

# 1

A glint of orange bounced off the arched windows across Anacapa Street as Brent Marks exited the tall wooden doors of the Santa Barbara courthouse. The old courthouse seemed to have a soul. The soul of every jurist who ever made an argument between the tall walls of each formidable courtroom. The soul of every man who ever sat before a jury of his peers in judgment since 1927.

How he dreamed of doing another grand trial in the old Spanish colonial building. Brent had spent the first 15 years of his 20 year career paying the dues leading up to that moment, with bankruptcies, divorces and drunk driving cases, but since then he had earned the right to take the cases he wanted – cases of social importance.

As he strolled down De La Guerra to the small office on quaint State Street where he had hung his shingle 20 years earlier, Brent inhaled the fresh ocean air and thanked himself for deciding on Santa Barbara. It was a refreshing break from the bustle of smog-bound Los Angeles, where he would have been an ant scurrying around with thousands of other ants, each trying to make a name for themselves in the law business. Santa Barbara was a small town, which sometimes can be an impediment to a newcomer, but, during his “dues paying days” he had made a name for himself, and established a thriving private practice.

Brent turned left on State Street, feeling the privilege of being able to walk to and from his work. He imagined State Street 100 years ago, with the Wells Fargo stage coach barreling through, and the town growing up around the route. It was the perfect match for his heritage.

His father was an immigrant from Spain. Jose Marquez had changed the family name to Marks, to avoid the stereotypes that he felt were cast on the family by people who thought they were Mexican. Brent could have passed for Mexican himself, with his dark brown curly hair and dark eyes, but he was much taller than most Mexicans. He was fluent in Spanish, which helped in the old days when he was a “poor man’s lawyer.” The Spaniards had tamed this land and now it was Brent’s turn. He loved Santa Barbara.

He had made it to his State Street office just in time to check messages and make sure everything was in order for the big weekend. No work, only play and relaxation for the next 48 hours. As he entered the office, Melinda Johnson, his secretary, looked worried. It was unusual for her to be there past quitting time on a Friday.

“Hey Mimi, what’s wrong?” Brent asked her.

“You’ve got a call waiting. I told him you weren’t in, but he said he’d wait.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know, he won’t say. He’s really weird, Mr. Marks.”

“Why don’t we let him just die on hold then?”

“I think you should answer.”

Brent entered his office, sat down behind his plush mahogany desk, and picked up the phone.

“Hello, this is Brent Marks.”

The eerie voice on the other end was cold and inhuman. “Do you know how fast a bullet goes, Counselor?” it asked.

“Who is this?”

“Seventeen hundred feet per second. At that velocity it will crack open your skull and blast your brains all over your wall like a watermelon being hit by a sledge hammer.” The caller cackled like a wounded chicken.

Brent quickly switched on the recording device to the receiver. He had bought that baby to record threats from ex-husbands whose wives had obtained restraining orders against them but which Brent had always refused to dismiss, even in cases of so called “reconciliation.”

“I don’t think I got your name, mister?”

The voice responded with a maniacal chuckle, which turned into a full blown belly laugh, like Vincent Price in the final stanza of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*.

“No judge in the world can stop a bullet, Counselor. No piece of paper can do that.”

“This conversation is really interesting, but if I don’t have your name, I…”

“Think hard.”

“I’m not going to play games with you.”

“Oh, this is not a game. I assure you. I’m just giving you a little preview. Wherever you go, I’ll be there. When you’re at the corner at Starbucks, having your mocha grande in the morning before going to court, I’ll be there. You won’t see me, but I’ll be there. All it takes is one shot – one shot in the head.”

“And why would you want to shoot me?”

“I am a servant of the Lord, Counselor. I do His work.”

“You’re saying that you’re going to kill me because God told you so?” Without answering, the caller went into a sermon, like an evangelist preacher trying to convert a world full of infidels.

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, sayeth the Lord! When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers. I am your terror, Counselor. I am the hand of the Lord and I will strike you down!”

Suddenly, Brent realized who this character could be. Last year, he took on a case for Felipe Sanchez, who had rented a house from a crazy religious fanatic named Joshua Banks. When Banks found out that Sanchez had moved in his girlfriend, all hell broke loose. “I won’t have fornication in my house!” Banks decreed. Sanchez ignored him and three days later, came home to find himself locked out of his house and all his furniture thrown out on the street. When Brent

succeeded in getting the police to open the house, Banks turned off the utilities, and Sanchez sued. Thanks to a little known provision in the Civil Code, daily damages were awarded to Sanchez at trial which allowed him to take his judgment, levy it against the house, and become the owner of it. Justice can be hell for some people.

“Threatening my life is a felony, Mr. Banks,” said Brent, “Do you really want to go to prison?”

“Do you think I care about your court? Your prison? There is only one lawgiver and judge, and that is the Lord God! Judge not, that you not be judged, sayeth the Lord. Man does not have the right to sit in judgment of his fellow man.”

“You’re not God, Mr. Banks.” Ignoring him, Banks pressed on.

“Your judgment has been pronounced, Counselor. And I’m afraid there is no chance for a pardon. The punishment is death.”

Brent heard a click, followed by the dull dead sound of dial tone. It was now after 5:30 p.m. on a Friday. There was no way he could get a restraining order until the court opened on Monday morning, and the police would refuse to do anything about it unless he had one.

“Mims, I’ve gotta work you this weekend.”

“Oh, boss, it’s my sister’s birthday tomorrow and we planned to go to Solvang to see *Legally Blonde*. Do I have to?” she pleaded, batting her eyelashes over her power blue eyes. Melinda was 20 something, attractive, with auburn brown hair, and had a huge crush on the boss. But Brent had long since made it clear that their relationship would be strictly business. Still, that did not prevent her from using her feminine wiles whenever she had the occasion, or, in this case, the need.

“Sorry, but if I don’t get a restraining order against this crazy Joshua Banks, I’m afraid you may not have a boss by Monday.”

“That was Banks? Oh, I remember that guy. He’s nuts.”

“You can do it at home. I’ll dictate it now and drop it by your house in about two hours. But I need it by Sunday night. Court opens at 8:30.”

“Okay boss, you can count on me.”

It was a good thing that Brent had not yet made any plans for the weekend, because this weekend would be reserved for writing up a motion for a restraining order and trying to stay alive long enough for the Court to grant it and the Sheriff to serve it.

*Two years earlier...*

April Marsh knew when she rang the bell at the security gate outside her parent's lavish home in Hope Ranch that something was wrong. The drive from L.A was a long one, and she had been stuck in slow weekend traffic all the way from Thousand Oaks. She was tired and worried. Mom and Dad had not answered her calls, and would usually check in with her if they were planning on going somewhere, at least to ask for a dog sitter for their two mutts. All was still and quiet – no dogs barking – just the gentle sound of the waves lapping against the shore in the back of the property. An eerie fog had begun to shroud the large home; a heavy shadow that seemed to hide it from the rest of the world. As she stood outside the grounds of the estate, April looked more like a real estate agent than an investigative journalist from Los Angeles, via New York, where she had learned the trade, dressed in a stylish skirt, perched on high heeled Christian Louboutins, as she brushed her long blonde hair out of her powder blue eyes, as she tried to make sense out of the silence.

April rang the gate bell again – no answer. She pushed against the gate and it creaked open, giving way. *Strange*, she thought. *Mom and Dad always keep the gate locked.* April walked through the unkempt garden that once was finely manicured by a team of gardeners. Since Dad lost most of his money in the stock market crash in 2008, the gardeners were the first to go. What was once a series of plush flowerbeds bursting with color was now patches of flowers with wild vines and weeds weaving through them. Mom wasn't much into gardening, with all the added responsibilities of cleaning a house that came along with the dismissal of the maids.

April proceeded through the courtyard, to the once grand entrance, which was now collecting curled paint chips. As she reached out and knocked on the door, it squeaked open slowly; a sound you would imagine a coffin with rusty old hinges would make in a horror film; and that sound, combined with the dead silence that followed brought on a creepy chill and adrenaline rush from that uneasy feeling that something was no quite right.

“Mom?” she called, as she entered the travertine paved foyer. The call seemed to echo and reverberate throughout the house. *Maybe they're out in the back*, she thought. There was a lot of land out there, which led all the way to the cliffs overlooking the ocean. It would be virtually impossible to hear anything from the end of the property.

“Dad?” she called, her voice once again meeting with dead silence. Then her shuffling toe made contact with something soft and fleshy. She looked down in horror at the lifeless body of their German shepherd, Baron, who looked like his head had been crushed. She recoiled in horror, dropping her purse. Surging, panicking, she ran into the living room, almost spraining her ankle, as she landed on the side of her right heel. She kicked off the shoes and ran into the family room. “Mom!” she yelled, crying, trying to cover as much ground in the big house as she could. *Why did they ever get this big house?* was just one of the thoughts flying through her head at lightning speed as her eyes quickly scanned each room she ran through in her panic. Then, realizing she had dropped her purse, she quickly ran back to get it, sweeping it up with one arm and continued her search. *How stupid it was to drop it.*

“Mom!”

“Dad!”

Nobody was in the kitchen, the dining room, the downstairs guest bedroom. April turned and headed for the stairs. There, at the landing, was the limp body of Daisy, their weimaraner, her tongue hanging out loosely, surrounded by a slick pool of her own blood. April screamed, but her fleeting thought of grief for her precious Daisy was overpowered by the panic she felt for her parents. The realization that they were probably dead was competing with the hope that they were still alive, somewhere, and that they could be helped.

April bounded up the stairs, and into her parents’ bedroom, coming face to face with the battered remains of her mother, propped up against the wall like a rag doll, her lifeless eyes open with her face frozen in her last moment of terror, her bruised and battered arms to the side, and her legs splayed out in front of a bloodied torso. April could hardly recognize her mother, whose reddened bloodied head resembled that of a voodoo doll. She turned away from the scene, the blood drained from her brain, and turned a pasty white. Hunched over with her hands on her knees, April choked and threw up. The blood returned to her brain, she stood up and tried to catch her breath, which was coming in like hyperventilating and exiting with every profound sob, like she had a chronic case of the hiccups.

Turning from the ghastly grotesque scene of her mother’s murder, April screamed from the gut for her father, stretching the one syllable into an entire sentence, “Daaad!” and ran into the corridor, bumping her arm on the door frame as she did, her purse sliding from her shoulder down to the crook of her elbow.

She found him in his study, slumped over his computer desk. He had been bludgeoned and his blood was spattered everywhere. “Oh, dad...” she expelled, sadly, summoning the courage in her grief to feel around his bloody neck for a pulse as a last expenditure of hope.

A faint pulse! Thrusting open her purse, she snatched her cell phone and punched 911, while the purse fell to the floor, spewing the rest of its contents.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“My...mother...has been murdered....my dad...is still alive...please send someone fast!  
5689 Marina Drive...please help us!”

### 3

The upcoming client had Brent intrigued. Her case was a potential wrongful predatory lending case against one of the largest New York banks, which had taken over one of the nation's largest mortgage banks, rumored to have committed more fraud than Charles Ponzi and Bernie Madoff put together. It was the type of case that could put him over the top, not only financially, but professionally, and he squirmed in his black leather high back chair as he impatiently waited for her. He was too anxious and it was too close to her appointment time to start any new project, even a letter.

“Did she call in?” he called to Melinda, in the next room.

“You asked me that twice already. She’s not even late yet.”

“Okay, sorry. Well let me know right away if she calls in.”

“I’m sure she’ll be here on time. It’s an important case.”

Brent knew that, or at least he hoped it was. Oftentimes, clients would think that they had the greatest case in the world, and those clients can be a lawyer’s worst enemy. They do their own legal research, without the benefit of the three years’ training you get in law school, not to mention the 20 years of on the job training in practice; they make suggestions on the pleadings that you have to cross out and often confuse you. And, worst of all, they usually come up with something like, “You know, I have some legal training. I took business law in high school, and I can save you a lot of time by writing the pleadings myself. You can just check them over and edit them.” If looking over an amateur’s work wasn’t bad enough, they then expect a reduction in the fees for their “generous contribution.” Brent’s primary rule in dealing with clients was, *It’s your case, but I’m the lawyer. If you don’t trust my work, hire someone else.*

Some people don’t like lawyers, that is, until they need them. But, as Charles Dickens said, *if there were no bad people, there would be no good lawyers.* A lawyer was your “friend in need.” Lawyers have a different way of thinking; analytical thinking that does not incorporate the emotional side of the issue.

Granted, a lawyer can and should care about your case, but when the chips are down you don’t want him to blubber about it in court. You want clear, objective analysis that he can argue to a judge. Emotions are reserved for juries and, in that case, a good lawyer could really lay

them on when the time was right, better than the best Academy Award winning actor. Brent never took on a case he didn't think he could win.

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Melinda walked in, with a smirky grin on her face, to announce the arrival of the client. "You're gonna like this one," she said. Brent made a face to her that said, "Be professional," and responded, "Please show her in."

The woman was stunning. At about 30, blonde hair, blue eyes, and a stunning figure, April Marsh could arouse any man on earth better than 100 milligrams of Viagra. Brent sized her up right away, keeping his emotions at bay, of course, and his eyes away from her ample, but not overwhelming breasts.

"Brent Marks," he said, extending his hand. She took it. Her hand was warm and pleasant, but the handshake firm. "April Marsh."

"Please have a seat."

April sat down in the classic wooden chair across from Brent's desk. The chairs were comfortable enough for a conversation of the required length, but not padded, so as not to encourage a longer visit than was necessary.

"How can I help you?" asked Brent.

"As I told you on the phone, I'm looking for the right lawyer to handle my father's case against Prudent Bank."

"Yes, your father is incapacitated."

"That's right. He was almost killed, and now he can't communicate."

"And you've been appointed already as his conservator?"

"Yes."

"I looked at the materials you sent over to me. Of course, I would have to review all of the files, but it looks like when the bank bought the assets of Tentane Mutual after the FDIC seizure, your father's mortgage was not properly assigned to the mortgage backed securities Trust that was supposed to be one of the assets."

Before the 2008 mortgage crisis, thousands of subprime real estate loans on over-appraised real estate were assigned to mortgage pools and then resold to investors as mortgage backed securities. When U.S. home prices declined sharply after peaking in 2006, it became difficult or borrowers to refinance their loans. As adjustable rate mortgages began to increase in monthly



payments, mortgage delinquencies soared, causing mortgage backed securities to lose most of their value. This, in turn, led to what is known as the financial crisis of 2008, the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.

“Yes, they tried to slip it in with a forged assignment three years after the closing date of the Trust.”

“I saw that. The assignment of the deed of trust was signed by Prudent Bank, who was not even authorized to assign to the Trust.”

“And it was a robo-signing.” Robo-signing was a common practice during the years leading to the 2008 financial crisis, where numerous low level bank employees would sign important documents, as officers of the bank, often with forged notary signatures. Brent could see the prima facie elements of a solid mortgage fraud case against the bank.

“The branch president talked my father into the loan,” she continued, “to get him back on his feet after he lost most of his capital in the stock market. Then, when the loan adjusted and the payments doubled, he talked him into going behind on his mortgage payments so he could qualify for a loan modification.”

“But he never got the modification, only a foreclosure notice.”

“That’s right, and now he can’t pay at all.” April’s lip quivered, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“What’s the name of the branch manager?”

“Steve Bernstein. He’s a vice president of Prudent Bank now.”

“Ms. Marsh...”

“April.”

“April, my preliminary review tells me you have a potential case of mortgage fraud here, and we may be able to have the court declare that Prudent Bank has no power to collect on the loan or foreclose on the deed of trust.”

“I know, but that’s not why I came to you.” Brent looked puzzled.

“I don’t understand.”

“I came to you because of your landmark case against Prudent Bank last year. My mother was murdered, Mr. Marks, and my father was beat within an inch of his life.”

“I know. I remember the case. The police never identified a suspect.”

“I know who did it.”

“You do?”

“Well, I know who ordered it, but I can’t prove it, but you can.”

“Wait a minute, I’m a civil lawyer. You came to me to discuss the case against the bank.”

“The bank did it.” April’s eyes were trained straight on Brent’s. “I know you may think I’m crazy, but I know the bank is behind my mother’s murder.”

“And how does that tie into your mortgage fraud case?”

“Mr. Marks...”

“Brent.”

“Brent, do you remember the OJ Simpson case?”

“Yes I do.”

“Did you have any doubt that OJ was responsible for Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman’s murder?”

“None whatsoever. But he was acquitted of it.”

“That’s right, but he lost the civil case for wrongful death. I’m here because you proved in the Carson case that Prudent’s employees perjured themselves in Court, right?”

“Yes.”

“And that they committed mail fraud and wire fraud in the process of foreclosing on your client’s home?”

“Yes.”

“Well, aren’t murder and attempted murder predicate acts under RICO?” RICO, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, was a federal statute that Brent had used against the bank in his landmark wrongful foreclosure case.

“Look, Ms. Marsh.”

“April.”

“April, I’m not sure you came to the right lawyer for this.”

“Oh, I’m absolutely sure I did. My mother is dead. My father will probably die soon. I don’t give a damn about the house. I just want those bastards to pay for what they did to my parents.” Her bottom lip, the one that was quivering before, was absolutely stiff. The telltale sign of the problem client began to rear its head in Brent’s mind.

“What gives you the idea the bank is behind your mother’s murder?”

“My father was the principal witness in a grand jury investigation against the bank. All the other witnesses were scared off. He wasn’t. Most people, faced with two difficult choices, prefer not to choose at all. My family is not one to back down from a conflict.” Brent could see that. “Unfortunately, violence has a way of overpowering the will,” she added.

“I’ll look at the case and make a full evaluation. If I think I can win it, I’ll take it. That’s all I can promise you.”

“I left the files up front with your secretary.”

“Great, I’ll give you a call after I evaluate the case, but I have one ground rule with all my clients.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s your case, but if it take it, as long as I’m on it, I run it. Is that agreed?”

“Yes, so long as you agree that we have a RICO case and that murder is one of the predicate acts.” April was tough. She would make a terrible damsel in distress.

“Like I said, I will evaluate the case and let you know.” Brent stood up, showing her that the interview was over. April stood up as well, and shook his hand.

“Thank you, Brent. I’m glad I found the right lawyer.”

“I haven’t taken the case yet.”

As she turned to leave, and Brent watched the swish of her hips, he almost lost sight of his rules. April turned her silky blonde head, her eyes smiling. “You will,” she said.

Brent spent the rest of the day digging through cases. In the old days, you had to go to the law library to do legal research, or buy hundreds of law books, at the cost of thousands of dollars per month. Now, thanks to the Internet, which leveled the playing field, for less than \$100 per month, Brent had access to all the legal authorities he needed, and all he needed was his computer and a lot of time.

Brent actually had a social life, but he was between girlfriends at the moment, so he plowed into his work. As his late mentor, Charles Stinson used to say, "Your first mistress is the law." Of course, he said that when Brent was too busy fooling around to prepare for a joint case he and Charles were working on until the last minute. Then, at the last minute, they were both in the office together, copying exhibits and preparing testimony, because Charles too valued his play time.

RICO, the Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organizations Act, was first enacted in 1970 by Congress to take a bite out of organized crime in the 60's, but it also could be used to bring a civil action, and that is where Brent focused his research. Since its enactment, RICO cases had been brought against the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club, famous mafia crime families like the Gambinos and Luccheses, and even business tycoon Michael Milken. But most civil RICO cases never got past the pleading stages. Big business committed big crimes, but they also hired big firms to defend them, and spent big money to get the best defense. Most RICO claims did not have a chance.

The law was a tool. It was complicated, but being your own lawyer was worse than being your own doctor. Lawyers are expensive, and powerful people can afford more of them than the common man. To go up against Prudent Bank was no easy task for a one-man firm like Brent's.

To make a case under RICO, Brent would have to plead that Prudent Bank was a criminal enterprise, and that it had committed at least two serious crimes as part of the operation of the enterprise. Certainly murder and attempted murder were among the top offenses that could be alleged, but Brent thought it a little far-fetched that a bank could be accused of murder. However, companies do not exist independent of the people who run them, and people do commit murder for many various reasons.

Brent had seen enough fraud in April's files on the part of both Tentane Mutual Bank as well as a cover-up by Prudent Bank to stick Prudent with a nice fat mortgage fraud claim, but going after them for RICO was a bigger stretch. The last thing he wanted was for the Court to throw out his case on a motion to dismiss or for the judge get a bad impression about it to begin with.

Tentane had falsified documents. They didn't bother having notaries actually sign and witness documents as required by law. They just stamped the notary stamps on the documents and had employees in their mortgage processing factories in more than 15 states forge the notaries' names. That was known as "robo-signing," and, April being an investigative reporter, already had expert handwriting analysis and records to prove the assignments of the mortgage were forgeries. She also had a forensic report that showed a faulty chain of title of documents on the Marsh's mortgage. Prudent Bank knew about the fraud, yet proceeded with foreclosure like nothing was done wrong.

What it meant to Mr. Marsh was that Prudent Bank, who had purchased the assets of Tentane Mutual by an agreement with the government on the eve of the FDIC seizure, did not have the right to foreclose on the Marsh home.

Prudent had already paid millions of dollars in fines to numerous government agencies and investors for their deceptive mortgage loan origination and fraudulent securitization practices. They knew about the problems with the faulty assignments and forgeries, but covered them up and continued to record false documents to try to bury the cover up.

Since they used the U.S. Mail and made interstate telephone calls, Brent surmised that he could hang a RICO case against them by mail fraud (the U.S. Mail) and wire fraud (the interstate telephone calls). That way, he didn't have to prove a murder case. But now he had to sell this idea to April.

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Brent looked at the clock. It was already 10 p.m. He picked up the phone to call his buddy, Rick Penn, who was also his investigator.

"Dude, I think I've got a juicy case for you," said into the phone.

"You've gotta be kidding me, it's 10 freakin' p.m. If you want to talk about it, get down to Sonny's and we'll discuss it over a drink."

Sonny's was Rick's favorite bar. State Street may be charming during the day, but at night, the lower part of it, near the Santa Barbara Pier, is pretty wild. Sonny's is one of the bars on the lower side that seems to always be full, even on the weekdays.

“I’ll be there in ten,” said Brent, and hung up the phone.

Sonny's was always packed and the fact that it was Thursday night made no difference. The cops had already parked some squad cars on State Street to prepare for their post bar-closing drunk driving dragnet, so Brent had been smart and walked there from his office. It was about ten blocks, but they were short blocks. Santa Barbara itself was a small town; only 42 square miles, but it had the longest south facing coastline on the west coast, so beautiful that it was referred to as the "American Riviera."

Brent planned to take a cab home after the meeting. He knew only too well California's DUI laws. There was no way he would be caught driving under the influence of alcohol, even though he knew all the prosecutors in the city – especially because he knew all the prosecutors in the city.

As was typical with most of the bars and bar and grills downtown, Sonny's had an outdoor seating area on the sidewalk. Brent could see that it was packed as he approached. Being only a few blocks from the coast made for a frosty evening even on a summer night, but the peeps at Sonny's didn't care. They were insulated from the inside out and feeling warm and fuzzy all over. Sonny's kick ass sound system was so good, Brent could swear it was really Shakira singing instead of her recording of "Whenever, Wherever," when he walked in.

Rick was sitting at the bar. He was easy to spot because he was the tallest guy at the bar. He was always easy to spot, for that matter, because he was always the tallest guy anywhere. When Brent first started hanging out with him, it was kind of intimidating because he didn't quite know where to look. He wanted to look up because, for one thing, he didn't want Rick to think he was looking at his crotch. The other thing was, it's usually nice to make eye contact with someone you're having a conversation with. Seated at the bar, it was a lot easier. He didn't have to strain his neck.

Rick smiled, and put out his hand for the "thumb to thumb" handshake, which Brent tackled with experience as he slid onto the bar chair. Rick was an ex-FBI agent, retired from the Bureau for about five years, about 56 years old, 20 years Brent's senior, with greying hair and, although he tried to look cool, he could never shake that "G-Man look," which was a combination between "GQ" and nerd. He definitely looked better in a suit than the long baggy grey shorts and black Def Leppard T-shirt he wore.

Rick had started out with the LAPD, and was hired out by the Bureau after putting in about five years hard work as a street cop, then spent the next ten years of his career in the Bureau's LA office until the Santa Barbara position opened. His buddies in LA used to joke that he went "on vacation" when he transferred to Santa Barbara. For Rick, it was a step closer to the perfect retirement. He now worked as a private eye to supplement his retirement income from the government.

They had met about ten years before, when Brent was taking just about any case for money. Rick had walked into the office, fully suited, and presented himself as Agent Penn of the FBI. Brent had almost pissed himself, wondering if this G-Man had come to arrest him for something. It turned out that he just needed a general education on securities, and Brent was well versed in them, having recently settled a big securities fraud lawsuit.

"What's goin' on big dog?" Rick asked.

"Hey dude." Brent took a seat at the bar and Rick flagged down the bartender, a lanky young guy, who leaned over to take the order.

"Whatcha drinkin'?" asked Rick.

"I'll have one of those chick's martinis."

"Cosmo," Rick said to the bartender, who nodded and went to work on it.

"Drinkin' the chick's drinks, means you're getting horny, dude," said Rick.

"You know me, I'm always horny." Rick laughed. "Look, I need you to take a look at a case for me," said Brent.

"Who's the client? Gotta know there's no conflict."

"April Marsh."

"Doncha mean March April?" Rick prided himself as the master of puns. Of course, after a couple of drinks, his jokes got even better, or so he thought.

"Very funny."

"So, what's she look like?"

"Rick, come on, man."

"No, you come on. One to ten, a five? Seven? Is she hot?"

"Rick, I didn't come here to talk chicks."

"Since when do we not talk chicks? Plus we're in a bar for fuck's sake. What else do guys talk about in a bar?"

"Dude, I can't get involved with a client."

"Oh, so she's hot?"



“Can’t say.”

“What? What happened, did your dick go on vacation or something?” What’s she look like?” Brent was stoic.

“Blonde hair?” asked Rick. Brent said nothing, giving it away. “Blue eyes?” Again nothing. “Woa, I’m on a roll now. Smokin’ hot body too, right?”

“If you must know…”

“I must.”

“Yes, all of that.” Rick whistled.

“Can we be serious now?” The bartender slid the pink martini to Brent across the sticky counter. Rick pointed to his own glass with a “pouring motion” and the bartender topped it up

“Serious is too boring.”

“It’s no boring case.”

“Yeah, you told me.” He covered his mouth, as if to yawn. “Financial fraud, whoopee!”

“This is different.”

“How so?”

“Her parents’ house was in foreclosure, Prudent Bank, major fraud.

“So?”

“Her mother was murdered. Father beat within an inch of his life.”

“You told me. And?”

“She says the bank VP did it.”

“Why would a bank VP want to murder her mother?”

“That was my initial reaction too. Seems the VP was up against a Grand Jury investigation for all his dirty little mortgage dealings and the parents were witnesses.”

“Now that is interesting. Well, banks are the biggest mafia, you know, except for the government of course.”

“Of course.”

“Calls for a toast,” Rick said, lifting his glass. Brent took the cue and raised his class as well. “Give me everything and I’ll sniff around for you.” Rick slammed his drink as Brent took a sip from his martini.

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“Come by the office tomorrow afternoon. Melinda should have your copies of the files ready by then,” said Brent.

“Don’t have to talk me into it. That Melinda is one helluva fox.”

“Dude, nobody says fox anymore.”

“Yeah, well nobody says dude anymore either. Hey, whatever happened with that nut case and the restraining order?”

“Joshua Banks? They served him on Monday.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I told the Sheriff he was dangerous, so they asked the cops for help. They brought out the whole freakin’ SWAT team - served the guy at gunpoint and everything - he even gave up his whole gun collection.”

“No shit.”

“No shit. I think that one is under control.”

“Just watch your back, man. You never know.”

“I know.”

“And Brent...”

“Yeah?”

“You know you can call me if it gets too hairy.”

“I know, thanks.”

“No need.” Brent knew that was true. The mark of a good friend. Someone who asked for nothing, and gave everything. Someone you could call up at 3 in the morning who would never be pissed off at you. And they could do the same.

