

Crack!

“Damn Carol! Almost shot my eye out. Second time tonight.”

Frank blinked, dabbing yellow crab guts from his cheekbone with the side of his knuckle. Carol noticed it didn’t keep him from stuffing his face with crabmeat. Pinched between her finger and the paring knife, Carol’s hard shell, blue crab meat disappeared into her mouth before Frank had finished his sentence.

“Third time’s the charm,” she said, stuffing home another mouthful, careful not to cut her tongue on the knife.

“Hey Franky, it’s every man for himself here,” Dom chirped.

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

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

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

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

“Fran-kee. Fan-koh. What’s the diff?”

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

Frank ignored her, saying, “You have no problem with Frank or Franco, when you’re pissed with me Dom, so why can’t you get it right now?”

“Cuz I ain’t mad at ya now and cuz you’ll always be Franky to me, just like Concetta’s ‘Sister.’ You still call her ‘Sister’ too, and so does Carol, who give her the name in the first place when she was just a toddler.”

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

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

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

Dom set his beer can down to pick meat out of his crab. He looked over to Carol.

“Listen to him. Hell Carol, *he* don’t even know who he is. Can’t make up his mind. I always knew. He’s Franky.”

Franco tossed his uncracked crab claw into the mountain of crab shells in front of him.

“Sheeitt!”

Focusing on her crab, Carol said, “Who’s on first?” Dom replied, “Franky.”

Standing up, Frank kicked the wooden chair out from under him with the backs of his legs, as he wiped his hands with a brown paper towel.

“I’m going to take a leak. And ask the girl for an order of crab cakes for dessert. Okay? You both in, or you want some more hard shells?”

“Your treat, right Franky?” Dom grinned.

Frank nodded, clenching his teeth. Dom gave a thumbs-up. Carol nodded but ate as she spoke: “Sure. Crab cake sounds good to me too.”

Frank threw the paper towel on the table. “Gee-zis!”

He stalked away holding his crab-stink hands away from his pressed slacks. Caught between Frank and her dad was like being caught between a rock and a hard place.

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

“Why? Why the hell you think?”

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

“You don’t wanna hear it, hunh? How long’s it been, Carol? How long you been seein’ him now?” Carol shook her head, frowning.

“Dad, please. What’s between Frank and me is between *us*.” Dom frowned.

“*Us*? Well, as your father, I think it’s about time I dusted off my shotgun.”

She placed her wrist over his.

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

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

Her mouth was full of crab, so she shook her head silently.

“Cuz they’re usually dirty.” Carol swallowed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah? To whom?”

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

“You asked me that before.”

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

“More off than on, until the last year. Hell, I know, sure. Thinks he’s movin’ up in the world. Thinks he’s gonna find someone better. Better than *my Carol*? Dumb ass.”

Her dad smirked, shaking his head.

“Who the hell else you know drinks wine with hard-shell crabs besides him?”

“Daddy, please. Frank and I have an understanding.”

She placed her wrist over his. Again, he pulled away.

“Understandin’, hunh? Yeah. Well, your mother, God rest her soul, and I had an understandin’ too. ‘N’ her old man made sure the Church was in on it.”

Carol sighed. “How do you know *I’m* not the one putting *him* off?”

Her dad stopped eating.

“Cuz I know *you*, Carol. You’re just like your mother. God bless her.”

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

“Be cool. Just be cool. You need ‘em for this one budd,” he whispered under his breath.

Dom strolled in to take his turn.

“Just playin’ with you Franco. Thanks for treatin’. D’ya order the crab cakes already?”

“My pleasure Dom. Yeah, I ordered them.” Franco nodded then left for the table.

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

His thoughts wandered ... If that kid screws up out there on vacation in Iowa, could ruin everything. Never should have let him go. How much trouble can he get into wearing a leg cast with his folks and Ryz’n there to keep an eye on him? Whoever took a vacation in Iowa anyway? Lake resort or not? Damn. That Ryz’n was something though. Just seventeen and a woman and a half already. Franco wondered whom he would draw as the trial judge. He’d settle for anyone, as long as it wasn’t old man Higher.

Langham Hardern Higher, better known as Hang’em Harder and Higher. That old goat should have recused himself for good ten years ago. Odds were against him if he drew Higher. He knew that for a fact. He’d file a petition for a jury trial. Offer Dom his going rate, sixty per day and expenses and give Carol her standard forty-five. With only five weeks to prepare, he needed two good pairs of legs on this deal, one on each coast. He’d keep Carol’s legs on this coast with him. He spied Dom and Carol coming back. Finishing his cigarette, he flicked the butt into the water below. He hoped Carol hadn’t seen that or she’d be on him again for polluting.

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

Dom rapped the table with his knuckles. “So *Frank*. What’s the deal?”

Feigning surprise, Franco said, “What deal?”

Dom sneered.

“You know. The reason you brought me out here. Must be somethin’ special if Carol can’t handle it herself. She’s a first rate dic if you pardon the oxymoron. I oughtta know cuz I taught her everything she knows.”

“Well, now that you mention it...”

Dom glanced at Carol as if to say: *Told ya so*. Carol rolled her eyes.

Franco said, “Believe I’ve really got something for us this time.”

“Something for *us*? Get that Carol? *For us*. Isn’t that sweet? Yeah—Ides of August.”

“Daddy, come on.” Dom threw up his hands “O-K, O-K. Go ahead I’m listenin’.”

He lifted his beer and guzzled. Franco looked to Carol. She said “Go ahead, Honey.”

“All right. You recall that grisly accident down in Surrettsdale the end of June?”

“You mean the one all over the local TV news showed two corpses fryin’ against the night sky?” Franco nodded. “Yeah Dom. That’s the one.”

“Who could forget it?”

“I musta missed it. What happened?”

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

“Dad, that’s terrible but where’s the case in that?”

“Beats me.”

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

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

“Hope there’s no shells.” Dom picked and prodded at his cake with a fork, turning up his nose, inspecting it, as if he smelled something bad. “Can’t stand shells in a crab cake.”

“Well Dad, if you don’t eat like a pig and swallow too fast you’ll be all right.”

“Don’t know about you Dom, but I plan to have my cake and eat it, too.”

Franco dug into his cake. They joined him. Dom said, “So what about the kid?”

“Well, a cop on the scene wouldn’t hear him out.” Franco chewed. “Told him to scram. The kid had already called it into that new station in Oxen Mill. Drove back to the scene at the urging of one of his passengers. The cop there, directing traffic, thought he was trying to sneak a peek at the accident to, you know, impress the girls with him.” Franco swallowed then forked off another bite of crab cake.

“Girls?”

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

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

“Seventeen.”

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about *her*. Even you would have better sense than to get involved with a girl that young.”

"I dunno," replied Dom. "She's past the age of consent, right Franco? Criminal lawyer's gotta know that." Franco sighed.

"Look Dom, this could be a great case for us."

"What case? You haven't said anything yet that might interest the State's Attorney."

"But Frank's interested all right, Carol. Big time interested. Teeny bopper maybe? Fran-*kee*?"

Franco grimaced. While Dom grinned.

"That it, Frank? Darby O'Halloran's got the judgeship locked up. What does he care?"

Franco shook his head. "No Carol, not him, his assistant."

"Who?"

"Petros Perkouri."

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

"He was appointed interim S. A. a couple weeks ago when O'Halloran got that judgeship. Don't you read the papers Dom?"

"Not unless I have ta. TV's better. Bing-bam and ya got it."

"Think I just got it." Carol picked a piece of shell out of her mouth.

"Yeah, me too." Dom spit a shell onto his plate. Franco said, "Guess I'm the only one livin' right."

"Vinny's the only one livin' right."

"Funny you should mention Vince, Dom. He's the one got me into this."

"You've seen Vinny recently? How he's doing? Still over at Holy Trinity?"

"Yeah Carol, still there. This kid and the girl are in his parish, though the kid isn't Catholic. He's Protestant. Seems just the girls in his life are Catholic. [Chuckles.] Vince says the kid's a one-man, female-wreckin' crew over there. Thinks he's following the golden rule, you know? Doing unto others by loving his neighbor and such, instead of committing mortal sin. The boy never understood the meaning of fornication until Vince explained it to him. Kid thought it was some kind of a venereal disease, like celibacy."

Dom cracked up. "Damn, what I wouldn't give to come back as a Protestant."

"Come back? Back from where, Dad?"

"Back from the grave—reincarnated."

"We don't believe in that either, Dad." Carol rolled her eyes. "Neither do Protestants."

Dom shook his head. "Always knew we got the short end of the stick. Sure as Hell, believe in mortal sin though, don't we? Ain't that right Franco, or do ya?"

Carol slapped her father on the arm. Franco ignored the slur.

"Anyway, Vinny's the one who sent the kid to me. One of the girls with the kid that night recommended him to Vince. Said Vince could help."

"Well that girl did right. Vince can always help."

Franco said, "You still carry a torch for him, don't you Carol?" She blushed: "Always."

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

"Dad. Please."

"The hell you talking about? I *am* happy."

"*Happy*? Gettin' criminals off the hook? Or *happy with my Carol*? Or both?"

Carol slapped at her father's wrist. "*Dad!*"

"All right. All right. I'm sorry. I got a little carried away. Let's get back to business. Still, with you on the mound and Vinny backin' ya up at short and Little Dom catchin', we did all right."

Didn't we? Won that Boy's Club championship what, twice? Ages fifteen and sixteen? CYO, too. Me the manager. Yeah, we did all right. Yes we did.

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

Carol nodded. "Think they use egg yolk to hold the meat together, Dad. So you think it's the black pepper and not those wet sanitary napkins they give you to wash your hands afterwards that cuts down on the crab odor?"

"Maybe. Maybe both."

"Hey," said Franco through clenched teeth. "You don't like it Dom? Don't eat it."

Carol reached out to pat their forearms. "Come on now boys. Play nice."

"What else about the case Frank? I still don't see where there is one." Franco sighed.

"That's the point. There isn't. Perkouri is blowing this thing up out of proportion. Wants to capitalize on that gruesome news footage and the upward trend of youth violence in the county. Use his discretion to try the kid as an adult. Like they did those two, sixteen year olds over in Baltimore. Royal George allows that too, you know. Only other jurisdiction in the state—damned rednecks. Perkouri figures to ride a victory in this case to a victory in the election in November as the new state's attorney."

"On what charge?"

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

Dom: "The kid was drinkin'?"

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

Carol said, "*Murder?* Shoo. That's crazy. Talk about giving an inch and taking a mile! He can forget about that. Seems more likely to charge him with homicide by a vehicle. And we know Maryland is pretty lenient when it comes to vehicular manslaughter, right Frank? But if he *was* legally intoxicated *and* they can prove that's what caused the accident, why not charge him with homicide while under the influence?"

Dom: "Perkouri wants to make a bigger splash. Greater maximum penalty for manslaughter. Ten years to three each count. So the kid's lookin' at twenty years max instead of six, if they run 'em consecutive. Plus what? Five for leavin' the scene of a fatality? But the liquor shoulda been out of his system by then. Two beers and a shot, five hours earlier? Come on. Had to be. Unless they got other evidence, no way they can say his driving was impaired."

Franco nodded. "That's right. But it might be worse."

"How could it be worse? If they can't prove his drunkenness caused the accident, absent gross negligence or recklessness on the kid's part, what case do they have? I mean that's the law, right? And why should homicide by vehicle be less than manslaughter?"

"Maybe it won't be in the future Carol. You forget about leaving the scene?"

Carol nodded. "Oh yeah. Forgot about that." She shrugged, guzzling her beer.

"What do you mean '*worse*'?"

Franco smirked. "Well Dom, my source tells me Perkouri thinks he can make a case for capital murder, saying the kid laid in wait for these turkeys on a deserted road late at night and, with evil

intent, ran ‘em off the road. Or, at the very least, drove recklessly, which would be cause for second degree.”

Carol set her beer down hard. “Capital murder?” She shook her head. “Talk about overcharging. That’s incredible.”

Franco shrugged. “Well. As I said, Perkouri really wants to win that election in November. Make a big splash like Dom said. Kill two birds with one stone—upsurge in teen violence and drunk driving. Could be bad for the kid.”

Carol shook her head. “Nobody should want anything that bad.”

Munching on crab cake, Dom shook his head.

“No. It ain’t like a car is your typical murder weapon. Besides, we got the fastest growin’ county in the country—what? Three—four of the last five years? O’ course, teen crime *is* up. *All* crime is up. More people, whaddaya expect? Shoot.”

“True Dom, but the word is Perkouri will go hard on motive, try to establish evil intent—malice aforethought—for first degree or, like I said, at the least, recklessness for second degree and settle for manslaughter.” Dom balked.

“How’s he gonna do that? Claim the kid pointed a loaded car at the victims and fired off, what? How many rounds before they died of lead poisoning?” Carol cracked up at her dad’s joke but Franco didn’t think it was so funny, adding, “True, as you say. After all, a car isn’t like a gun or a knife or something. But, even if the State could—”

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

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

“This sounds like quite a kid.”

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

“This kid got a name?”

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

“Hey Frank. Wasn’t there a Sh’boom went to Sweetland High with us? Graduated in between us? Ron or Roy or something?”

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

“That’s right. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Cute guy but had an acne problem, as I recall. Good dancer. Liked to wear mohair sweaters.”

Dom tried to snap his fingers, but could scarcely make any sound because his fingers were wet from holding the sweating beer can.

“Curve ball! Had a slow, tantalizing curve for his out pitch, like you, Franky. Guys used to break their backs trying to park it over the fence. Roll over on it.” Franco nodded.

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

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

“Frank.” Carol shook her head, pouting.

“Hey. Believe I read about this kid in the papers. ‘Little Nick.’ That’s what they called him. Helped win the first ever state championship— Class A ball for Pocomoke—the friggin’ hero of the game. Had the impression he’s a cocky little dude.”

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

Dom blinked. “Sure, to keep up with local club and schoolboy sports. Don’t get that on TV.”

“*A je ne sais quoi?* Is that what the kid’s got, Frank? As much as his new *girlfriend*?”

Carol lifted one eyebrow towards him. Franco made a face.

“Say. Not the same Nick Sh’boom with *GRT*?” Franco nods. “Yup, Carol. The same.”

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

“Local rock band Dad. *Good Rockin’ Tonight*—*GRT*. Heard ‘em over at the Brolling NCO Club.”

Franco sneered. “You dating air men now Carol?”

“No. But I might if I thought it’d make you jealous.”

Franco smiled, shaking his head.

“So what *were* you doin’ over there?”

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

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

“What’s to be afraid of? You caught him and delivered the goods to little Suzie? That’s my girl. Just like her old man.” Dom reached over to pat Carol’s shoulder.

“Dad, please. Catching someone in adultery is no cause for rejoicing. After only two years of marriage? Come on. That’s sad.”

“Pays the bills though. So, this kid—how does an underage kid play an NCO Club?”

“I don’t know Dad. His whole band looked underage but they were very good. Best local band I heard in years. Play any request thrown at them. Amazing. And sound just like the original, too. Kids with a history of music like that.” Carol shakes her head.

Dom grunted. “Ha. No Sinatra I’ll bet.”

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

“Like Sammy Davis, Junior, hey?” Carol nodded. “But cute, Dad. Real cute.”

“Yeah. Should have heard him telling me his tale. Acted it all out, imitated all of it.”

“No kiddin’? I gotta see this kid. Sounds like a wonder man. But if he’s playin’ a club underage, probably has a fake I-D. Makes you wonder a little. Know what I mean?”

Carol sneered. “Lot of kids have fake I-Ds Dad. Doesn’t make them killers.”

Something caught Dom’s eye over Franco’s shoulder. Dom nodded that direction.

“Got a sawbuck says I go home with them tonight.”

“Who?” Carol looked over Franco’s shoulder. “What about your car, Dad?”

“You can drive it home.”

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

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

“What about me, Dad?”

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

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

Dom raised his head.

“There. The table with the two women eatin’ crabs. Three tables down on the right, up against the glass wall.”

Franco smirked. “Yeah? You’re dreaming. Which one you think’d go home with *you*?”

Dom jerked his head up. “Hey. Don’t limit my options buddy, but I’m leaning toward the one with the frosted hair.”

“Dad. She can’t be much older than me.” He shrugged.

“Her hair turns me on. Reminds me of your mother, God rest her soul.”

“But Mom never frosted her hair.”

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

Carol shook her head in disgust.

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

Franco joked, “Yeah. Turns him into one.”

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

“Sure, why not? But you can make your move *after* we finish our business. Looks like they have quite a pile to go there yet.”

“Fair enough. So what’s the deal with this Sh’boom kid? Doesn’t sound like Peter Pecker’s got much of a case to me.”

“One of the two eyewitnesses, one of the girls, thinks Nick played chicken with the Buzzbee boys on purpose.”

“Not the one that referred him to Vince?”

“Right Carol, not that one.”

“Was the kid boppin’ her and not the other one? The squealer, I mean?”

Franco chuckled. “I dunno, Dom. May be. Though probably not at that time as far as I can tell. Since then, I get the feeling he might have nailed both of ‘em.”

“To keep ‘em quiet?”

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

“The seventeen-year old that shook you up, hunh Frank?” Franco looked away.

“So he’s a ball player, band leader, and a hot shot lover too? Ain’t sixteen grand? When does he sleep?”

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

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

“It’s the damndest thing, Carol. He took them both on down at Truley’s, single-handed, but separate—and no witnesses. Kid’s about the size Sinatra used to be, and he tears these two big boys up. Used the divide and conquer theory. Took ‘em one at a time, each into a different rest room under the pretense of having sex. They’d been molesting him and makin’ threats. Buzzbee boys got a taste for their own kind in the slammer. Liked his long hair and, well, he is kind of a pretty boy, if you know what I mean?”

“Oh, you bet he is. Thought he kind of favored Ricky Nelson.”

Ignoring Carol, Dom cracks up.

“Havin’ sex in the can? Took ‘em one at a time? How the hell he do that?”

“I dunno Dom. The kid’s a corker. Says he learned self-defense up to the Crest Hill Boy’s Club. And the Buzzbees had been drinking heavily. Anyway, he messed both of them up pretty good. Nobody saw any of it though. Left them out cold on the rest room floor—men and women’s, respectively. Went out in the parking lot and messed up their truck, tore out the distributor wires—”

“That’s where the destruction of private property comes in?”

Franco nods, swallowing some crab cake.

“Yeah Carol. Afraid the Buzzbees might come after him, see? When he came back by there later that night with the girls, they’d gone to the Range Drive-In, the Buzzbees were waitin’ for ‘em in a hot rod jalopy in Truley’s parking lot. They followed him up Old Veer Avenue and that’s when it happened.”

“How exactly?”

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

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

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

Carol: “Why’d he do that?”

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

“Nick said he felt something inside tell him to turn around, go slow and wait. He did and he met the Buzzbee boys jalopy returning just on the straightaway between the two right angle turns. You know the place I mean?” They nodded.

Carol said, “Yes, that’s a nasty spot. Bobby Farino almost bought it there, remember Frank, my junior year?”

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

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

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

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

“The one girl Terri, the blonde—she was in the front seat—says no. The brunette in the back—Patti—she’s not so sure. What all three are certain of is that the weather was terrible. A torrential downpour. Nick was doing about thirty-five in a forty-five mile zone and he stayed on his side of the road. The Buzzbees swung over into his lane and came right for him. Hi-beams on.”

“A real showdown hunh? Like *Hombre*. What about the kid? ‘Have his brites on, too?’”

Franco frowned.

“That’s the curious thing Dom. He didn’t have any lights on at all until the last few seconds. He had turned them off when he hid up the lane. Said he turned them back on to make sure the Buzzbees saw him and because he thought his hi-beams might cancel out theirs, so he wouldn’t be so blinded.”

Dom: ““Cancel out theirs?’ Really?”

“Yup. He really believed that’d work. He wasn’t fooling. He takes Physics *next* year.”

“Driving without lights under those conditions? Then flashin’ on his brites, blindin’ ‘em at the last second? Sounds pretty reckless to me. Negligent, at the least.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Watched them burn and left?”

“Yeah Carol. That’s what he did. Don’t look so stunned. They’re kids. They were shocked, and scared. Nick said he didn’t figure he could do any more to help the Buzzbees at that point.”

“Help them? Sheeitt. Could have called an undertaker I guess.”

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

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

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

“Think you can keep the news reel out of the trial Frank? That would be prejudicial as hell for the jury.”

Franco shrugged. “Hope so Carol. We’ll see. Depends on the judge.”

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

“You got that right. Dom. Wouldn’t be surprised if Perkouri includes assault and battery too. Falls into the category of lesser included offenses.”

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

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

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

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

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

“No Carol, it doesn’t.”

Dom: “Any priors?”

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

“But what?” replied Carol.

Dom: “*But* sometimes a baby’s behind can be pretty shitty. Don’t need a record for that.”

“Exactly. Besides, he was involved in those murder cases out in California last summer as a material witness.” Carol snapped her fingers.

“That’s right. I remember now. Two different cases right? In L.A.? Wow. How’s that for coincidence? How can one kid be in the wrong place at the wrong time twice, back to back like that? Odds on that have gotta be astronomical. Perkouri’d have a field day with that if he can get the judge to let it in the record. What was the name? Uh—”

“Right, Carol. But this kid’s one in a billion—make that a trillion. But you know Perkouri’ll do his damndest to get it in too. That’s one of the things Dom could check into. Help us out.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So Franky, you think I can dope out an ongoing police investigation just because I’m an ex-cop?” Franco nodded.

“Yeah Dom, everything as far as Nick is concerned. As much as Perkouri anyway. That’s why I need the two of you. I need a pair of legs on each coast.” Dom glanced at Carol.

“No need askin’ which pair you want here.”

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

“Sure. Like to meet this kid. Gotta admit he fascinates me. Find out how he nailed those Buzzbee boys in the can. What pitch he threw to induce the batter to hit into a triple play in the ninth in the state championship. But traveling to the Coast is expensive—”

Franco held up his hand. “I got you covered Dom just like I’ve got this covered.”

He slapped forty dollars on the table for their meal over the tip already lying there.

“And that runaway girl, the unsolved case, started out up in Vegas. So I could see where you might have to go up there for a day or two. Could spot you a hundred extra to, shall we say, sightsee out there?” Franco arched one eyebrow for effect. “I’ll defray all *reasonable* expenses—standard per diem—no high roller’s suites though, no Beverly Hills Hilton and such. But *I do*

want you to use any connections you might have to find out everything the cops had on Nick on both those deals. Work that fraternal order of police angle. Whatever it takes. Nick was initially a suspect in both cases but his alibis were rock solid both times—how he became a material witness. Bring back all the witnesses you need. We'll pay for them too."

Carol said, "Who's we?"

"The kid's old man. Hear he's not hurting for cash. Trouble is he doesn't know anything about this yet." Carol looked at him dumbfounded.

"What? How can that be? That's crazy."

"The kid's own request. Said he'd get another lawyer if I told his folks before I had to. I kept telling him the thing would all blow over, see? I thought it would. No case to be made, ya know? Especially as liberal as Maryland law is on vehicular homicide because that's what I thought they'd go for. But this Perkouri's an asshole. Sees this case as his ticket to the big time."

Carol looked at him sideways.

"Maybe yours too, eh Frank?" He peered at her. "Carol. You know me better than that."

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

"You can count on that. But Perkouri's going to make this happen. I'm telling ya. He's champing at the bit. Doing everything he can to fast-track it for circuit court."

"You sayin' the kid hasn't been arrested yet?"

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

"Best for whom, Franky? Best for you? Who bailed him out? How much?"

Franco frowned. "Five big ones. Kid used his own money for the premium and paid the bondsman his fee, too. I'll let that crack slide Dom. Co-signed for him with Max Terry."

"Terry's a good man. Worked with him out of the Bradensburg station back in the Forties, just after the War. The big one—WW Two. Not this chicken ass thing we got now in Viet Nam."

"And the summons?"

"Put out yesterday, Carol. At least that's what I heard. Haven't seen it yet."

"Gee, guess you'll have to tell his old man now?"

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

Franco chuckled. "The S.A.'s office fouled up, see? Grand jury delivers their indictment yesterday, so the office has a couple plain-clothes men deliver the summons to the kid's home. Only, nobody's there. Right? Because they're all out on vacation in Iowa, see? Some miscommunication. But they should have known that, since they set up the check-in deal with him out there. Perkouri's office don't know which end is up. Idiots."

"When's he due back Frank and when's the trial date?"

"Two weeks."

"Two weeks to trial? That's crazy."

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

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

“That’s what I’m saying Dom. I might be able to get him to call you. But you can talk to almost everyone else. Got a list of people to interview on the boat, and where you might find them. Have a copy for each of you. It’s a long list, what with all the character witnesses. And I’ve got statements from the three kids you can review. Got ‘em on tape too, about two hours-worth, if you’d prefer that to the transcripts. Actually, you ought to listen to them; especially, the kid’s. He’s a great mimic. Acted out the whole thing—all the characters. He’s something else.” Franco chuckled.

“Sure,” said Dom, “like to hear ‘em. See the transcripts, too.” Carol agreed.

“Great. Now, I’m going to need you to check with everyone who knew this kid. Start with what happened at Truley’s. Check with his teachers—you know the drill. Truley was there and his staff and several customers when it went bad with the Buzzbees. Also, talk with the two girls, the eyewitnesses. They’re key. Give me your intuition as well as the facts, how you think they’ll shake out on the stand. The twins, of course, and their folks. But stay away from the kid’s neighbors and relatives who might be able to contact the old man until the family gets back here. I put asterisks next to their names. Could use a good accident expert, too. If you got any recommendations, like to hear ‘em.”

Dom: “Know a couple o’ guys—solid guys. No bull. Know their stuff. Get you their numbers. Fella name o’ Barnes might be your best bet. An expert. Worked thirty years for the State investigatin’ accidents. Then, there’s another guy—retired insurance investigator—Juan. Last name escapes me right now.

“Seventeenth birthday, hunh? What a way to spend it. Sheeitt.” Dom clucked his tongue.

Carol shook her head. “Seventeen makes trying him as an adult not look as bad.”

Dom: “Yeah. You think Perkouri didn’t think of that? That pecker’s a real piece o’ work.”

“Dom. See if there’s anything you can do to help Carol. Then let me know as soon as you can get out to the coast. Might want to start by visiting Truley’s with her before you go. That’s a rough place.”

“What about the old man? Wouldn’t he want the same shyster he hired last year to represent his son? There’s none better.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Look Dom, this is gettin’—”

Carol thre up her hands. “Speaking of bills, standard rates?”

“Yeah Carol, standard rates, plus expenses. The usual deal. When we get the kid off, there could be a little extra in it. Can’t promise but I expect the old man to be *very* grateful.”

“Thought bonuses were illegal, Franky?”

Before he could respond to Dom, Carol said, “Promises, promises Frank but that’s not the promise I’m looking for.”

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

“That’s not what I meant.”

Franco ignored her.

Dom called the waitress over, saying: “You mean *you* could be famous, get rich, Franky.”

The waitress said, “Yessir?”

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

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

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

“And mine on the east, hunh Dad?” Dom smacked his lips in disgust.

“I didn’t hear that.”

They finished off their crab cakes in silence...

“Hey. Looky here.”

Dom tilted his head towards the table behind Franco. They turned to watch the server deliver the drinks. The one with frosted hair leaned over to peer around her friend, raising her glass to Dom as the waitress pointed him out. Frosted hair motioned for Dom to come over.

Finishing off his beer, Dom got up.

“Excuse me *friends*. Thanks for the treat Franco. You can do this again anytime. Right now, the evening is young and my destiny awaits—like that ten-spot.”

Fin & Claw

(Except from the novel *Even Better*)

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