

LARCENY

Salvatore Grasso

Larceny

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The Author's website: www.SalvatoreGrasso.com

The Author's email: Salvatore@SalvatoreGrasso.com

Sample Chapter

The accounting clerk pulled the open items box down from the shelf. “About time to go through this again,” she thought. By mid-morning, the wire transfer instructions were at the top of the list. Another call to Steve Higgins; this time he answered. “Mr. Higgins, I am trying to process information regarding National University and the engagement letter. There are some questions about the information.”

Higgins hated mundane interruptions. “Listen, I’m in the middle of a conference call. Just send me the documents through interoffice mail with your questions and I’ll get back to you.”

Before she could respond he clicked off and joined the conference call. “These guys don’t seem to have time to deal with important problems. But if the man wants to deal with the paper, that’s his problem.” She placed the document at the bottom of the stack in front of her. She would get to it after she finished with the rest of the problems.

The deal with Franklin Rhymes sat uneasily in Robert Watson’s craw. Too much time had passed to unwind it without looking guilty. Agonizing over the problem for days, Watson was visibly tired. Haggard was probably a better description—eyes sunken, body looking slightly undernourished. He needed to figure out how to make it go away before it inevitably found its way into the public eye.

Running the script over again one more time, he settled himself before dialing.

“Franklin, Robert Watson calling.”

“Bobby, how’s things downtown?” Franklin said, his bubbly tone making Robert seethe.

“Franklin, I’d prefer you didn’t call me Bobby.”

“Sorry, Robert. Guess I lost it for a second. What can I do for you, my friend?”

Watson cringed. “Franklin, it’s time for us to meet again. And it has to happen today.”

“Sure, Robert, any time that works for you.” They arranged a time and meeting place, as dictated by Watson. It had to be private enough yet not too obvious. Most important, the message he delivered had to be unequivocal.

Franklin waited in the lobby, as Watson had requested. After a few moments an attendant escorted him into a private room, outfitted for a meal.

“Wow, this is really elegant.”

“Franklin, please take a seat.”

“You’re looking serious, Robert. Is everything all right?”

Watson’s expression remained granite cold. “Sit. I have a menu already selected. I’d appreciate no business discussion while the food is delivered—wait until we are alone.”

Franklin nodded, wondering what to make of the formalities. After the first course and drinks were delivered, Robert stepped gingerly into the conversation.

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“Franklin, we’ve had a very good business relationship to date, one I would easily call profitable for all parties involved.”

“Fair statement,” Frank said, perspiration blossoming under the arms of his shirt.

“Franklin, it’s time that we put a portion of the relationship behind us.”

“What are you saying exactly?”

“I’m saying the private deal with you directly stops immediately.”

The color drained from Franklin’s face, and the perspiration was now running down his armpits in cold rivulets. “Robert, you’re such a card. For a minute there I thought you were serious.” Franklin tried to confirm the joke with a nervous smile. Watson’s expression failed to change.

“Do you see me smiling? I’m not joking.”

“Why? Things were moving so smoothly! You’ve made your bones on this relationship alone. You’re cutting me off.” As his frustration rose, so did Franklin’s voice. “If you think I’m going to stand by while you continue to reap a windfall, you’d better think twice, my learned friend.”

“I trust you are finished. Assuming you’re ready to listen, I’ll explain the reasons. First off, unless you’ve been dead these many weeks, you would have heard about the scandal in New York. People are going to prison over something related to our little deal—”

Franklin cut in, “But the dollars were orders of magnitude greater than what we’re talking about.”

“Sometimes I wonder how you ever got to this point in your career. And I wonder how I ever let you talk me into this deal in the first place,” Watson said, impaling his guest. Waving his hand in the air as if to chase a fly, he continued, “Nonetheless, it’s over. You’ll return all the funds. I’ll show you how to accomplish this in order to avoid detection and violation of banking laws.”

Improbably, Franklin’s face turned a shade whiter. “Return the money, return the money. Are you crazy? That’s my money. You can just forget that idea.”

“It’s not your money, you pompous clown. It belongs to licensees and the university, along with all of the constituencies entitled to receive their share. So you see, my shortsighted client, this is bigger than anything either one of us considered.”

“Fine, pull the plug on any further payments to me. I’ll keep what I have and you can keep the business. Besides, they’ll never find out.” The conversation was interrupted by the wait staff bringing coffee and clearing the dishes. One they were alone again, Watson stood and paced for effect.

“How much is in that bank account in the Caymans?”

“Robert, don’t tell me you don’t know.”

“Oh, I know all right. Any lawyer worth his salt will know the answers before he asks the questions. So how much is in there?”

“If you’re so smart, you tell me.”

Seized by anger, Robert thrust himself at his nemesis, grabbing him by the throat. Franklin attempted to elude the grasp but failed, managing only to jar the table and splash coffee onto the white linens. “Now, you tell me, you son of a bitch, or so help me God I’ll choke you to death with my bare hands!” Robert was seething, trembling and spraying saliva as he spoke. As his grip slowly tightened around Franklin’s neck, his adversary’s face began to turn

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blue. Franklin struggled in vain as his vision grayed. As quickly as he fired up, Robert began to cool, slackening the grip and easing away. His panic over his loss of control scared him enough to overcome the anger. Franklin heaved, slowly recovering from the momentary loss of oxygen. Watson grabbed a water glass, drank deeply, and then handed another to Rhymes. Wrapping trembling hands around the glass, Franklin drank shakily, spilling water on his tie and down the front of his shirt. Watson backed towards his seat, never taking his eyes off Franklin.

"If you're finished playing games, I'd like to know the balance please."

Swallowing hard, Franklin considered understating the number but feared a repeat performance. "A little over a half million."

"That's what I thought. Grand theft, larceny, unlawful taking. These are just a few of the menu items available to the district attorney. I'm sure your employer can add to the list."

Watson's diatribe continued a little while longer, with Franklin lobbing in an answer when appropriate. Totally sobered by the physical outburst, Rhymes avoided anything even remotely resembling gamesmanship. As Watson explained the plan to recoup the funds, Franklin took copious notes. When they departed, Watson felt relieved, while Rhymes began to consider alternatives to relinquishing his retirement nest egg.

Unable to return to the office, Rhymes wandered around the city on foot, finally calling the office to speak with Jasmine, although he wasn't sure why. They talked for a long while.

"Frank, is everything okay? You sound different."

"I'll survive."

"That's not very reassuring. Sounds like you could use me to cheer you up."

Thinking about whether he wanted anything more than superficial tonight, he didn't respond immediately. "You really know how to make a girl feel wanted."

"It's not that. I'd love to see you, but not sure I would be much company."

"Why don't you let me decide that for myself?"

They settled on a quiet dinner together.

Watson's evening started with a drink to unwind. Sitting in front of the television watching a legal drama, he escaped the doldrums by losing himself in the characters. On the drive home, something about the midday conversation with Rhymes erased the feeling of weightlessness. A mental itch in the back of his brain indicated that things may not have been settled as he hoped. Being a hypocrite was not one of the hallmarks of his professional career, but neither was losing his job over a stupid decision. He could control the damage if the money was returned. He could also explain the lapse in judgment. After all, he did possess a letter from the provost of National University supporting the deal. But somehow, that letter would not provide as much of a shield as Watson first thought. Rhymes provided the letter as an afterthought, blatantly volunteering that it was a forgery. The more he reviewed the facts, the dumber he felt. *Nothing left to do but try to make it go away.*

Jasmine kissed him warmly, trying to absorb his anguish with her hug.

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“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. Besides, there’s no reason we both should suffer.” Tonight he was a bachelor. Marcy decided to spend a few days with her parents. She was still in pain from their failed dinner and needed to get away. Jasmine served up the meal, which they ate in the kitchen. When he arrived, she was clad in her silk bathrobe. Slipping it off, she revealed silk pajamas that fit her curves perfectly, the light reflecting off the candy apple color, highlighting perky breasts and firm nipples. As the meal slowly progressed, she coaxed him out of his clothes. Not long afterwards they were in bed. She took him quickly and aggressively; he got off once, distraction drawing out his pleasure while multiple orgasms ripped the energy from her being. The events of the day brought sleep quickly. Spending the night at Jasmine’s wasn’t his first choice given her nosy neighbors, but eventually he succumbed.

During the night Jasmine awoke to a one-sided conversation. Her first reaction was to nudge him. Though a portion of the words were incoherent, she was able to piece together some meaning as the soliloquy continued. Lying on her side, running the words over in her mind, she hoped for a second act. After a long while she dozed off. Jasmine kissed him softly, hearing the remnants of restless sleep in his response.

“Good morning, my sleepyhead. You must have had a vivid dream. Do you remember any of it?”

Looking at her for some hint, he tried to remember. “No, can’t say I remember, although I don’t feel very rested.” At that moment it dawned on him that it was morning. “I spent the night, didn’t I?”

Smiling, she kissed him again. “You certainly did, and I’m so glad you did.” She rolled on top of him. “In your dream—which woke me from a sound sleep, by the way—you were talking about money. You said something about saving for retirement and how that was now all ruined.” She searched his eyes for confirmation.

“I told you I don’t remember.” He forced himself from under her and went to the bathroom. Then he showered, dressed, and drove home to don fresh clothes before heading to the office.

His lack of attentiveness to her sexual needs frustrated Jasmine. Their first evening together—albeit unexpected—hadn’t played out as she had planned. *He’s hiding something*, she thought as she looked at her reflection in the makeup mirror.

“Richard, this is Ralph Iconera calling. Is now a good time to converse?”

“Sure, Ralph. I’ve got some information to follow up our last meeting. Seems your instinct was right about Mr. Jacobsen.”

Ralph smiled. “Jolly good. I thought as much. What do you have worth sharing at this point?”

“There’s something in play and our friend is obliging us with documentation. He’s pretty confident at this point.”

“Will he have any grounds to claim entrapment?” Ralph asked, his tone cautious.

Not willing to concede anything at this point, Richard was equally cautious with his response. “I’m not sure yet. I want to have my counsel give this close scrutiny.”

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"I appreciate the sticky wicket you must be facing, but if it becomes too much of a bother, I'd be happy to have our learned counsel have a go at it."

"Ralph, if I get stuck, as you put it, I'll let you know. Otherwise, I'll run this one down with my own resources."

"Jolly good. Would you be kind enough to supply me with a copy of what you've received? At your earliest convenience, that is."

"Sure, I'll get something over to you shortly. Will e-mail work?"

"Send it by telly, would you?"

"You mean by fax?"

"Yes, yes facsimile. That's the ticket."

Richard had had about enough of Iconera's "jolly good time" for one millennium. Richard made every attempt to get off the call graciously, which he eventually did.

Rubbing his hands together, Richard glanced over the proposal from Jacobsen. Albert was going to enjoy this exercise, but they'd need to rewrite it. Forwarding the e-mail, Albert retrieved it over Richard's home network.

"Richard, we've got to rewrite this thing. It's not tight enough."

"I figured as much. You want to take a crack at it or wait for me?"

"Let's work on it together. I'll scratch out a few notes that we can review when you get home."

"I don't want the illustrious provost to wait too long for the baited hook. I'll run over in an hour or so. We'll work it through, take it back the office, and fax it from there."

On the way home, he rang up Bridgette. He would update her on the status and excuse himself from their evening together, as there were things he needed to do and it was best she wasn't involved. Although she was not particularly happy about a lonely evening, Bridgette did her best not to make him feel bad. Understanding the unspoken feelings, Richard comforted her with a promise he fully intended to keep.

Meanwhile, Albert sliced and diced Jacobsen's offering, commenting as he did. "Looks like the dance partners are finding each other, unlikely as it seems."

"I would not have anticipated such an easy collaboration."

Louis recognized the number immediately. "Hello Joseph, calling to report good news?"

"I'm having a hard time with your deal. Two million is a big chunk of change, even for me."

The last phrase burned Jacobsen's ass. "Don't make me make my case again, okay? This is getting monotonous."

Taking a deep breath, Ralinski proceeded. "Louis, I can't really justify paying you anything. Having said that, if I have to pay you something, it's got to be less than two."

Louis kept silent, not about to negotiate against himself.

"I'm willing to talk about one. I pay you one—when the deal is done—and you get the same percentage we discussed."

"Joseph, one is a huge haircut. There's no logical reason I should take one."

"There is another alternative. I could let the deal slide and you'd get nothing."

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“Ah, yes. But that would mean you’re foregoing the upside. I know you well enough to know that’s not really an option for you.”

Ralinski understood the trust imbedded in that statement. *You’ve got to pay to play*, he reminded himself. “I can go up to one point five. Not a dollar more.”

“You just jumped halfway. If it’s worth that much, it’s worth another half, wouldn’t you say?” Louis wasn’t totally comfortable with the gambit, but the negotiator in him had to push one last time.

“No, another half is not acceptable. It’s one point five or nothing. Take it or forget about it.” Ralinski knew there was no way Jacobsen would be able to walk away from the deal. For the extra half million he’d walk away from the entire personal stake and for the first time in his professional career at National, live within its policies governing licensing deals.

Louis contemplated the options. One and a half million in cold cash would go a long way to salving the pain of the inevitable divorce. “I believe we have a deal. It’s just a matter of making sure you don’t forget your obligations. I’ll have my attorney draw up the paperwork. We’ll split the cost of forming the entity that we’ll jointly own.”

Jacobsen listened for a response, knowing Ralinski wasn’t happy with the result. All he got was the dial tone.

Richard faxed the papers to Iconera and then called to ensure he had received them. Iconera tried to engage him in conversation, but Richard blocked his attempts. Looking over the fax pages, it was clearly evident Jacobsen was breaking more rules than he could remember. Ralph couldn’t help but admire the creative way the opportunity was crafted. Pretty brazen to ask for a finder’s fee for arranging the transaction—and structuring it outside the main agreement in order to hide it. He had to hand it to old Louis.

Richard embellished the presentation with handwritten notes in the margins, prominently reflecting the approximate value of the stake he had fabricated for Jacobsen. A low whistle escaped his lips as Louis’ avarice jumped off the page directly into his lap. There was definitely something wrong with this place. People had their hands in the university’s pockets, pulling out large amounts of money unchecked.

He shook his head, feeling a combination of disdain and envy. Ralph Iconera was “the people’s provost.” Lifestyle devoid of opulence, refusing the aloofness of celebrity, he chose instead to be reachable by all constituencies on campus. A throwback to bygone days, Iconera was not wealthy by most standards. Yet only of late had he felt left out. All around him financial freedom thrived. He began to rationalize a taste of the good life for himself as well. In corporate America, the top manager rarely made less than his subordinates. There was a certain irony to his situation. He had looked on passively as everyone cut their own deals, shunning the written rules and probably violating a few that were unwritten as well. Barking out a laugh, arms folded across his chest, Ralph gazed longingly at the pages, imagining his name in the benefactor slot. The million-dollar finder’s fee made him feel small.

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Albert's a genius, Richard thought. *Throwing in an upfront cash component will place the spade squarely in Jacobsen's hands for him to dig his grave.* Richard reflected on the fabrication now sanding the floor in the provost's office.

"Such a blatant revelation has got to slam him pretty hard," Richard said. "If not, Ralph's a better man than me."

"Ralph will see hard cash, and after the knot in his stomach loosens, he'll figure it's time to put himself into the game," Albert said.

Skepticism spread across Richard's complexion. "He's so damn self-righteous. He might just take the high road, fire the Nazi, and bring Ralinski before the faculty discipline board."

"That's why you're my apprentice," Albert said. "You've got much to learn before these old bones finally rest."

Richard rolled his eyes. "What makes you so sure this will play out as you've scripted?"

"Faculty discipline board? What a joke. Half of those fuckers are stealing and the other half wish they were. I helped write the charter for them. It's nebulous and ineffective, a convenience to satisfy some obscure recommendation by a consultant hired by the governing board." Nodding as the facts washed over him, Richard felt more comfortable with the direction and likelihood of the outcome. Albert reminded Richard of the evening meeting. "I've already arranged for dinner. The group will include the men you met last time as well as a few others. I want you keep an open mind as you listen to them. Their involvement is critical to the success of this plan."

"I understand. I'll listen, but I'm not agreeing to like what I hear," Richard chastised.

"You've always been stubborn. But now's not the time."

Iconera rested uneasily, conflict raging within him. Vacillating from moral stalwart to immoral urchin, he could not come to a firm decision. Even half the million-dollar fee would make a dramatic change in his lifestyle.

It's a cost of doing business. Jacobsen will understand. Especially since I'm seeing things his way for once. The idea of being in harmony with Louis Jacobsen made Iconera queasy.

Rising, finally succumbing to his insomnia, he decided a telephone call to Louis was in order.

Louis was annoyed by the early intrusion.

"Who is this?"

Unprepared for the crass response, Ralph considered hanging up but thought better of it. "Ralph Iconera here. Pardon the earliness of the call, but I thought it appropriate. There's a matter to discuss, namely your impending deal with Central States Ventures. You recall that deal, I trust?"

"Ralph, are you calling to counsel me on negotiation terms? If so, please call back when I'm in the office. I'm not quite in a position to discuss the deal. You see, I don't carry deal documentation around."

"Louis, is that any way to approach my inquiry?"

"Okay, Ralph, go ahead and raise your issue. I'll listen."

"Rumor has it that you're negotiating a personal stake in the deal for the Ralinski portfolio. Is that true?"

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That bastard, he ratted me out. Louis thought about how to respond. “Who told you that?” he said, feeling him out.

“Revealing my source is not possible at this point. Let me say that I found your tactic initially repulsive. Reflecting on the matter, I concluded that maybe there was some merit to such an innovative structure after all.”

Louis pulled the phone away from his ear, not exactly sure what he was hearing. “Ralph, assuming I am admitting that your source is accurate, let me get this straight, you are condoning the deal?”

“Let’s not put the cart before the horse. I’m not condoning anything. Your refusal to take responsibility for the deal means there’s nothing to condone. Assuming you refute my statements, then I’ll be forced to come down opposite you. On the other hand, should you consider a magnanimous approach, I may consider underpinning your position.”

Silence.

“Louis, are you there?”

“Ralph, I’m speechless.”

“You either admit or disavow. Logically that should be your next consideration.”

“Okay, assume I admit. Just what am I admitting to? Maybe if we start there, I’ll have some clue about this conversation.”

“You’ve requested a deal facilitation fee for your efforts. I must say, although your request is outside the realm of university guidelines, it does not overtly violate a precise policy. On the other hand, it does run afoul of a plethora of standards of conduct.”

“A finder’s fee? I never asked for a finder’s fee,” Louis said, wondering if the equity component was being classified in that category.

“Am I to believe then that you did not request a one-million-dollar payment when the agreement was consummated?” Stunned, Louis stared blankly at the handset. He did not know how to respond to the accusation.

“Ralph, I’m flattered that you’d think I would attempt to extract cash to complete a deal. An innovative idea, to use your term, but a total fabrication.”

“Louis, your position is totally unflattering. I have the documentation in hand.”

“I don’t care if you have your pecker in your hand, that document is a fraud!”

“This document will accompany me to the office. Drop in and we will visit further over this matter.”

Louis shuddered with anger. Somebody was fucking with him. There would need to be corrective action. He contemplated who might be playing games. It had to be that fucking Ralinski—calling his payment a “finder’s fee.” But the amount was wrong. If he was going to hang Louis out to dry, why not use the full two million? Louis continued to run the possibilities through his mind. At the end of the discussion he realized there was someone else in the mix. He would need to pump the intelligence out of the provost.

Watson’s call to Rhymes went unanswered for the third time. This pissed off Robert, normally a patient person. “That twerp thinks he’s going to keep the money. Well he’s got another thing coming.” After sending instructions to the accounting group to redirect the offshore money to

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the university's main account, he contemplated the next step. Picking up the phone again, he placed a call on his private line. The call was routed twice before he reached a live person. The short conversation ended with a meeting place and time.

Franklin checked his voicemail, deleting the third message before it ended. Placing several calls on the cell phone, he was convinced he could move the money before Watson and company attempted to track and recover it.

Since his escape from Jasmine, he had played the dutiful husband, although his motives were far from altruistic. Franklin spoke with her about international finance, attempting to pick her brain over the ability to trace and recover funds. Marcy was thankful for the attention. It had been a long while since he showed any real interest in her knowledge. Although initially suspicious, she acquiesced, engaging him with as much knowledge as she could muster. Marcy went as far as researching some of his questions through her previous employer. At the end of the day, Franklin was just paranoid enough to feel Watson's firm could reach through and reclaim all the money.

There was a downside to this whole offshore deal. He couldn't move the money without filling in nine million forms. After several days of tracking down the right person, Franklin convinced them to fax forms to him. They would be at the local Kinko's office. Walking over at lunch, he retrieved the forms and took them to an empty workspace. As he read them, his suspicions were validated. There was no way anyone was going to accept these forms unless he delivered them in person. Cursing under his breath, Franklin scooped up the forms and returned to the office. He would have to fly down there, and he couldn't even do it on the university's nickel.

Watson pulled up to the seedy diner ten miles south of the city. He parked in the designated spot, and several minutes later someone approached his vehicle. Not altogether comfortable with the meeting and the place, he was startled by the appearance of the dark-skinned face in the driver's side window. No words were exchanged, just hand signals. After his newest acquaintance passed through the entrance to the diner, Watson stepped out of the vehicle, engaged the car's alarm, and followed. Once inside, he was escorted to a table away from foot traffic. As he sat, the face in the window watched from two tables over, strategically placed to watch the exits. Picking up the water glass, Robert Watson mused that it could not have been much dirtier. Replacing it without drinking, he checked his fingers and spied the thin film on his fingertips.

As the main entry door opened, two men entered, approaching his table slowly. As they approached, the lead man nodded to the lookout two tables over, who then moved to a table by the main entrance. The duo sat across from Watson. They exchanged knowing glances and greetings. Approaching the table, the gum-cracking waitress used her best South Philly to take a drink order.

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He ordered an iced tea, even though he was sure it would come in a dirty glass and was revolted at the thought. His request for bottled water, unopened, was met with a 'what are you, some kinda wise guy' look. His two companions ordered coffee, black, explaining that the coffee was hot and probably so strong it would kill anything that might have been growing in the cup. Somehow this did not give him a reason to change his order. After depositing the drinks, splashing liberal amounts of liquid over the rim and onto the table, the waitress turned and departed, leaving ancient menus with yellowed edges behind.

"So, Mr. Watson, it's been a while since we talked."

As the man spoke, Robert imagined cockroaches roaming in the kitchen. Reaching for the glass of iced tea and then thinking better of it, Watson retracted his hand. "I've got a problem," he said.

"This problem have a name?" the other man asked.

"Mikey, how many times do I have to tell you to be more patient? Our client here will get to that."

"The name is Franklin Rhymes." Watson spelled the name slowly, first then last.

"Weird name, he a musician?" His partner glared at him and Mikey sat back. Sliding a sheet of paper across the table, John, clearly the brains of the outfit, picked it up while Mikey looked on.

"Got it seems straightforward enough." Looking up from the paper, John met Watson's eyes.

"Now, here's what I want you to do. It's a two-step process. You will wait for me to give you direction before you take the second step. I want you to take the first step before the end of the weekend. The first step is to rough him up a bit and leave this note with him." Watson handed over an envelope inside a Ziploc bag. "Take the envelope out of the bag and drop it on him. There are no fingerprints on the envelope inside the baggie. Burn the baggie immediately afterwards."

Taking the package, John nodded. Reaching inside his sport jacket, Robert pulled out another envelope; this one was unsealed and not clad in plastic. John thumbed the contents and then slipped the envelope into his jacket pocket. Before the waitress returned to take the order, Robert rose, turned, and walked out.

"Jeez, he didn't even stay for the food."

"Mikey, you really want to eat this shit?"

He stood and left, not waiting for the answer.

Looking at airline schedules on the travel Web site, the soonest Franklin could make the trip was late next week without Marcy suspecting something. He wasn't about to let her in on the deal. He printed off the ticket and locked it in his desk drawer. He'd just have to chance that Watson wouldn't be able to act before he could make the trip. Standing outside his office, Jasmine stared at Franklin until he felt her eyes on him. Looking up, he still felt embarrassed. She wasn't going to let him off the hook, not just yet.

"Hey, Jas, what's going on in finance land?" he said, trying to break the ice.

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“Unfortunately, nothing to do with you at this point.” She walked in and sat in the one empty chair; the other was littered with papers. He sensed the unhappiness but refused to acknowledge it. “You know, Frank, the way you are treating me is wrong. What happened?”

He shrugged, trying to let the moment pass. He hated confrontation, and the female brand was the most troublesome. “You can’t give me the benefit of an answer?” She said. “That’s the part I don’t understand.” Jasmine stood tapping her foot, her arms crossed under her breasts.

Slowly, her words broke the resolve that he’d built over the past few days. “Look, Jas, this whole thing is turning me inside out.” Attempting to look sincere, he continued, “Fooling around is not very gratifying. In fact, it sucks.”

“Oh, so this relationship sucks, does it? So why’d you do it?”

“Wait,” he shook his head, “I didn’t mean the relationship sucked. I meant I felt like shit. I have a wife and kid at home counting on me, and here I am enjoying life for the first time in a long time with a single woman.” The words seemed to turn down the intensity of her fury. He continued, “I got so much on my mind right now and I’m not thinking straight. I really need you to understand. If I was single, we’d be having the time of our life. Right now, though, I barely have a life at all.”

The conversation bumped along for a few more minutes before Jasmine left for a meeting. *Man that was close*, Franklin thought. He cursed himself for letting his emotions get the better of him. Now nervous, he checked the location of the airline ticket and reminded himself to round up his passport before he forgot. Throughout the day, he thought about his alternatives. He wasn’t willing to give her up, at least not just yet.

The phone rang, startling him back to the present. Absentmindedly he answered it.

“Hello, Frank Rhymes.”

“Frank, it’s Bob Watson. Thought you might have been dodging me. But that would have been uncharacteristic of you. Isn’t that right?”

“Sure, Robert, that’s absolutely right.” Coughing, he struggled for the next words, wondering how to craft a credible excuse. Finally he decided to approach the problem directly, despite his nature. “Look, Robert, that last lunch is still sitting like a rock in my stomach. I’m having a hard time dealing with the fact that you need the money back. I was counting on it for my retirement.”

“Well, that’s nice, but if you keep the money, you won’t need a retirement fund. You’ll be spending the golden years in a ten-by-ten cell with a thousand of your closest friends.”

“That’s not very appealing.”

“Of course it’s not appealing. Now, take a pen and paper and write down these instructions. And by the way, Franklin, if you don’t follow them, I can guarantee you will regret your ignorance.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“No threat at all, just a promise that will become a vivid reality for you, my friend.”

Watson spoke and Franklin wrote, the pen shaking badly. After the call ended, Franklin stared blankly at the paper, thinking his future was going up in flames. Needing consolation, he wrote a pledge to give up everything he had stolen. Stolen was the third choice of word after scribbling out the first two. After reading what he wrote, he tore the paper into tiny pieces before tossing them in the trash can. Saving the money was at the top of his list. He needed to

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do something about this Watson character. As long as he was in the way, there was nothing he could do about this situation. Violence was not in his nature, leaving few if any alternatives. Somehow he needed to talk this over with another human being. Franklin never impressed anyone, including himself, when it came to decision making. Marcy identified both the problem and the opportunity in their relationship early on, exploiting it for the benefit of a normal life. Suddenly a thought struck him. *If this is in jeopardy, then the other deals are in jeopardy as well.* The walls were closing in on him.

Franklin had just broken their plans once again, conjuring another excuse. Marcy had been contemplating action ever since he missed dinner with her parents, and she now decided to take drastic measures. After confirming he was still at the office, she found a babysitter, borrowed a friend's car, and headed in that direction to see for herself. *I'll be damned if my husband is going to make a fool out of me. I'm going to see just what he's up to.* Her first thought was to confront him at the office, but she thought better of it. *I think I'll just follow him and see what he's up to.* She grabbed a book and some magazines in case she was forced to camp out near his office until he departed for home.

Parking within sight of the entranceway and his car, she settled down to wait. As five o'clock approached, she paid particular attention to the comings and goings, hoping she was going to be proven wrong quickly. As the minutes ticked by, her spirits lifted. Just as she was about to sweep the problem into the dustbin, her husband walked out of the building, carrying on a conversation with Jasmine Edwards. They walked for a while before he peeled off towards his car, Jasmine going in another direction. As he pulled away, Marcy followed, keeping some distance between them. Fortunately it was sunny, allowing her to hide behind a pair of large sunglasses. Franklin's car nudged through traffic. She began feeling badly about her decision, as his initial direction took him towards home. His pace quickened, threatening to lose her in the tangle of traffic. Manically she attempted to stay within sight of him. After several turns he pulled off the main road, leading her easily through side streets before coming to a stop in front of his destination. Marcy pulled into the nearest parking space several cars up, watching intently. After he entered the building she slid out of her vehicle and approached. Access to the building was restricted.

She decided to wait for the next tenant to enter. She saw someone walking towards her on their way out of the building. She busied herself as if digging for keys in her handbag. Just as the door opened she plucked the key ring from her bag. Holding the door for her, Marcy thanked the elderly gentleman for the politeness, all the while keeping her head turned away from his gaze.

Safely in the building, she scanned the mailbox tags. As she did, a chill spiked through her. The name "J. Edwards" appeared on one of the boxes. Doubt mixed with shame, and she felt she needed to get out of there. Was this the woman, Jasmine, who worked at his office? What did it mean? Surely they were working on a project. But why wouldn't they just work at the office? The option to push the intercom button for J. Edwards and ask for Franklin seemed too simple. There was no way she was going to get in there and catch them. Maybe she'd wait

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there until he came down. Shaking off the urge to wait, she wrote down the address, climbed back into the car, and drove home, her mind rushing with questions.

“Jasmine, I need your help.”

“Sure baby, anything I can do.” She began undressing him, but he stopped her, taking her hands firmly in his. Jasmine looked up at him, not sure what to make of this. “You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you?” she said, tears welling up and spilling down her cheeks.

Taking her face in his hands, he kissed the tears. “Oh no, I’m not. I just want to talk with you right now before I lose my nerve.”

Her face brightened. They walked over to the settee and he began to tell her. Her reaction was unexpected. “If you want my help, it’s got to be on terms that make it worth my while.” He considered her statement. *If she wants money, she’s got another thing coming*, he thought. Taking a deep breath, he attempted to act casually despite the acid churning inside him. “Okay, what is it exactly that you want? You want money?”

Her face contorted. “Money, why would I want money?”

“Well, how else would I make it worth your while?” As he spoke the words, he began to realize her meaning.

“I want you to leave your wife and come to me—*that’s* what I mean!”

Darkness had fallen. Franklin spied himself in the reflection of the black, curtainless window, occasionally looking away from Jasmine’s gaze as she spoke.

With no moon it was pitch black when Franklin made his way across the street to his car. Once behind the wheel, he slumped. *Nothing that’s worth having isn’t worth working for*, he thought. The ride home was going to be long and agonizing. *Home. Where is home?* He thought. *My two choices are money and Jasmine or normalcy and Marcy.* Stir in the potential for prison time and Franklin had created a poisonous stew.

Marcy watched as headlights approached the house and then passed. Each time her heart leaped into her throat. The foundation of her ordered existence was flaking. *How do I keep it from crumbling? A fatherless child and broken marriage, just what I need.*

Marcelyn contemplated the fallout of a failed marriage. After all, she was daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Raphael Stiles, the prominent medical family of the Main Line, who had raised four ordered and well-adjusted children—or at least so they thought. The good doctor’s prominence in medicine was expected to permeate the family through osmosis. Siblings fought for his attention and affection. When a flaw appeared, the unaffected pounced like tigers on wounded prey. A breakup would subject her to intolerable abuse and vilification.

I need to salvage this relationship, she thought. Fighting back tears, she swallowed hard as the newest set of lights beamed through the front window. As the sound of the engine died, she listened acutely for every sound—the car door closing, footfalls on the concrete, the key in the lock and the door turning on its hinges. *Those squeaky hinges. I’ve got to remind Franklin to oil them.* As she turned the corner into the living room he spotted her. The hair on the back of

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his neck stood at attention as he approached her. Rising, she approached him, arms outstretched.

“Late night? Can I get you something to eat?” She kissed him softly, her lips trembling.

“Yeah, always a problem. I’m not really hungry.”

She grabbed his hand and led him to the sofa. Sitting close to him she wondered how to begin. “Are things really that bad here, Frank?” It was a blow to the gut, causing his expression to fall immediately. “Are you seeing someone else?”

“W-what makes you say that?”

“Please don’t. I can take the truth; I just can’t take the lies and games. Don’t you think I know? Women know.” She realized how stupid those last two words sounded.

“I’m not—”

Before he could continue her newfound strength stopped him. “Look, we’re going to talk this out and then we’re going to work this out. Ending this marriage is not an option.”

They talked haltingly for what seemed like hours, making progress and then regressing. The opportunity to spill the truth presented itself several times, but he let it pass. After fighting sleep, he succumbed as Marcy sat up frustrated until she dozed off.

From the depths of sleep he was shocked awake, fighting breathlessness. It was too vivid to be just a dream. He was drowning, water pouring into the small chamber where he stood. As he fought to plug the opening, another appeared and the water flow increased. As he frantically searched for an exit, the water rose above his shoulders, and he panicked. Just as the last vestiges of air disappeared, he awoke.

Feeling him shuddering, Marcy hugged him tightly as perspiration leached out of him. Gasping for air, he sat bolt upright, finally opening his eyes to the comfort of the bedroom. As his pulse rate dropped closer to normal, the desire to come clean with his wife overtook him. They discussed the problem until dawn. He thought of calling in sick but decided against it. Not showing up at work after the night before would create unnecessary complications. He needed to keep Jasmine engaged, at least for the short term.

Showering and dressing, he ambled out to the car. At the end of the block he decided to take the longer ride through back streets, not feeling energetic enough to battle the traffic grind. As he approached a deserted intersection in the industrial district, a car pulled across the intersection in front of him and stopped. A halfhearted attempt to pull around was thwarted as the sedan lurched forward, blocking him. A second vehicle, an SUV, pulled up tightly behind, boxing him in. Fumbling for the cell phone in his pants pocket, he watched as two men stepped out of the sedan; there was no movement from the SUV. Quickly he locked the doors as he tried to punch in the emergency number. One of the men approached the vehicle, reaching into his breast pocket. Assuming the worst, Franklin ducked. The man pressed a billfold against the window, revealing an official looking badge.

“Put your window down a crack, Mr. Rhymes. And I’d suggest you tell the operator you made a mistake.”

The cell phone in his hand showed a completed call. Putting the phone up to his ear, he asked the 911 operator to hold for a moment. Turning to the window he cautioned, “I’ve still got the operator on the line. If you’re lying, I’ll scream.”

“There’s no need for that. Check out my badge. I’m with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

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“Operator, sorry I made a mistake. No emergency.” As the operator responded he closed the phone with a loud click. A million conflicting thoughts raced through Franklin’s mind. The agent at the window waved the SUV off. It pulled around and into the adjacent vacant lot.

“Mr. Rhymes, we would like to talk with you, but not here in the street. Please pull your car into the empty lot.” The agent motioned to where he wanted Franklin to park. The sedan pulled up, allowing Franklin to negotiate the short distance as it followed him. Franklin wondered who had called the feds. It could only be Jasmine or Marcy. *Fucking women—can’t trust any of them.* He was both embarrassed and pissed off. Gingerly exiting the vehicle, Franklin stood as the FBI agents approached him.

“Special Agent Duca, Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is my partner, Special Agent Micheaux.” Danny nodded, flashing his identification.

“Okay, which one made the call?” he asked nervously.

“Sir?”

“Which one?”

“Which one of whom? Maybe I should explain the reason for our visit.”

“Yes, maybe you should.”

“We’re members of the financial crimes unit of the FBI. We’ve been asked to investigate significant criminal financial activity at several universities. Sources have provided us with information regarding significant financial transactions at National that violate various federal laws.”

“And the reason you approached me? Am I under investigation?”

Duca’s eyes narrowed. “Should we be investigating you? Mr. Rhymes are you hiding something?”

Franklin responded as calmly as possible, although his insides were churning. “Financial crimes, what sort of financial crimes?”

“We’ve approached you as a potential source of information to further our investigation. Would you be willing to cooperate?”

“How can I cooperate unless you tell me what financial crimes you are investigating?” Franklin’s head hitched back, his lips puckered, and his nose wrinkled as if he had smelled something awful.

Jimmy turned to his partner and spoke directly to him but loud enough for Rhymes to hear. “Did we mention anything about a particular financial crime?”

Danny responded, “I think Mr. Rhymes is confused. Maybe you should clarify.”

“Mr. Rhymes, you would be doing your country a great service if you would talk with us,” Jimmy said earnestly. Danny looked on passively. “We’re gathering background information. We’ve asked around and your name came up several times as a solid and reliable source.” Danny’s expression changed as Franklin’s complexion paled.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of you asking around about me.”

“There’s no reason for you to be concerned, unless you have something to hide,” Danny said.

“A reliable source of what type of information again?”

“Mr. Rhymes, we can do this easily or we can request that you accompany us to our office as a person of interest,” Jimmy said, growing red with frustration.

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Franklin finally acceded to their request—or at least told them what they wanted to hear. Duca walked through the next step, which was to arrange another meeting. At that time the first actions would be put into motion. Dismissing him, they watched as he drove off.

Danny turned to Jimmy. “That guy’s dirty.”

“Yeah, felt it the moment he stepped out of the car.”

“We’re going to have to dig up something on him to strengthen our case. That will insure he works with us. Get somebody on it as soon as we get to the office. Better yet, call it in now and let’s get a head start. We probably have three days to find something.”

“We offer him immunity from whatever he’s hiding and that’ll lock it down.”

“Right, we just don’t tell him it’s conditional,” Danny said. Both men laughed.

Franklin’s drive was unsettling. He drove slowly, as if approaching the speed limit might cause more agents to materialize. He needed to figure out whom to trust. He had confided in both women. Could either of them help him? A connection at work might help. But what if Jasmine was part of this whole plot? She had never referred to his money. If she was involved and he was forced to turn on her, Franklin knew it would kill him. Patching things up with Marcy began to emerge as the most logical alternative. At least their interests were aligned. She was worried about appearances and would do anything to avoid her family’s ridicule.

Pulling into the parking lot, he dreaded the day for the first time in ages. In his office, Franklin opened his e-mail program. Five messages from Jasmine. He struggled with whether to open them. The ringing phone startled him. The display indicated it was coming from home.

“Franklin, I wanted to see if you made it in okay,” Marcelyn said. Was she checking up on him? “Frank, last night’s conversation hurt me. It cut deeply into my trust of you, but I know you already know that.”

“So did you call to hurt me back?”

“No, but the idea did cross my mind. I called to tell you that I can get my old job back. I spoke to them this morning. They’ll even let me dictate my schedule—within reason, that is.”

His mood lightened. She really was trying to make this work. If nothing else, she was true to her word. “Marcy, I don’t know what to say. This is great news. Although I need to tell you that was never my intention.”

“I know. And if I thought that was the case I would have told you. If it’s okay with you, I’ll start back next Monday.” He stared at the phone. She was asking his opinion. No, she was asking his *permission*. He liked that.

“If you’re comfortable starting back so early, that’s fine with me.” They talked several minutes longer before he was interrupted. “Marcy, I’ve got to go. We can talk more tonight. I’ll see you for dinner, promise.” Marcy insisted that any commitment be sealed with the words “I promise.” It made Franklin uncomfortable, but this was a situation of his creation.

Sitting in the weekly meeting he wondered again about the Caymans. The airline ticket sat smoldering in his desk. He hadn’t disclosed this particular fact to Marcy. Jasmine was aware and pressed to accompany him, wanting a strong showing of commitment. He wasn’t willing to take that step, and after the tremulous night he’d nailed his casket shut by not playing with Marcy anymore. She was many things; a suffering fool was not one of them.

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After the meeting Jasmine stopped by to talk. He engaged her for a minute before feigning a deadline and promising to talk later. *There's that word again, "promise." This whole affair is going to be the death of me yet.* Jasmine's last longing look as she turned to leave made him queasy.

The atmosphere in the office was suddenly stifling, confounding his attempt to focus on work. With lunchtime fast approaching, he decided to duck out ahead of the crowd to clear his head. Everywhere he walked seemed to be polluted with yacking people. Searching for respite from the crowds, he turned down side streets until he seemed to be alone. As he ambled down the street, he attempted to put the situation into perspective. Marcy going back to work could be a really good thing. But would she trust him if he told her he needed to go away for a while? Somehow he doubted it. She wanted him to give the money back. But if he did that, then he'd have nothing if he lost his job. That would ruin Marcy's lifestyle. Franklin played out the alternatives. Giving up his plans for the money and the good life on a tropical island was killing him. But he wouldn't be able to enjoy his money from a jail cell either. With Marcy working she would be preoccupied and that would provide him with precious mental and emotional space. He wanted to tell her that he was doing this for her, but he wasn't sure how to tell her without raising suspicions.

Wandering further from campus, he failed to notice the two strangers who had appeared behind him, closing the distance. In the shadows of two large deserted warehouses they moved in, grabbing him by the arms.

"What the—"

"Just keep your mouth shut, got that?" Franklin looked from side to side, fear radiating from his eyes. Thrust against a chain link fence, he bounced off the rusty metal. He stumbled but caught himself before he kissed the broken concrete underfoot.

"Wha—"

"Didn't we tell you to shut your pie hole?" One of the bruisers raised a fist, causing Franklin to raise his arms protectively. The arms would have done little to quell the blow given the cannon to which the fist was attached.

"This is a friendly reminder from one of your business associates. He's been trying to get hold of you. You've been ducking him, and he don't like that. He says you should follow those instructions, and make it quick, or the next time you see us, it might just be the last thing you see. You got the message?" Lips moving without sound, he shook his head to convey the answer. "Good."

The bear claws latched onto him again, this time slightly gentler, encouraging him away from the fence before they headed off, leaving him alone again. After looking down to confirm he hadn't messed himself, he began walking as swiftly as possible back to the safety of his office.

I'm trapped between the FBI and the thugs. Fucking Watson, the bastard. There was no need for the forceful reminder—he was going to return the money! In order to appease Watson he spent the first part of the afternoon transmitting the wire instructions for the first return installment.

That evening he spoke with Marcy about the events of the day. Smugness permeated her responses. "I'm not surprised. You've got to tell the FBI about this issue with Watson and the thugs who roughed you up today."

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“Right, you want me to admit to the FBI that I’m an embezzler? Maybe you want to just drive me to federal prison now?”

“Frank, think logically would you?” she countered, unmoved. “They want something from you; horse trade. If they want your cooperation they’ll look the other way on the embezzlement.”

Hearing her say that caused him to recoil. Tiring of the conversation he flipped on the television. It watched him until he fell into a fitful sleep. Marcy woke him to come to bed, where unwholesome dreams clouded his mind with unsavory characters.