always,” Dom said and she always will. “Vinny’s a good kid, always has been and he don’t mind me callin’ him Vinny either, ‘stead of Vince or Vin or Vincent. I tell you that. You should have followed him into the priesthood Franco. You’d be a happier man today.”

“Dad. Please.”

“All right.”

“The hell you talking about? I *am* happy.”

“Happy? Gettin’ paid to get criminals off the hook? Or *happy with my Carol*? Or both?”

“*Dad!*”

“All right. All right. I’m sorry. I got a little carried away. Let’s get back to business. Still, with you on the mound and Vinny backin’ ya up at short and Little Dom catchin’, we did all right. Didn’t we? Won that Boys Club championship what, twice? Ages fifteen and sixteen? CYO, too. Me the manager. Yeah we did all right. Yes we did.

“Know the trouble with these crab cakes is they got too much bread filler, not like over in Baltimore at Obrycki’s. Now that’s where we should have gone for crabs Franco. Don’t know how they make their crab cakes stick together over there without the filler, but they do. All back fin lump. Fantastic! Cook their hard shells in black pepper ‘stead of red. Makes a difference. And ya don’t smell as bad after eatin’ Obrycki’s crabs as you do everywhere else. Ever notice that?”

Carol agreed. “So you think it’s the black pepper and not those wet sanitary napkins they give you to wash your hands afterwards?”

“Maybe. Maybe both.”

“Hey! You don’t like it Dom? Don’t eat it.” Carol reached out to put a hand on each of their forearms. “Come on now boys. Play nice ... What else about the case Frank? I still don’t see where there is one.”

“That’s the point. There isn’t. Perkouri is blowing this thing up out of proportion. Wants to capitalize on that gruesome news footage and the upward trend of youth violence in the county. Try the kid as an adult. Ride a victory to the election in November as the new state’s attorney.”

“On what charge?”

“Two felony counts of first or second degree murder, or lesser included offenses of homicide by vehicle or felony manslaughter. Not to mention leaving the scene of an accident resulting in death, and misdemeanors for disturbing the peace, a DWI, underage drinking and destruction of private property. Guy’s using the shotgun approach. Haven’t seen the indictment yet but that’s the word I got through the grapevine.”

Dom: “The kid was drinkin’, too?”

“Two beers and a shot of whiskey, five hours earlier.”

Carol said, “*First or second degree murder?* Shoo! That’s crazy. Talk about giving an inch and taking a mile! He can forget those charges. And we know Maryland is pretty lenient when it comes to vehicular manslaughter, right? But if he *was* legally intoxicated *and* they can prove that’s what caused the accident, why not charge him with homicide while under the influence?”

Dom beat Franco to the punch. “Greater maximum penalty for manslaughter. Ten years to three each count. So the kid’s lookin’ at twenty years max instead of six, plus what? Five for leavin’ the scene of a fatality? But the liquor shoulda been out of his system by then. Two beers and a shot—five hours earlier? Come on. Had to be. Unless they got other evidence, no way they can say his driving was impaired.”

Franco nodded. “That’s right. But it might be worse.” Carol said, “How could it be worse? If they can’t prove his drunkenness caused the accident, absent gross negligence or recklessness on the kid’s part, what case do they have? I mean that’s the law right? And why should homicide by vehicle have less of a penalty than manslaughter?” Franco said, “Maybe it won’t in the future. You forget about leaving the scene?” Carol nodded. “Oh yeah. Forgot about that.” She shrugged, guzzling her beer.

Dom said, “Yeah. What do you mean ‘*worse*’?” Franco smirked. “Well, my source is telling me Perkouri thinks he might be able to make a case for murder, alleging the kid laid in wait for these turkeys on a deserted road late at night and, with evil intent, ran ‘em off the road on purpose. Or at the very least—drove recklessly, which would be cause for second degree.” Carol set her beer down hard, clucking, “Actual murder?” She shook her hand. “Talk about overcharging! That’s unbelievable.”

Franco shrugged, saying, “Well. As I said, Perkouri really wants to win that election in November. Wants to make a big splash—kill two birds with one stone—upsurge in teen violence and drunk driving. Could be bad for the kid.” Carol shook her head. “Nobody should want anything that bad.”

Munching on crab cake, Dom shook his head. “Crap. It ain’t like a car is your typical murder weapon. Besides, we got the fastest growin’ county in the country, three, four of the last five years. O’ course, teen crime *is* up. All crime is up. More people, whaddaya expect? Shoot!”

Franco says, “True, but the word is Perkouri might try to establish evil intent—malice aforethought for first degree or, like I said, at the least recklessness for second degree.” Dom balked. “How’s he gonna do that? Claim the kid pointed a loaded car at the victims and fired off, what? How many rounds before they died of lead poisoning?” Carol cracked up at her dad’s joke but Franco didn’t think it was so funny, adding, “True, as you say, after all, a car isn’t like a gun or a knife or something—but, even if the state could—

“But first degree murder Frank? Come on.” Carol asked, “Where’s the evil intent?”

Franco replied, “Oh? Didn’t I mention that? The kid had altercation with the Buzzbees down at Truley’s earlier that night. My source mentioned including second degree assault and battery, too.” Dom smiled. “Ah, the plot thickens.” Franco paused to wash some crab cake down with his Chablis. Carol said. “This sounds like quite a kid.”

“Oh he is. He most definitely is. Never met anyone like him, kid or not.”

Dom asked, “This kid got a name?”

“Yeah, Sh’BOOM, William Nicholas. Spelled S-H-double-E-B-double-O-M.”

Carol said, “Hey Frank. Wasn’t there a Sheeboom went to Sweetland High? Graduated in between us? Ron or Roy or something?”

“Yeah. Ray. Played legion ball for My Maryland. Pitched against Vince, Little Dom and me. Was a regular on the Milt Grant Show.” Carol, nodded, swallowing some beer.

“That’s right. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Cute guy. Good dancer. Liked to wear mohair sweaters.”

Dom tried to snap his fingers, but could scarcely make any sound because his fingers were wet from holding the sweating beer can. “Curve ball! Had a slow, tantalizing curve for his out pitch, like Vinny. Guys used to break their backs trying to park it over the fence.”

“Yeah. You guessed him. That’s Nick’s half brother Ramon. Runs the Outdoor Living Centre now. Down just past Truley’s, on the right? Nick works for him. Summer help. Brothers—right. Shoot! You’d never know it to look at ‘em though. Different as night and day. Nick’s dark where the brother is fair, as you said Carol.” Dom asking, “Nick, hunh?”

“That’s right Dom. Goes by his middle name and not William. So don’t go calling him Billy or Willie or Nilly or whatever the hell you feel like and piss him off.”

“Frank.” Carol shook her head, pouting. Dom says, “Hey. Believe I read about this kid in the papers. ‘Little Nick!’ That’s what they call him. Won the first ever state championship— Class A ball for Pocomoke—the friggin’ hero of the game! Had the impression he’s a cocky little dude.”

“You guessed him. But he’s really a likeable kid. Got a certain charm—a charisma to him, know what I mean? Thought you said you didn’t read the papers Dom, just watched TV?”

“Well sure, I keep up with the local club and schoolboy sports scene. Don’t get that on TV.”

“*A je ne sais quoi?* Is that what the kid’s got, Frank? As much as his new *girlfriend?*” Carol lifted one eyebrow towards him. Franco made a face. Carol said, “Say! Not the same Nick Sheeboom who plays with *GRT?*” Franco nods. “Yup. The same.”

Dom joked. “*GRT?* What the hell’s that? Grit?”

“Local rock band Dad. *Good Rockin’ Tonight—G-R-T.* Heard ‘em over at the Brolling NCO Club.” Franco sneered. “You dating air men now Carol?”

“No. But I might if I thought it’d make you jealous Frank.” Franco smiled, shaking his head.

“So what were you doin’ over there?”

“I was on a case Dad. Suzie Farentello or Blackmoor now, at least for a little while longer I guess.” Dom shook his head. “Little Suzie. You were a bridesmaid in her wedding—what? Couple years ago?” Carol nodded. “That’s right Dad. Had me tailing her husband Bobby, Staff Sergeant—suspected him of cheating on her.”

“Was he?” Carol nods. “Yes. Afraid he was.”

“What’s to be afraid of? You caught him and delivered the goods to Suzie? That’s my girl. Just like her old man.” Dom reached over to pat Carol’s shoulder. “Dad, please. Catching someone in adultery is no cause for rejoicing. After only two years of marriage? Come on. That’s sad.”

“Yeah but it pays the bills. So back to the kid. How does an underage kid play an NCO Club?”

“I don’t know Dad. His whole band was underage but they were good. Best local band I heard in years. Play any request thrown at them. Amazing. And sound just like the original, too. Kids with a history of music like that.” Carol shakes her head. Dom grunted. “Ha! No Sinatra I’ll bet.”

“Well you’d be wrong Dad. He sang a version of “That’s Life,” on request. Knocked me out. Thought it was Old Blue Eyes himself up there. The thing with this kid is he not only can sing and dance, play different instruments, but he can imitate other artists—mannerisms, voice, tone the whole bit. He *is* talented.” Dom said, “Like Sammy Davis, Junior, hey?” Carol nodded.

Franco said, “Yeah, you should have heard him telling me his tale. Acted it all out, imitated all the parts.” Dom said, “No kiddin’? I gotta see this kid. Sounds like a wonder man but if he’s playing a club underage, probably has a fake ID. Makes you wonder a little. Know what I mean?”

“A lot of kids have fake IDs Dad. That doesn’t make them all killers. If that’s what you mean.”

Something caught Dom’s eye over Franco’s shoulder. Dom nodded that direction. “Got a sawbuck says I go home with them tonight.” Franco said, “Who?”

Carol looked past Franco’s shoulder. “What about your car Dad?”

“You can drive it home.”

“But I was going home with Frank on the boat.” She frowned, as her shoulders slumped.

“We’ll see who’s the *winner* after *dinner*. Me or Franky? Hey? Fran-ko?”

“What about me, Dad?”

“If I win, you win. Only Franky loses.”

Franco ignored the slight to turn around, resting his left elbow over the back of his chair, jabbing a toothpick in and out between his teeth, mumbling. “Who are you talking about?”

“The table with the two women eating crabs. Three tables down up against the glass wall.”

Franco, sneered. “Yeah? You’re dreaming. Which one you think would go home with *you*?”

“Don’t limit my options buddy, but I’m leaning toward the one with the frosted hair.”

“Dad. She can’t be but a few years older than me.” Dom shrugged. “Her hair turns me on. Reminds me of your mother, God rest her soul.” Carol said, “Mom never frosted her hair.”

“Yeah but those two premature gray streaks always got to me. Wasn’t for those streaks of grey you, Cetta and Dom Junior might not be here now. Or either of Sister’s kids for that matter.”

“Don’t pay any attention to him Frank. He always drinks too much beer when he eats crabs.”

“Yeah, I know. Makes him turn into one.”

“Hey, smart ass! We on or not?” Dom smirked.

“Sure, why not? But you can make your move after we finish our business. Looks like they have quite a pile of crabs to go there yet.” Dom agreed. “Fair enough. So what’s the deal with this Sheeboom kid? Doesn’t sound like Peter Pecker’s got much of a case to me.”

“One of the two eyewitnesses, one of the girls, thinks Nick played chicken with the Buzzbee boys on purpose.” Carol said, “Not the one that referred him to Vince?”

“Right, not that one.”

Dom asked, “Was the kid boppin’ her and not the other one? The squealer, I mean?” Franco chuckled. “I dunno. Maybe. Though probably not at that time anyway, as far as I can tell. Since then, I get the feeling he might have nailed both of them.”

“To keep ‘em quiet?”

“I dunno, maybe. He’s not the kind to kiss and tell. But if he did, he blew it with them because he dumped both of ‘em now for this new chick.”

Carol said, “The seventeen-year old that shook you up, hunh Frank?” Franco squirmed and looked away. Dom said, “So he’s a ball player, band leader and a hot shot lover too? Ain’t sixteen grand? When does he sleep?”

“Ha! That’s what I asked him, just like that. You know, as a joke. Said he doesn’t only need but three to four hours a night. I’m tellin’ you this kid *is* something else.”

“Sure sounds like it. So what about this altercation the boy had with the two ex-cons?”

“Carol. It’s the damndest thing. He took them both on down at Truley’s, single-handed. Kid’s about the size Sinatra used to be, and he tears these two big boys up. Supposedly used the divide and conquer theory. Took them one at a time into a different rest room under the pretense of having sex. They had been molesting him and making threats. Buzzbee boys got a taste for their own kind in the Klink. Liked his long hair and, well, he is kind of a pretty boy, if you know what I mean?” Carol said, “Oh, you bet he is. Thought he kind of favored Rick Nelson.” Ignoring Carol, Dom cracks up. “Havin’ sex in the can? Took ‘em one at a time? How the hell he do that?”

“I dunno Dom. The kid’s a corker. Says he learned self defense up to the Crest Hill Boy’s Club. And the Buzzbees had been drinking heavily. Anyway, he messed both of ‘em up pretty good. Left them on the rest room floor: men and women’s respectively. Then he went out in the parking lot and messed up their truck. Tore out the distributor wires—”

“That’s where the destruction of private property comes in?” Carol asked. Franco nods, swallowing some crab cake. “Afraid the Buzzbees might come after him, see? When he came back by there later that night with the girls—they’d gone to the Range Drive-In—the Buzzbees were waiting for them in a hot rod jalopy in Truley’s parking lot. They followed him down Old Veer Avenue and that’s when it happened.”

Carol asked, “How exactly?”

“Well, Nick and the two girls, Terri and Patti, a blonde and a brunette, said Nick foxed the brothers by hiding up a farm lane with his lights off. The Buzzbees flew past without seeing them. When the Buzzbees were out of sight, the kid pulled back on the road the opposite way.”

The waitress asked if everything was okay, did they want anything else. Dom asked for another Rolling Rock and Franco asked for the check. Carol asked him to finish the story.

“Well, this is where it gets dicey. The kid’s leaving right? And then he stops to make a three-point turn on that narrow country road, two a.m., in a driving rainstorm and turns back around.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“Exactly! That’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question, Carol. And that’s what this whole case will hang on. Why—his motivation.” They both nodded, waiting on him to finish.

“Nick said he felt something inside tell him to turn around, go slow and wait. He did and he met the Buzzbee boys just on the straightaway between the two right angle turns. You know the place I mean?” They nodded. Carol said, “Yeah, that’s a nasty spot. Bobby Farino almost bought it there, remember Frank, my junior year?”

“Yeah, I remember and he’s not the only one. That stretch *is* nasty. Something like seven people have been killed there now in the last ten years, including the Buzzbees.”

“So Franky, whaddaya tellin’ me, this kid hears voices?”

“No Dom, not heard—*felt*. He *felt* the voice inside him here.” Franco tapped over his heart with his fist, as if he were burping himself. “He was very adamant on that point. The thing is *both* Vince and the blonde told me that Nick had told each of them that very thing separately and, of course, that was within a couple hours after the accident. So I don’t think that it’s some cock and bull crap he made up just for me the other day. He really believes it.”

Dom asked, “So, did he run those bums off the road on purpose or not?”

“The one girl Terri, the blonde—she was in the front seat—says no. The brunette in the back, Patti, she’s not so sure. What all three are certain of is that the weather was terrible. A torrential downpour. Nick wasn’t doing any more than thirty, thirty-five tops, in a forty-five zone and he stayed on his side of the road. The Buzzbees swung over into his lane and came right for him. Hi-beams on.” Dom said, “A real showdown hunh? Like *Hombre*. What about the kid? ‘Have his brites on, too?’” Franco frowned. “That’s the curious thing. He didn’t have any lights on at all until the last few seconds. He had turned them off when he hid up the lane. He said he turned them back on to make sure the Buzzbees could see him and because he thought his hi-beams might cancel out theirs so he wouldn’t be so blinded.” Dom balked. “‘Cancel out theirs?’ He really said that?”

“Yup. He really believed that would work. He wasn’t fooling.”

Dom said, “Driving without lights under those conditions? Sounds pretty reckless to me. Negligent, at the least.”

“Yeah. But he said the voice from inside never said anything to him about turning the lights back on. If you can feature that. He also said the Buzzbees were speeding.”

“Yeah? How’s he know that? Got a radar gun?”

“He said he turned his car onto the straight-away before them, from opposite ends of the road. When they met, the Buzzbee’s car was well onto his half of the straight-away. I went down and checked the tire marks and he’s right. The police have an accident scene map of it. You’ll see. You can go down and check the marks yourself if you’re interested, Dom. Pretty sure they’re still there. *It was a bad one.*”

Carol asked, “And no one in his car was hurt? What was the damage to his vehicle?”

“None. No damage. Not a scratch. Nobody hurt. Both cars veered off at the same instant, just missing each other. But the Buzzbees were going so fast they lost control, couldn’t make that next right angle turn, or left angle in this case, and flew off the road into the wooden power pole snapping it in two. The transformer came down on their heads and blew them to smithereens. Fried ‘em both. The kid skidded to a stop and saw the whole thing.”

“Watched them burn and left?”

“Yeah Carol. That’s what he did. Don’t look so stunned. They’re kids. They were shocked, scared, stunned. Nick said he didn’t figure he could do any more to help the Buzzbees at that point anyway.” Dom said, “Help them? Shee-itt. Could have called an undertaker I guess.”

“He called the police, anonymously, from a pay phone a mile or so up the road. If it weren’t for that gory news footage, we wouldn’t even be here talking about this now. Couple twelve-year old twins staying with their grandparents at the farm house are film photography buffs. They heard the accident, saw the fire and filmed it. Didn’t see Nick or his Pontiac though. He’d already split. Might have heard him leave though.”

“So you wouldn’t have treated me to this tasty crab dinner at the Fin and Claw Franky, if you it weren’t for those twins and you didn’t have this case?” Dom grinned.

The waitress left Dom his Rolling Rock and the check for Franco. Dom nodded towards Franco’s tip leavings saying, “And that’s the way it should be.”

“Think you can keep the news reel out of the trial Frank? That would be prejudicial as hell for the jury.” Frank shrugged. “Hope so Carol. We’ll see. Depends on the judge.”

Dom said, “Better hope you don’t get old man Higher. Leavin’ the scene like that after incurrin’ bodily injury, death no less? Two counts? Whoa. That alone’s another five years max right there and what? A five thousand dollar fine to boot, ain’t it”

“You got that right. Wouldn’t be surprised if Perkouri includes assault and battery, too.”

“You mean because of the altercation at Truley’s? An undersized teen age kids beats up a couple of ex-cons who molested him? Even old man Higher wouldn’t touch that one.”

“Forget it Dad. So Babe, why do you need both of us?”

“Because—” Franco failed to suppress a burp. “Pardon me ... Because we’ve got a short fuse on it. And this thing is going to come down to trying the kid’s character for the motivation angle. Is he the type of kid to do something like this intentionally, or even unintentionally? And I can’t put the kid on the stand.”

“Yeah, talking about voices from inside here.” Dom taps his chest with his beer can. “Ain’t gonna cut it with a jury, unless you want to plead temporary insanity as a defense.”

“And one of his girl friends doesn’t seem to be helping too much, does it Frank?”

“No Carol, it doesn’t.” Dom asked, “Any priors?”

“No, none. As far as the law’s concerned, the kid’s butt’s as clean as a baby’s behind, but ...”

Carol said, “But what?”

Dom said, “Sometimes a baby’s behind can be pretty shitty. Don’t need a record for that.”

“Exactly. Besides, he was involved in those murders out in California last summer as a material witness.” Carol snapped her fingers. “That’s right. I remember now. Two different cases right? In L.A.? Yeah. How’s that for coincidence? How can one kid be in the wrong place at the wrong time twice back to back like that? Odds on that have gotta be astronomical. Perkouri’d have a field day with that if he can get the judge to let it in the record. What’s the name? Uh—”

“Right Carol. But this kid’s one in a billion. I’m telling ya. Make that a trillion. But you know Perkouri’s going to do his damndest to get it in too. That’s one of the things Dom could check into. Help us out.”

Dom said, “You’re talkin’ about The Ransom Clan murders and that teenage runaway whose naked body they found charred and half-buried out in the desert? What was left of her, anyway. Those murders, gruesome as hell, one right after the other? Bang-bang.” He shook his head.

Carol: “Of course—the Clan murders out in L.A. Shoot! That’s one for the books. State of California sentenced them all to death, right? Trial finished in December. Sentence came down right after the New Year. Talk about a bad way to start the year off.”

Dom: “Not if you’re the D.A. Think those killers made any new year’s resolutions Franky?”

“Yeah. Get a better lawyer to handle their appeals maybe.”

Dom smirked. “Spoken like a true shyster Franco.”

Carol said, “And they never did try anyone on the other case, did they?”

“No it’s still an open investigation. Close to being a cold case I think.”

“So Frank, you think I can dope out an ongoing police investigation just because I’m an ex-cop?” Franco nodded. “Everything as far as Nick is concerned, yeah. As much as Perkouri anyway. That’s why I need the two of you. I need a pair of Eyes on each coast.”

Checking Carol, Dom said, “And a pair of legs. No need askin’ which pair you want here.”

Franco said, “Well Dom, are you in or out?”

“Well, I’d like to meet this kid. Gotta admit he fascinates me. Find out how he nailed those Buzzbee boys in the can like that. And what pitch he threw to induce that batter to hit into a triple play in the ninth in the state championship. But traveling to the west coast is expensive—”

Franco held up his hand. “I got you covered Dom just like I’ve got this covered.” He slapped forty dollars down on the table for their meal over the tip. “And that runaway girl, the unsolved case, started out up in Vegas. So I could see where you might have to go up there for a day or two. Could spot you a couple hundred extra to, shall we say, sightsee out there?” Franco arched one eyebrow for effect. “I’ll defray all *reasonable* expenses—standard per diem. No high roller’s suites though, no Beverly Hills Hilton and such. But I *do* want you to use any connections you might have to find out everything the cops had on Nick on both those deals. Work that fraternal order of police angle. Whatever it takes. Nick was initially a suspect in both cases but his alibis were rock solid both times. And bring back all the witnesses you need. We’ll pay for them too.”

Carol said, “Who’s we?”

The kid’s old man. Hear he’s not hurting for cash. Trouble is he doesn’t know anything about this yet.” She looked at him dumbfounded. “What? How can that be? That’s crazy.”

“The kid’s own request. Said he’d get another lawyer if I told his folks before it was necessary. I kept telling him the thing would all blow over, see? I thought it would. No case to be made, ya know? Especially as liberal as Maryland law is for determining vehicular homicide. But this Perkouri is an asshole. Thinks this case is his ticket to the big time.”

“Yours too, eh Frank?” Carol looked at him sideways. “Carol. You know me better than that.”

“Just so long as you do all you can to keep it from going to trial. File all the necessary motions, no cause due to lack of evidence, etcetera—you know. Push it to Juvie. Then I’ll be satisfied.”

“You can count on that. But Perkouri is going to make this thing happen. I’m telling ya. He’s champing at the bit. Doing everything he can to fast-track it for adult court.”

“You saying the kid hasn’t been arrested yet?”

“No Dom, I never said that. He was arrested a couple weeks ago. He’s out on bail. Turned himself in voluntarily at my request. Cops didn’t have a clue he was involved until I talked to my contact in the SA’s office. I feel bad about that. But for all his shenanigans, he’s an honest kid. Wanted to do the right thing. I thought it would be all right, all for the best. But ...”

“Best for whom, Franky? Best for you? Who bailed him out? How much?” Franco frowned. “Five big ones. Kid used his own money for the premium though and paid the bondsman his fee, too. I’ll let that crack slide Dom. I co-signed for him through Max Terry.”

“Terry’s a good man. Worked with him out of the Bradensburg station back in the Forties, just after the War. The big one WWII. Not this chicken ass thing we got now in Viet Nam.”

Carol said, “And the summons?”

“Mailed out yesterday, supposedly. At least that’s what I heard. Haven’t seen it yet.”

“Gee, guess you’ll have to tell his old man now.”

“Not yet. The kid’s visiting his grandparents in Iowa with his folks and the girl. Some lake resort town his mom’s from. We worked a deal with Perkouri and the county cops here and local police out there to keep tabs on him. Talked to him this morning. Said he’ll tell his folks before he gets home to find the paperwork waiting in the mailbox.”

Carol asked, “When’s he due back Frank and when’s the trial date?”

“Two weeks.” Carol: “Two weeks to trial? That’s crazy.”

“No. He’s due back in two weeks. Trial’s set for September twenty-second. His birthday no less. We’ve got five weeks to prepare. Not much time. See why I need you? Perkouri’s really pushing this thing.”

Dom: “And you’re saying we can’t even talk to your client for two weeks, hunh?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I might be able to get him to call you. But you can talk to almost everyone else. Got a list of people to interview on the boat, and where you might find them. Have a copy for each of you. It’s a long list. And I’ve got statements from the three kids you can review—got ‘em on tape too, if you’d prefer them to the transcripts. Carol, I’m going to need you to check with everyone who knew this kid. Start with what happened at Truley’s. Check with his teachers, you know the drill. Truley was there and his staff and several customers when it went bad with the Buzzbees. Also, talk with the two girls, the eyewitnesses. They’re key. Give me your intuition as well as the facts—how you think they’ll shake out on the stand. The pair of twins, of course, and their folks. But stay away from his neighbors and relatives until the family gets back here. I put asterisks next to their names. Could use a good accident expert, too. If you got any recommendations.”

Dom: “Sure. Know a couple o’ guys—solid guys. No bull; know their stuff. Get you their numbers. Fella name o’ Barnes might be your best bet. An expert. Worked thirty years for the county investigatin’ accidents. Then, there’s another guy—retired insurance investigator—Juan. Last name escapes me right now. Seventeenth birthday, hunh? What a way to spend it. Shee-itt.” Carol shook her head. “Also makes trying him as an adult not look so bad.” Dom said. “Yeah. You think Perkouri didn’t think of that? That pecker’s a real piece o’ work.”

“Dom. See if there’s anything you can do to help Carol. Then let me know as soon as you can get out to the coast. Might want to start by visiting Truley’s with her before you go. That Truley’s is a rough place.” Dom asked. “What about the old man? Wouldn’t he want the same shyster he hired last year to represent his son? There’s none better.”

“Bailey? Checked with him already. He’s too busy. Said he doesn’t feel any heat from this thing. Too local for his tastes. He doesn’t mind throwing me a bone here.”

“What if the old man insists? He’s footin’ the bill, right?”

“He will—yes. But the kid and I shook on it and I trust him.”

“Trust him to sway the old man to hire you, ‘stead of that ace Bailey?” Dom smirked.

“Yes I do. I trust him. And he trusts me.”

“Didn’t know that’s how it worked with criminal lawyers Franky.”

“Look Dom, this is gettin’—” Carol jumped in. “Speaking of bills, standard rates?”

“Yeah Carol, standard rates plus expenses. The usual deal. When we get the kid off, there could be a bonus in it for us. I expect the old man to be *very* grateful.”

Carol said, “Promises, promises Frank but that’s not the promise I’m looking for.”

“First things first. This works out we could all be famous. Get rich.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Franco ignored her. Dom called the waitress over, saying. “You mean *you* could be famous, get rich, Franky.”

The waitress said, “Yessir?”

“The two ladies over there next to the glass—see the one with the frosted hair? Bring them a round of whatever they’re drinking and add it to my friend’s tab here, OK?” He nodded to Franco. The waitress smiled. “Yes sir.” Dom added. “But tell ‘em it’s from me.” He winked. Her smile broadened. “Will do.”

“You’re a piece of work Dom! Bet me a sawbuck and use my pocketbook to close the deal!”

“Yeah buddy. I know my way around. That’s why you want my legs on the west coast.”

“And mine on the east, hunh Dad?” Dom smacked his lips in disgust. “I didn’t hear that.” They finished off their crab cakes in silence.

Dom said, “Hey. Look here.” He tilted his head towards the table behind Franco. They watched the girl deliver the drinks. The one with frosted hair leaned over to look around her friend, raising her glass to Dom, as the waitress pointed him out. Frosted hair motioned for Dom to come over.

Finishing off his beer, Dom got up. “Excuse me friends. Thanks for the treat Franco. You can do this again anytime. Right now the evening is young and my destiny awaits, like that ten-spot.”

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