

Chapter 1

In a small, noisy dive called The Shiny Penny, two men sat at the end of the bar, engaged in furtive conversation. One wore Ray Ban sunglasses, the other an old-school hat with a brim, like a young Frank Sinatra.

“How much?” asked the hat.

“Twenty tons per truckload.” replied the sunglasses.

“It's good copper?”

“Highest quality, for solenoids.”

“How many shipments?”

“The paperwork is good for thirty days. After that, the warehouse will be looking for payment. I've got to turn around as many loads as I can and disappear. An actual round trip is four days. Say, seven loads, with me and the truck laying low for three days, each load.”

The fence tweaked the brim of his hat. “I can move all of that. You'll get a small cut, after it's moved to the buyer.”

“Small cut?! I'm taking all the risks!” The man in the sunglasses fidgeted, then pulled off the Ray Bans. A deformed eye glared out of his face at the fence.

“What, you giving me the Evil Eye, now? Put those back on. You're calling attention to yourself.”

After a moment, the evil-eyed man complied, twitching nervously on his stool. “If you screw me over, I'll put two holes in you!”

“Easy, crack baby! Okay, I can go with a few more bucks. I got expenses. But you better think twice about threatening me. I know people.”

“Yeah, you're no made-man! So what, you know some people? What makes you think they'll care if you turn up dead?”

“My mother dated the Don, the head of the family. All

she has to do is make a call and they'll find you, even if you're hiding in the mountains of Afghanistan. Do *not* do that again." The hat brim jerked as he said this.

Sunglasses backed off. "Okay. Pickup is early tomorrow morning."

"Have the stuff at the yard no later than 10AM. I got a guy who needs to be gone early, so don't screw this up! Be there, or you don't get nothing and you don't get no second chance."

Sunglasses hopped off the barstool. "I'm gonna find me a hooker. I got an itch for a bitch with a pair of big ones."

"You've got a serious problem with impulse control."

Sunglasses threw a dollar tip on the bar and left. He reached under his jacket and fiddled with the gun in his belt, perhaps thinking of how it would feel to have shot holes in that hat. He pulled his collar up and ducked his head. It had begun to rain.

Chapter 2

The rain soaked the streets and cast halos around the streetlights. From inside the greasy spoon restaurant, the view of the night was obscured by mist on the windows. Passing shadows of people, trudging through their lives, occasionally broke the stillness. A tired, older woman, in a tired, old waitress uniform, approached a heavysset, tired, older man, seated at the counter. For a moment, her eyes twinkled.

“What'll you have?”

“I think I'll have me some eggs.”

“How'd you like those eggs cooked?”

“Gee, that'd be great!”

This was not the first time this exchange was played out, nor would it be the last. The man looked into her eyes.

“Belle, can I have some coffee?”

“Regular or decaf?”

“When, in the last whenever, did I order decaf?”

“Rafe, I can't honestly say.”

“Woman, you lie like a rug! Gimme regular coffee. Uh, please.”

“Well, since you said the magic word...”

Belle poured a steaming cup of fresh coffee and served it with a small pitcher of $\frac{1}{2}$ & $\frac{1}{2}$.

“Eggs scrambled? Wheat toast?”

“Practicing your mind-reading act, Belle? What number am I thinking of?”

“Seven, as in the number of minutes it'll take to serve your order.”

“You're a saint, Belle. No, that's not true. Saints are generally dead.”

Rafe Velez had grown old investigating other people's

troubles. Sometimes, he helped them, sometimes he didn't. He had never crossed the line into outright criminal behavior in his work and personal life, but some of his decisions would have cost a better man a decent night's sleep.

At this point in his life, he needed money. He didn't have expensive vices, nor did he waste money. In helping his clients, sometimes, he profited from them, above and beyond the fee. Some crooked money came his way, from time to time. It was age that demanded more money. He needed his retirement fund to be as fully funded as he could manage, without getting busted or killed.

He sipped coffee, turning his mind back to the young woman who visited his office that afternoon. She was almost pretty, with a peasant blouse that revealed a bit too much cleavage. He presumed she was a bit simpleminded and had no idea that the blouse said more about her lack of judgment than she might have wanted. Her fingernails were little works of art, with her ring fingers in a different, bright color. When she spoke, she did not disappoint Rafe's expectations.

“So, *entonces*, I think I need a detective. I wanted to ask you something. Uh, you speak Spanish?”

“Lousy, high-school Spanish. I'm a coconut – brown on the outside, white on the inside. I was born here, grew up here and don't generally need to speak Spanish.”

“Okay, mister. You think you can help me?”

“Help you with what?” he asked, with a tone that suggested he wasn't patient.

“Oh, yeah, I should tell you.”

This is going to take a long time, mused Rafe. He wondered if this was going to be a simple I-think-my-boyfriend's-cheating-on-me” job.

“I lost my lottery ticket. I won \$250,000. Now I can't find it.”

This was new. Rafe straightened in his chair and gave her his full attention.

“What's your name, rich woman?”

“Maria Consuelo Alonzo Perez.”

She's probably from Mexico, Rafe assumed. The question wasn't whether she was lying. The questions were, how much, how often, and would it be possible to tell when she was not lying?

“Is that your real name?”

She blushed a bit. “Yes. Why, is that important?”

“Not really, but I think we'll get along better if you don't start lying to me right at the start. You from Mexico?”

“Sí. Wow, you smart! I think you gonna find my lottery ticket.”

Rafe sighed, imagining all the twists and turns it would take to get this girl to tell him all the facts. The odds that this was actually about a missing lottery ticket were small. Most likely, it's about a straying boyfriend.

“Where was the last place you remember seeing the ticket?”

She hesitated for a moment, then said, “On my dresser.”

“When was this?”

“This morning. I was excited to be going to the store to get my money, so I got dressed in the bathroom. When I got dressed, it was gone.”

“Were you alone?”

“No, my boyfriend was there.”

“Was he there after you saw the ticket was missing?”

“No.”

“And you think your boyfriend took the ticket?”

“No, I don't wanna think that! But...”

“Does he live with you?”

“No, he has a place over on Mulberry, near the

warehouses.”

“Let's go. Or, rather, I'll go. Give me your cell number. I'll call you when I've spoken with him.”

She looked very uncomfortable. “No, I want you to go there tomorrow morning, early, and ask him!”

“Maria, if he has the ticket, he could have already claimed it. The store can't pay out that kind of money. The lottery people have to handle it. Which store sold you the ticket?”

She told him.

“Let's go there now and let them know you lost track of the ticket.”

“Oh, we don't have to do that, do we? I can tell them at the *bodega*, myself. I just want you to go ask Enrique tomorrow if he saw the ticket. In the morning.”

Rafe put his palm to his face. “Are you sure there isn't something else you want to know? Like, “is Enrique sleeping around with another woman”?”

She shifted in her chair, her eyes narrowing and looking off into space.

“Just, can you do that for me?”

“Yes, I can. You're the boss, once you pay me.”

He told her the fee, which she paid with crumpled bills from her purse.

“What do you do for a living, Maria?”

“I do pedicures at Nails Now.” Tip money. She paid with tip money from working on people's feet. Not pretty or sexy enough to be a stripper, he mused.

Rafe put her mobile number into his phone, then said, “Here's what I think you want: you want me to see if your boyfriend is sleeping around on you, but you don't want to say that. That would make it real in your mind. I don't care, really. I'll go there early tomorrow morning and ask about the ticket, just like you asked me to.”

Maria, looking relieved, gave him a vulnerable smile.

“Thank you, Rafael.”

“It's Rafe. Only my father, when he was really pissed off at me, would call me Rafael.”

A plate with eggs and toast plunked down in front of him, jarring him back to the present.

“You want ketchup?”

“Belle, when, in the last whenever, did I spoiled eggs with ketchup?”

“Never, Rafe. Enjoy your food.”

“Well, I have to enjoy it, now that you told me to.”

Chapter 3

Early the next morning, Rafe stood down the block from Enrique's apartment. At the nearby warehouses, trucks were pulling up to the loading docks. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Maria, furtively watching from an alley.

Rafe rapped on the door and waited. After a moment, a freshly dressed young man appeared, looking quizzical. "Yes?", he said, with a good, American accent.

"Hi. Enrique? I'm Rafe Velez. I've been asked by Maria Consuelo Alonzo Perez to check and see if you know the whereabouts of her missing lottery ticket. Can I come in?"

Wordlessly, Enrique let him in. Once Rafe was inside, he said, "I don't know anything about a lottery ticket. She lost it?" He looked genuinely puzzled and not at all guilty.

Rafe looked around. The place was a modest bachelor pad, a studio with an unmade bed. The bathroom door was open. Unless he had a girl in the closet, Enrique was sleeping alone.

"I don't think she was telling the truth about the lottery ticket. She actually wants me to see if you're spending time with another woman, is my guess."

Enrique smiled, guilelessly. "She's kind of jealous. That's the way she works."

Rafe's instincts told him that this kid was no cheater and no thief.

"I have to go to work now. You need me for anything else?" Enrique had a bemused look on his face, imagining Maria's suspicions, no doubt.

"Nope, I'm good."

Outside the apartment, Enrique trotted to catch the bus, which was just pulling up. Rafe headed over to the alley where he had spotted Maria.

Two gunshots split the air. Rafe froze, then hurried to the building next to the alley, waiting a few moments before peering around the corner.

Maria, with a bright bloom of blood on her chest, lay gasping on her back. Steely eyed, Rafe scanned the alley. No one else in sight.

He walked quickly to her side. She managed to gasp, “Mal ojo. Crooked eye.” A moment later, her own eyes were sightless. On the ground, nearby, was a scratch-off lottery ticket. Without touching it, he saw the word WINNER, in the of amount \$250,000.

“I’ll be damned! There really was a ticket.”

Robbery was not the motive for the murder. Her purse was zippered shut and her jewelry was untouched. Ah, but the ticket! As he dialed 911, Rafe, tempted by greediness, considered swiping it, but thought better of it. Why complicate things in a murder investigation?

The distant sound of sirens approaching broke his reverie. Time to be sharp. He looked around the alley again, sweeping it with his eyes for clues, evidence, anything that could help solve this murder. Nothing stood out.

The ambulance arrived first. The EMT's worked quickly to revive her, but in vain. They were careful to avoid any unnecessary contamination of the crime scene. This wasn't their first rodeo. While they worked, a tractor trailer pulled out into the alley and drove away.

Next, an unmarked car with a dash beacon and siren pulled up. Detectives Toole and Stern got out, unhurriedly and looking tired. This was the end of their shift and they were not happy.

Chapter 4

“Good morning, Rafe.” Detective Toole was professional, distant and courteous. “Did you get a look at the shooter?”

“Nope. She was a client, checking up on her boyfriend. Uh, a truck pulled out from over there a minute or two ago. Dammit, didn't get the license plate.” Quietly, Rafe asked, “Wanna be a lottery winner?”, said. He inclined his head toward the ticket near the body. The EMT's hadn't noticed it. Toole's eyes narrowed.

In a matter of fact tone, Toole asked, “Where was the boyfriend when she was shot?”

“On a bus, headed to work. I saw him board it. There wasn't enough time for him to exit, come back and shoot her.”

“Where does the boyfriend work?”

“He didn't say and I didn't ask.”

Toole eyed Rafe carefully. “You carrying, Rafe?”

“Not today.”

Toole nodded. Rafe seldom needed a gun on the job. Toole took out his phone, requesting a Crime Scene team, then spoke to his lieutenant.

“Yeah, Rafe Velez here lost a client. No, no shooter ID. Basically, he's useless.” Toole's eyes were expressionless as he told his boss in so many words that Rafe was not a suspect. Then he winked.

Toole said, “Right”, pocketing his phone. “We'll need you to give a statement.”

“Didn't I just do that?”

“You're a funny guy. Wiseguys I don't need”, referring to the “funny guy” banter in the movie by the same name.

“Funny, you don't look like Joe Pesci. You're too tall, for one thing,” quipped Rafe.

“Ah, we had to catch this at the end of shift. Drop by the precinct later and tell your story to the lady who does the typing. This stinks.” Toole was right. No clear motive, no eyewitnesses so far and a waste of a human life.

Toole sent a few uniformed officers to canvass the area, but had little hope. “Whaddya say we split the winnings, Rafe? Uh, any family to contact that you know of?”

“She's from Mexico. Unless there's a cousin or sibling around, I don't think so.”

“Work?”

“Nails Now, pedicurist.”

Toole sighed. “Get lost. Go have coffee. You're cluttering up my crime scene.”

“No! Really?” Rafe walked away, his shoulders hunched, then turned back.

“Dying declaration: “mal ojo, crooked eye.”

Toole perked up. “A clue! Now, all we need to do is round up every wall-eyed sonofabitch and beat 'em with phone books until one of 'em cracks. Or not. I'm thinking not.”

Toole was not lazy or stupid. He was a plodder, in Rafe's experience. He wouldn't win any awards for being a super-sleuth, but he got the job done as best he could. When he couldn't, he let it go cold and moved on to the next case.

Rafe headed for the greasy spoon. The day shift waitress had legs, and he appreciated them.

Chapter 5

AT 3:17 that afternoon, Rafe got a call. He was looking at the clock when the phone rang.

“I am the lucky winner of \$250,000! Imagine my happiness!” Toole was chortling as he spoke.

“Are you kidding me?! You stole that lottery ticket? What if those EMT's noticed it and rat you out?”

“Nah, they were too busy dealing with the recently departed. Only you know about it, unless you mentioned it to someone. I haven't actually claimed it yet,” he added.

“I did mention it. The boyfriend. It was the pretext I was supposed to use for questioning him. The ticket was “lost”. She thought he was cheating on her.”

After a long pause, Toole asked, “Am I as screwed as I think I am?”

After a longer pause, Rafe said, “No. This is fixable. When you question the boyfriend, don't even mention the ticket. Just say you spoke to me about Maria's suspicions. Then you can split the money with me.” Rafe was half joking.

“Done! All cash. Whatever's left after I pay taxes, you get half.”

Rafe thought a long time before answering. “Okay, as long as this killing gets solved. No money until there's an arrest. I don't want to be hooked into this over stolen money. And no convenient frame-up of one of the usual suspects, either. If I had a conscience, I wouldn't want that on it.”

Toole was agitated as he spoke. “I'll work this straight. If I don't find the doer and I don't make an arrest, you still want the money?” Toole was almost plaintive, trying to buy Rafe's silence.

“If you really hit the wall in your investigation, I'll do

the work myself. I'll earn my half of the money.”

“Hey, don't be a self-righteous prick! You got a retirement fund? Well, this will be a nice addition to it, or a good start.” Toole wasn't wrong. Rafe had a small nest egg, but it wasn't much. This was a windfall, no matter how you sliced it.

“I got expenses. I got an ex-wife and kids. I need this, Rafe!” Toole was whining now.

“Relax. Take it easy, take it easy. Near as I can tell, there's no clear connection to anyone else, as far as the money goes. Not the boyfriend, anyway. Did you get any leads as to family?”

“Stern searched her apartment. Got some letters in Spanish to translate.”

Toole wasn't normally this impulsive. What had triggered this theft? He never looked like he was on drugs or mentioned gambling.

“What the hell possessed you to do this, Toole? You got a bookmaker who's looking for you?”

“No! I-I just looked at that ticket and wanted it, bad. Stern was busy talking to the uniforms and I just pocketed it. It was like I finally got lucky or something. I didn't think.”

Rafe doubted that. Toole had a methodical way of handling his work, even if it wasn't inspired. He may not have done any thinking right then, but he most likely had been thinking about money for a long while.

“Okay. Toole, you need to relax. I'll take the money. The only person who deserved the money is dead, as far as we know now. If it came right down to it, can you think of a way to make this ticket reappear, if it has to?”

“I don't know. Yes! I can go to the girl's apartment myself and 'find' it. Stern said Crime Scene didn't tear the place apart because it wasn't where she was killed.”

Rafe sighed with relief, for both of them. That money

was growing in his mind into a real pile of cash, heaped in front of him.

“I’ll come by the precinct in about an hour and a half to give my statement. Will you be there?”

“No. Stern will. He’s following up with finding relatives. I have to talk to the boyfriend when he gets home from work.”

Chapter 6

Rafe finished making his statement to a woman typist who, ironically, had a crooked eye. Her alibi for the murder was solid – day shift at a police station. He wandered over to Stern's desk.

“Find any family to notify?”

“Uh, yeah, an uncle in Monterrey, Mexico. She had some documents, letters in Spanish I got translated. The guy was pretty broken up about it. Spoke pretty good English. She's an orphan who came here for a better life. Sucks, what happened to her.”

“Nobody here in the States?” Rafe was careful to be neutral, almost bored, when he asked.

“Nope. She got the job at Nails Now through a friend of the family who works there. Nothing of interest there.”

Rafe allowed himself a moment of relief. No family on the ground here, poking around the investigation. Nobody at Nails Now mentioned the lottery ticket.

“Do you need anything from me, Stern? I mean, aside from the statement?”

“Not really, unless you have an idea why she got shot, aside from what you told us already.”

“Not a clue. Probably just the wrong place at the wrong time. You get anything from the canvass?”

“Nobody saw nothin'. The, uh, warehouse manager at Acme Distributing heard shots at 8:47 AM. He remembered the time because he had just told the forklift driver that the truck that was being loaded was supposed to have gone out at a quarter to nine. The driver was all over his ass about it.”

“So, nothing of interest at her place?” Rafe was carefully deadpan, his voice betraying no particular interest.

“We're still going through her papers, but there wasn't anything that jumped out at you. Crime Scene gave it a once-over, but there wasn't much to play with.”

“Solve this one, Stern. It's bad for my business if my clients die while I'm on the case. You've got 36 hours before this one goes cold.”

“Ooh, you must watch a lot of TV! Get that from the Discovery Channel?”

“A&E.”

Stern was already shuffling through the stuff on his desk, glancing at the computer monitor and heaving sighs.

Rafe waited until he was away from the precinct house before calling Toole. “Stern gave Maria's place a light rinse. A clever man could find a place to put back a missing piece of evidence, if it was necessary.”

Toole's tone showed his relief. “Small favors. Stern is a good man – predictable. Now, all we have to worry about is any witness statement that there's a missing lottery ticket. Let's hope this goes cold.”

“No, let's hope you do your job and collar the shooter! That's what we really need. Don't phone this in Toole.”

“All right, already! Enrique alibied out. He knows the bus driver and the bus driver knows him. I'll find the bus driver tomorrow and confirm. The kid didn't mention the ticket, but he did mention Maria's jealous streak. He was really broken up about it. My gut says he's clean.”

“Yeah, I agree, poor bastard. What else you got?”

“I want to take another pass at the warehouse manager over at Acme Distributing. He's the only guy who even admitted he heard something.”

“If you hurry, you can get there before the sun goes down.”

“Just pulling up now, smartass.”

Chapter 7

Long shadows followed Rafe home. He pushed himself to take the stairs two at a time, up to the second story apartment he kept. It was his cardio exercise routine. He kept telling himself that as long as he could do that, he didn't have to join a gym or something to whip himself back in to the shape he lost years ago.

Stripping down to his underwear, he sprawled on the couch. The thought of the lottery money kept poking at him, making him turn over in his mind everything he could think of that could go wrong. Enrique figured largely in his worst case scenarios. He was the only person, so far, that had knowledge of the 'alleged' ticket. Alleged. The mere fact that it wasn't just an allegation didn't bother Rafe. His morality didn't extend into gray areas. It wasn't Bad, therefore it was Good that free money had been harvested by Toole, who was the only one who could control the situation. After all, he was a real cop, whose partner didn't know about this piece of evidence.

A sudden fear intruded: what if Toole is more desperate than he seems? Would he get rid of the only link to the ticket, in order to secure the money? The thought of Toole arranging the death of Enrique and hanging the girl's murder around the kid's neck was Bad. Rafe couldn't touch the money if it came to him that way. All his experience in dealing with Toole said, "No, he won't do that." But this theft was off the map in Rafe's mind regarding the man. Time to press Toole for his motive. He picked up his phone.

"Toole. Rafe. Yeah, I'm old school. I announce my name when making a call. How'd it go with the warehouse manager?"

“He was nervous about talking with cops about a murder. Basically, he repeated what he told the uniform. The truck driver was needling him about keeping to his schedule, so he yelled at the forklift driver as he was looking at the clock. Bang, bang.”

“Did you press him, see if he was hiding something?”

“Yeah! What do think I'm doing, here? My freaking job, Velez!”

“Where was this driver at the time? Did you get a description?”

“Aw, fer crissakes, what is your malfunction?! 5'8”, brown hair, sunglasses, medium build, spoke with an American accent, *amigo*. Had too much coffee or something. The guy was antsy to get on the road.”

“What was the cargo? Where was it headed?”

“About twenty tons of copper wire, headed for Incoils North America, in Dayton, Ohio. You want their product line, too?”

To himself, he said, 'No, I want to know why you stole that ticket, Toole'. “I'm just concerned, Toole. You went off the reservation today and I want to know why.”

Toole breathed heavily into the phone. “Look, I saw the ticket. I added up the odds and picked it up.” There was a very long pause. “Kathy needs an operation.” Kathy was his 8 year old daughter. The other shoe dropped.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“It's some cardiac thing. I don't know what the hell it is. It's \$50,000. Insurance will only cover half. It's my daughter, fer crissakes!”

So, Toole was a good daddy. Rafe hoped that Toole's confession would clear his mind and let him do his job well enough to close the case fast.

“I'd tell you, 'Don't worry', but the last time I told someone that, she panicked. Of course, it was my mother. Never tell a mother not to worry.”

Toole chuckled, weakly. "Did you really think I had bad habits, or something? Yeah, it was probably stupid to take that ticket, but my brain shut down once I realized there was a chance at getting out from under the weight I've been carrying."

"Well, is your brain switched on now, so you can work this case with your usual flair for deduction, Sherlock?"

"I feel like I got a load off my shoulders. Uh, you satisfied with half, Rafe?"

"I wasn't going to squeeze you. It's not in my best interest to have you pissed off with me, or distracted from closing this case."

"It's not looking good. It's thin and there's nothing to follow up."

"Where was the truck driver at the time of the shooting?"

Toole did not speak for a moment. "Uh, I don't have that in my notes. I gotta go back and make that warehouse guy wet his pants again."

"You do that, now that you're not distracted. Meanwhile, I've got to feed myself. I'm sick of that greasy spoon food."

"You cook?"

"Barely, but there's something in the freezer I can reheat."

"I'll call you tomorrow, after I've pushed the warehouse guy."

Rafe heaved himself off the couch and plodded into the kitchen. Frozen lasagne beckoned.

Chapter 8

On the toilet, Sunglasses was doubled over, in pain. Perhaps his diet didn't agree with him. Most likely, the sight of the girl with the nice cleavage laying on her back, with two bullets to the chest from his gun had worked its way into his bowels. After cleaning himself up, he phoned the warehouse manager.

As soon as he answered, Sunglasses asked, without preamble, "You kept your mouth shut to the cops?"

"Look, I told 'em nothing! Why'd you have to kill that girl?!"

"She saw my face. I took off the Ray Ban's to get a better look at her cans. She kinda freaked out. It just happened!"

"You can't come back here! The cops have already come back to ask more questions."

"I'll shoot your ass, just like I did that snotty bitch, if you open your mouth! If I get busted, my people will find you and you'll wish you were dead!"

"I don't want any more trouble. Can't you send someone else to do the pickup?"

"I don't need to send someone else if you keep quiet!"

Sunglasses cut off the call, sweating, then ran to the bathroom and vomited. Rinsing his mouth with mouthwash, he snorted a line of crystal meth, changed his shirt and counted the wad of cash in his pocket. He left his apartment, heading into the night for the street where the cheapest hookers plied their trade.

After getting some quick relief, he wandered over to a certain greasy spoon restaurant, where a tired, older woman in a tired, old uniform took his order, with no banter, and served him his food. Sunglasses left a lousy tip and went back home. He stripped, crawled into bed

and, after the meth wore off, eventually fell asleep.

The day dawned, cloudy, with a gray light that didn't add any cheer to the room where Sunglasses awoke from sleep. He passed his hand over his face several times and arose. Picking through a pile of clothes, he dress in the least dirty pants and shirt he could find, shoving his gun into the back of the waistband of his pants. More meth stiffened his resolve.

Sunglasses skulked over to the scene of the crime. Yellow tape fluttered in the slight breeze. Twitching, he looked around, then walked quickly to the warehouse. The main door was shuttered, so he went in through the smaller door. No one but the manager was in view.

“Are you crazy?!” hissed the warehouse manager. “What the hell are you doing back here? You're not due back for another three days. I thought you were on the road to Dayton!”

“You don't need to know my business! I wanted to see your face for myself.” Taking off the Ray Bans, he shoved his face in front of the manager, who flinched.

Haltingly, the manager said, “I don't want no trouble. I won't say anything that'll make trouble for you.”

“That's right! You never saw me before yesterday, anyway. That paperwork says I come back on those dates there to pick up my load and leave. That's all you need to tell them. Did you give them a description of me?” Sunglasses looked menacingly at the manager.

“Just your height, build, brown hair and sunglasses. I didn't say anything about your eye...”

A slap to the face cut off the manager in mid-speech.

“That's right and you won't say anything about it if they come back again. You don't know nothin'.”

The manager blurted out, “The cops are looking for a guy with a crooked eye!”

Sunglasses started, then reached his hand behind his

back.

“No, don't do anything to me!” The manager was ashen, pleading.

Sunglasses abruptly turned and left, hurrying towards another alley, where he vomited again.

Chapter 9

Rafe was sipping coffee at home when Toole called.

“Our warehouse manager is nervous in the service. When I mentioned the crooked eye, he got tense and claimed he didn't see anybody with such an eye. The truck driver is supposed to be headed to Dayton, with a load of copper wire. At the actual time of the shooting, the manager didn't have eyes on the guy. I like the truck driver for this shooting.”

“Was this guy a regular?”

“Nope. New guy, with a contract to move, like, seven loads of wire to Dayton. Four day turnaround. I don't have enough for a warrant to dig in deeper than the bill of lading. Got a name: Max Gershenowitz. Ran that. No priors, under that name. Just a driver with a CDL. No moving violations.”

“So, he's a saint behind the wheel and shoots girls in alleys. What's his motive?”

“Damned if I know. Maybe he has an eye for the ladies, but they don't have an eye for him.”

“Remind me to buy you a trowel, so you can lay it on thicker. So, you think the manager is lying about Gershenowitz?”

“Yep. I want to bring him in for questioning. Might take all of half an hour to break his story.”

“Keep me posted. Oh, here's the address of the store where Maria bought the winning ticket. Go there and buy one of the same kind for yourself. That way, if they trace the batch of tickets to the store, you're covered. Who knows, you might double your money!”

Rafe wolfed down a bowl of cereal, dressed and headed to his office. He played back the surreptitious video he had shot of Maria's interview, listening for any clue that

might tie her to a man with a Commercial Driver's License and a crooked eye. There was nothing.

Then he spent time musing over the \$80,000 he might get if Toole managed to claim the lottery ticket without getting himself busted. If he did get caught, it was easy enough for Rafe to claim he never saw the ticket there.

He then considered having a woman in his life, again. His ex had remarried, happily, it seemed. Rafe didn't think it was worth the trouble to get serious about a woman, given his lack of money, looks and desire for true love. He wanted practical love – some sex, some harmonious housekeeping and time to himself. He hired the first two and enjoyed his alone time.

The thought of some financial security actually made him uncomfortable. Money complicates things, especially if there's a woman involved, in his experience. He only paid alimony for about a year, before his ex married a Realtor.

“Maybe I'll find a woman who owns a business, and become a kept man,” he thought to himself, with no little humor. Who would want to take care of a bear of a man that snored and farted in his sleep?

While lunching on a sandwich and iced tea, Toole called again.

“He broke like a cheap watch. Mr. Givens, warehouse manager, wants to be in the Witness Protection Program. Gershenowitz threatened him with worse-than-death if he ratted. Apparently, this truck driver with no record has “friends”, of the nasty variety, and a drug habit. He's also in the area, not in Dayton. Looks like he's moving stolen goods locally, on top of murder.”

“What's the price of copper these days?”

“About six grand per ton, as scrap. Seven load of twenty tons each of first quality wire amounts to something substantial. Even if he's only getting a smallish cut, it

beats a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. I think I've got probable cause for a warrant – I think the paperwork's phony. It says “Net 30.” By the time thirty days is up and the warehouse goes looking for payment, Gershenowitz will be in the wind, and his truck will have a new paint job.”

“Yeah, but you can't retire on a piece of “something substantial”. What was his play, here?”

“For all I know, he's just a dumbass with a crack habit who didn't think far enough ahead. The question is, who cooked the paperwork?”

Chapter 10

Stern, sitting at his desk at home, cursed that meth-head Gershenowitz for bollixing up the the job. On the computer monitor in front of him, a progress bar showed the time left before all the files pertaining to the phony paperwork for 140 tons of copper wire were shredded beyond recognition. The hard copies were all at the bottom of the paper shredder.

When it was done, Stern grabbed the bag of confetti from the shredder and heaved it into an incinerator near a certain greasy spoon. He went inside the restaurant, to a booth in the back. A wizened old man was waiting.

“I came a very long way here to ask you a question. Do we have some exposure here, Stern?”

“No. I used buffers to deliver everything to the truck driver: the offer, the paperwork and the fence. All the evidence on my end is gone.”

“Ah, the fence. I used to bang his mother, after he was born. She was from the old neighborhood, like me.” There was a long pause. “What will you do about this?”

“My partner has this in hand. He's got a name, a description and a suspicion about the copper wire. This was supposed to be just robbery, not robbery and homicide.”

“The wire is already delivered. I have the money. You will take a loss on this.”

Stern was impassive. “I assumed that. I don't want to jeopardize our long term relationship.”

“What will be done with the driver? The only people he can give up are pawns. Perhaps he can be arrested? I don't want this matter to escalate. It will call undue attention to whomever is behind it.”

“He was always supposed to be the patsy. You told me

those who contacted him were expendable, willing to do prison time in exchange for forgiveness of certain obligations.”

“Yes. I get paid, and get some troublemakers out of my hair.” The bald, wizened old man smiled. “You do realize that if this gets back to me, I’ll be disappointed. Very disappointed.”

Stern averted his eyes for a moment. “I know we’re not family, but I respect my elders.”

“That won’t protect you if you muck this up. Don’t let this get out of hand, on your part. You will have more to worry about than prison time, with a population consisting of those you have arrested.” The old man’s face was flat, impassive and his gaze fixed, distant.

Equally impassive, Stern said, “I understand.”

“Will you have something to eat? My treat.”

Stern ordered a sandwich and coffee, from a young waitress with nice legs.

Chapter 11

Rafe had a stray thought about how he was only four months away from going bankrupt, if he didn't get himself some living clients. Then, it passed, succeeded by thoughts of how to allocate his cut of the lottery winnings. His natural instinct to rein in his hopes was overcome, for the moment, by the bright, shiny prospect of a hunk of cash.

He had plenty of time on his hands. Prospective clients weren't busting down the door, offering big retainers for his help. His entire professional life had been feast or famine, with a bit of savings to help him through the lean times. At this point, his savings were enough to carry him for about four months. After that, it was time to declare bankruptcy.

In his mind, he still considered Maria his client. Never mind the fact that her reason for hiring him was no longer a consideration. Forget the fact that solving her murder was up to the police, who were making headway. He felt obligated to her, because of all that money he hoped to 'inherit' from her.

Then, there was the bigger problem: did he really want to walk through that doorway into an uncertain future with stolen money? The short answer was yes; he could handle any bumps along the way with a combination of experience and bluff.

The long answer was, "Who the hell knows?" This money represented a jump beyond his comfort zone. He had never, in his life, controlled that amount of cash. His biggest payoff from his work, as a consideration for his silence, was \$15,000. He took that amount in stride, spent it freely and never regretted taking or spending it.

This, however, was an uncomfortable amount. Too

little to retire, too much to just blow on wine, women and song. It was an obligation, to himself and his future. Buy a house? Invest? Certainly not give it to some deserving charity. That is, some charity other than his own, undeserving self.

The phone rang. "Toole? Got your days and nights mixed up?"

"I'm hitting a wall, here. The truck driver's last known address is his mother's home. For all I know, he's got a furnished room somewhere in Dallas, Texas, under the name O.H. Lee."

"Wow! You solved the Kennedy assassination, too?"

"The butler did it. I have to hit the sack. Us night owls need our rest."

"Toole, your deadline is tomorrow morning."

"What deadline? We've got the guy, just not in custody. What do you want me to do? I can't take a dump and find another clue in the toilet. There's a **BOLO** posted for him, but if he lays low, we're stuck, for now."

Rafe was becoming very agitated. "So, telling your fellow officers **Be On the LookOut** is the extent of your investigation? What's Stern doing, having lunch?"

"He's probably in bed, where I should be. Don't panic, unless you feel it's absolutely necessary. This guy is hopped up, stupid and here, in town. We'll find him. I've got as much motivation to find him as you. I need that money and can't get it until this thing is closed."

Rafe was not mollified. "I'm hitting the streets."

"Are you seriously gonna mess with a homicide investigation?"

"No, just be a freelance, swing shift investigator. I have a license, remember?"

"This is police business, freelancer. Do not mess this up because you're getting emotional."

Rafe *was* getting emotional. "That dead girl is my

client. The fact that she's dead doesn't end the job. Never mind the original reason. She deserves closure.”

“I can't talk to you when you're like this.” Toole hung up.

Chapter 12

Max looked out into the night from his window at a clock that read 12:32. He was scratching his chin and twitching. Abruptly, he went for the door, out in to the gloom.

Rafe sat at the counter of the greasy spoon, nursing a cup of coffee, when a man, 5'8", medium build, brown hair and sunglasses came in, twitching. He hardly noticed Rafe and sat at the counter a few seats away. The hair on the back of Rafe's neck stood on end, as he realized this could be the man who killed Maria.

"Cheeseburger deluxe," said The Man in the Sunglasses, in a quavering voice. His clothes were shabby and probably dirty.

Rafe was breathing steadily, while his heart was pounding. He finished his coffee, asked for the check and dropped a tip on the counter. Taking the check, he walked toward the register, toward the twitching man in the sunglasses.

"Hiya, Max," he said, standing directly behind the seated man, eyeing the bulge under his shirt at the waistband of his pants. Stupidly, Max grabbed for the gun without turning around. Rafe easily subdued him, twisting his arm behind his back and relieving him of the gun, which he tossed across the floor.

"Remember the girl you shot? She was my client. I'd like to think she's happy now." Rafe told the waitress to call 911. Max had his face pressed against the counter, his sunglasses laying next to him. His crooked eye glared at Rafe.

"Ooh, a dirty look if ever I saw one! Relax, Max, it's all over." Rafe was almost high himself, the adrenaline surging through his veins.

Uniformed cops rushed inside, guns drawn. “This is Max Gershenowitz, wanted for murder and probably grand theft. Max, these are the police. Glad I could introduce you to each other.”

Max was grunting while the cops cuffed him. Pointing to the gun on the floor, Rafe said, “That might be the murder weapon.” A uniformed cop went out to his car and came back with an evidence bag, skillfully retrieving the weapon. It was an old-school .38 revolver, with a longer barrel than a snub-nosed version.

Two cops escorted Max to the back of a patrol car. The one holding the gun said, “C'mon, you should give a statement at the precinct.”

“Gladly. This was dumb luck and I want to tell everybody about it!”

Stern and Toole greeted him at the precinct. “Well, gentlemen, too bad you don't get the collar. However, case closed.” Rafe was spent. The adrenaline rush had worn off. He eyed Toole and raised his eyebrows.

Stern asked, “How the hell did you find him? Our trail went cold.”

“He just walked into the restaurant, big as life and just as smelly. He fit the description, right down to the meth-head chic wardrobe. I called him Max and he went for his gun, badly.”

“Well, we've got him for the murder. The FBI is making noises about interstate crime, organized crime and whatever else will allow them to butt in. However, Murder Two takes precedence,” said Stern, while Toole stood next to him, his eyes smiling while his mouth was neutral.

“Here's my statement: I came, I saw, I grabbed his arm and took his gun. Questions?”

“Maybe later. We need to have a chat with Max first, if he hasn't already lawyered up. Stern, you want the first

crack at him?”

“Sure.” Stern walked casually towards the interrogation rooms, his mouth set in a satisfied smile.

“We’ll see how this plays out,” said Toole, *sotto voce*. “Payday soon, if Max cops a plea.”

“We can only hope.” Rafe looked around for a chair.

“Sit, Rafe, relax. I’d offer you a cigar, but this is a non-smoking building.”

“I’m trying to cut down on cigars. Had my last one last century.”

There was more banter, but no more mention of the lottery money. There was no need.

Stern returned. “Max has confessed to the murder of “the girl with the tits who gave him a dirty look”. I think he’ll give up whatever he knows about the copper wire theft, too. That’s not my business, right now.”

“Yeah, give it to the FBI and let ‘em deal with it.” Stern gave a funny smile when Toole said this.

Rafe asked, “Uh, do you still think Givens needs WitSec? Does Max seem like a guy who’s hooked up with vengeful comrades?”

“No, Max seems like a guy only a mother could love.”

Rafe sat with the detectives, fleshed out his statement, then stood.

“I need to sleep the sleep of the just. If you need me for anything, you know how and where to find me. Good night.”

Chapter 13

The FBI did look into the matter of the copper wire, but concluded there was scant evidence that the “instant offense” involved any out-of-state connection or serious organized crime elements. Max Gershenowitz would be prosecuted for Grand Theft and Murder in the Second Degree, with a gun enhancement. Max would plead guilty to both counts and throw himself on the mercy of the court, which would be non-existent, given the depravity of the killing.

Despite the lack of evidence of major Organized Crime involvement, the local District Attorney wanted to know where all that bogus paperwork came from. Rafe spoke to an investigator from the DA's office, but had nothing to add to the investigation.

Meanwhile, he and Toole had pleasant conversations about their windfall, which was soon to be realized.

“By the way, did you buy a ticket at that store?”

“Sure. Got it right here. Haven't scratched it off, yet. I don't want to jinx this.”

“Ah, go ahead. Be brave! Who knows, you might win something more.”

Toole took out a coin and scratched. He blanched and uttered, “Holy Mother of God!”

“Don't start with me, Toole! You know how I get.”

Wordlessly, Toole proffered the card to Rafe. WINNER. \$500,000.

Uncharacteristically, Rafe was at a loss for words.

“Do you know what this means?! Go to war Miss Anna!” Toole was in an ecstasy of disbelief, relief and bafflement. “Rafe, I have a little gift for you.” Toole gave Rafe Maria's winning lottery ticket.

Rafe turned the ticket over in his hands. If he was

ambivalent about sharing half of the proceeds of this ticket, he was almost fearful of accepting the entire amount. That fear passed quickly. "I think I have to go buy a ticket at that store. It's a lucky place. Let's go right now!"

They went, Rafe bought and won nothing. At least that burden was off his mind.

The two went back to Rafe's office and planned their strategy. Toole would win first, Rafe would follow. Both had receipts for the purchases and it would appear like they had had an unbelievably lucky streak, which was only half true.

The next day, Toole claimed the winning ticket. He made the papers and the evening news. Rafe followed, made the papers and the evening news, with the two of them giving interviews together, which the networks picked up.

Enrique totally missed the news about these two lucky detectives. Hopefully, he still had a happy life, wherever he ended up.

Chapter 14

A few weeks later, Rafe called Toole. “So, how's things? How's Kathy.”

“The operation is scheduled for the end of the month. She should make a full recovery and lead a normal life. My ex is cool. She doesn't want a piece of the winnings. She's found a guy she likes and is planning to get married.”

“I know how that feels. I might be tempted to use my ex's husband as my Realtor. I want to buy a house. How's work?”

“Fine. Well, actually, a bit weird. Stern's been acting weird, that is. It's like he's all of a sudden touchy about stuff. Paranoid, maybe.”

“Does it seem like it has anything to do with your sudden wealth?”

“Nope. It's more like he's always looking over his shoulder, at something I can't see.”

“Think he's dirty?”

“I've got no reason to think so. Nothing he's done looks sketchy. I've never caught him taking a bribe or anything.”

“Well, is Internal Affairs poking around about him?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Ah, a mystery! Go get him, Sherlock!”

“Yeah, right, like I'm going to start questioning a paranoid cop about his links to Organized Crime or repeated jaywalking.”

“If you really want, I can make some discreet inquiries that won't get back to you.”

“Nah. Well, not yet. It's just a feeling I have.”

Rafe hung up, then mused about Stern. The guy was clever, distant and a bit standoffish, at the best of times.

Maybe he was a bit too clever for his own good.

But, now it was time for lunch. He took a stool at the counter of a certain greasy spoon restaurant, ordered food from a young waitress with pretty legs and sipped coffee. An old, wizened man entered and took a booth at the back, his face vaguely familiar to Rafe. Shortly thereafter, Stern, of all people, came into the place. This was not the kind of restaurant Rafe would have expected to see him in.

“Rafe! Having lunch?” This was nervous small talk, if ever Rafe had heard it. Stern hesitated, then took the stool next to him. “How’s the food here?”

“You get used to it. Hasn’t killed anybody I know,” he deadpanned to Stern.

A fine sweat appeared on Stern’s brow as he scanned the menu. “Is this how you spend your winnings? I’d have thought you’d be more upscale with your restaurants.”

“You haven’t seen the waitress. She was a gymnast. Killer legs.”

Just then, the young lady in question came to take Stern’s order. He stuttered and misspoke himself several times before he finally got his order out of his mouth.

“Seems she has an effect on you, too, huh, buddy?”

“No, no! I’ve just got stuff on my mind.”

Rafe gazed intently at Stern, using the mirror on the wall so as not to call attention to himself. If Stern was not a connoisseur of fine legs, what was his major malfunction? Gazing around the room, all he could see were random groups of people in the booths – and one old, wizened man. Rafe didn’t recognize him.

Stern kept his eyes on his plate while he ate. When he finished, he took the check, rose and shot a glance at the old man in the back.

“Gonna leave a tip, Stern?”

“What? Oh, I need change.” He went to the register, got

his change and overtipped the waitress. With a nervous smile, he left.

Within a minute, the old man's phone rang. He spoke briefly, pocketed the phone and called for his check. He got up, paid and left.

Rafe thought to himself that this was a case where putting two and two together doesn't make twenty two. Stern had a meeting with this guy, which Rafe had interrupted simply by being there.

Chapter 15

Stern pulled his car under the bridge. Don Argento, the wizened old man, stood waiting for him, flanked by two big men, a car parked behind them. Stern walked stiffly up to the men.

“Who was that man in the restaurant?”

“Rafe Velez, a private investigator. His client was the girl who was killed by Gershenowitz.”

“I see. I think he saw me, too.”

Stern was silent.

The old man turned, motioning to someone in his car. A tall, strongly built woman, dressed as a prostitute, got out and walked to the Don. He spoke to her, quietly and briefly.

She walked up to Stern and, without warning, slapped at his face with her left hand, scraping it with her fingernails. Stern's expression turned from apprehension to rage. He punched her solidly in the face, knocking her back a few steps.

She smiled, triumphantly, and approached Stern again. There was a glint of metal in her right hand. Stern planted his feet and put up his fists.

The woman suddenly crouched and drove her fist into the inside of his thigh. She twisted her hand and a gout of blood spurted out of his leg. She pulled back, stood and dropped a push dagger onto the ground.

Stern clutched at his leg, vainly. He stumbled to the ground while blood pumped from the wound in his leg. Moments later, he lost consciousness.

“Call 911. You know what to tell them.”

The woman did as she was told. Don Argento and his men got in the car and drove away. The woman, expressionless, entered Stern's car, sat on the passenger

seat for a moment, then got out and waited for the police to arrive. She did not have long to wait, either for the police to arrive or for Stern to die.

When the patrol car pulled up, she acted suitably shaken up, crying that the man had threatened to kill her, hit her, so she defended herself. One of the uniformed officers collected the push dagger while the other cuffed her. Push daggers are against the law in this place. An ambulance arrived, but there was nothing to do for a man that had lost 7 pints of blood.

Toole had the unpleasant duty of questioning the woman who killed his partner. Her bruised face and the scrapings from under her fingernails were clear evidence of a tussle. The push dagger was illegal, but her claim that it was used in self-defense was unchallenged, as there were no witnesses, so far.

She told Toole that Stern had solicited her, drove her to the spot where the fight took place, showed her his badge and demanded sex. She got out of his car and tried to walk away, taking the dagger from her purse and palming it in her right hand. Stern confronted her, hit her, and threatened her. She scratched his face with her left hand and he went to hit her again in the face. She ducked down and used the dagger.

She had no priors for violence and two for solicitation. She was sent to a holding cell, awaiting a Public Defender to handle her case.

Hours later, Crime Scene, on a fast track for an officer related death, reported the following:

- Denim fibers, matching the woman's skirt, were found on the passenger seat of Stern's car.
- Aside from the pool of blood from Stern's wound and the push dagger, no probative evidence was found.

Toole called Rafe and brought him up to date.

“Was there an old man at the scene, a witness, perhaps?”

“No, this was under a bridge near the edge of town.”

“I have a hunch. Have you got mug shots of big shots, Mob types? Not local.”

Mystified, Toole assured him they did. Rafe was there in no time flat, flipping through a book of photographs.

“This one: Momo Argento. You got a jacket on this guy?”

The computer yielded a long list of suspicions, arrests and connections to organized crime, but no convictions. A note near the end suggested he was semi-retired, but liked to keep his hand in the occasional job.

“I saw this guy in a restaurant at the same time Stern showed up and clearly did not expect to see me. I think those two were having a meeting, which I interfered with.”

Toole said, “I think I’ll hand this over to the FBI. This Momo is from out of state.”

“Good choice. You don’t need to be investigating your partner’s murder, if he’s mixed up with the Mob.”

Epilogue

The FBI indeed found a connection. Don Argento had an airtight alibi for the time of the murder and no known connection to the woman who killed Stern was found. Rumors of Stern's complicity in the copper wire theft were heard on the street. None could be substantiated. All of it hung together, but was not connected with evidence that would stand up in court.

Internal Affairs closed the book on Stern, burying the dirty cop insinuations. Toole got a new partner, a bright-eyed youngster with a sterling record, who came up through the ranks.

For Rafe, the whole thing now hung together with no surprises; the robbery, the shooting, everything but the lottery tickets, especially Toole's astounding win. That didn't figure into Rafe's view of the world, unless dumb luck counted. Surely it wasn't lucky for Maria. One person sowed, another person reaped. All in all, he could still say to himself that there was nothing new under the sun, but privately wondered if he was wrong. His life was about to shift gears.

The Man with the Crooked Eye – A Rafe Velez Mystery
by
AB Stonebridge

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My thanks to my friends, especially Tink Boord-Dill, Dave Croft, Dennis Lively and my Mom. Hi, Mom! Please review this work, since real reviews help everybody.

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