

Chapter 4

Business was good. Dick Randall stood at the counter that served as a desk in his Evergreen Way coffee stand and counted out the money.

Mostly cash. Rarely did any of his customers use a credit or debit card. They didn't want their wives to know where they were buying their coffee. *Hah! Buying coffee, that was a joke.* They could get coffee anywhere, and a lot cheaper.

They were buying a chance to oogle scantily clad good looking women, maybe make a little time with them. He was careful in his hiring practices. He only hired attractive girls. Let the other girls work somewhere else.

"Hi handsome," Tammy said to the man in the black Ford Victoria. "What can I get for you?"

"What're you offering?" the man asked.

"Here's the menu." Tammy leaned out the window, making sure to show him her cleavage, to point to the sign.

"I heard you had a special menu," the man said.

Tammy smiled. She gave that an oh-so-innocent look. "You must mean this one." She pulled her hand lettered sign from below the counter.

"What do I get for the hot buttered bun?"

Tammy lifted her tiny plaid skirt and slid her hand down her panties. "Gee, mister, you order the hot buttered bun and I'll have to find some special seasoning for your latte." She quickly removed her hand.

The man pulled two twenty dollar bills and a ten out of his wallet. "I'll have one please."

Tammy took the bills, then slid her panties down. She climbed up on the counter and spread her legs, exposing herself at eye level to the man in the car.

“Everett PD.” The man flashed a badge. “You’re all under arrest.”

Marked police cars with lights flashing swarmed into the parking lot.

“Wait, what do you mean?” Tammy asked.

“You’re under arrest for performing lewd acts in public and for prostitution.” The man was out of the car. Uniformed officers came through the door at the back of the stand.

“What the hell?” Dick looked up from his work.

“Put your hands behind your back.” An officer spun him around. “You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in court of law . . .”

“What’s the meaning of this? We weren’t breaking any laws.”

“Been getting’ a lot of complaints from the community,” the officer said.

“They’re just a bunch of church ladies. They don’t know what we do here. We don’t break any laws. I have rules. I make the girls sign a form expressly prohibiting any lewd acts.”

The plain clothes detective was cuffing Tammy. “Do you have any ID?”

“In my bag.” Tammy pulled away from him, rummaged around in her purse and produced a wallet. “There.” She shoved the wallet in the detective’s face.

“Remove it from your wallet please,” the detective asked.

She handed her driver’s license to the cop.

“Twenty-three huh? And I’m the Shaw of Iran. You don’t really think we’d accept this ID do you? It’s faker than a three dollar bill.”

Tammy just smirked at him.

“How old are you?” the detective asked.

Tammy hemmed and hawed for a moment, then decided to answer. “Sixteen.”

“Sixteen? Charlie, add to the charges. Sexually exploiting a minor. Mr. Randall is going a way for a long time.”

“Wait a minute,” Dick protested. “I didn’t know she was sixteen. She showed me her ID; she said she was twenty-three.”

“Yeah, sure,” the cop said. “Tell it to the judge.”

“You can’t arrest me. I don’t condone lewd acts. It’s right in our rules. All the girls have to sign them. If they did anything illegal, I had nothing to do with it.”

“Take ‘em all in,” the detective said as he pushed Tammy towards his car.

Business was good for Catrina too. Ted spent most of the day Monday hooking up his computers, then making an inventory of all the equipment in Catrina’s network. It really hadn’t changed since he left five years ago. It was dreadfully out of date then, it was positively ancient now.

But Catrina’s business was prospering. Since adding Millennium Systems as a client, her background check department had become a cash cow. Alison Clarke had steered several other major accounts Catrina’s way. Now, her staff of wounded, broken women searched all fifty states for criminal records and financial data as well as doing credit reports for hundreds of requests a week.

Big companies made major investments in their employees. They didn’t want to hire people with criminal records, those who had been bad employees at previous jobs or those in financial difficulty. With the new privacy laws, it became harder and harder for employers to legally investigate their candidates. That’s where Catrina’s business came in. She could find out things about a candidate that an employer could never ask.

Catrina’s business had evolved over the years. It started out doing searches of county and state databases looking for criminal activity. Now she had operatives in every state that could do “boots on the ground” investigations should her clients require it.

If you were planning on making a six-figure offer to an out of state candidate, it was worth her fee to know everything there was to know about them.

All of this brought in enough income to finance Catrina's other operations. Her real passion was for helping women out of tough situations. Messy divorces paid for themselves, doing investigations for sexual harassment suits may or may not pay their own way, but it was a sure fire bet that helping battered wives escape their abusers was a losing proposition.

Now, Catrina had set Ted loose.

"Modernize our network. Bring our systems up to date. It's time we got into the Twenty-First Century," she told him.

He sat on the floor in the new computer room and worked on his Surface tablet. He tried to think ahead. *What will we need a year from now? Five years from now?*

New servers, routers, VOIP phone system, video conferencing. Where should he start?

"You make any progress on the Murray case yet?" Catrina stood in the computer room door. She must be going to court today. She wore a light blue suit that worked with her gray eyes. Ted smiled to himself. She had great gams and knew it. She wore very short skirts for a woman her age, and the heels didn't hurt either.

She wore a cream colored blouse with the top buttons unbuttoned. Ted smiled. She be testifying in front of Anthony Petrocelli. That idiot assistant district attorney would be drooling all over himself staring at Catrina's cleavage. She could play him like a cheap fiddle.

"Yeah, I hacked into his home system." Ted got up from his place on the floor and wiped off the back side of his jeans with both hands. "I placed a little Trojan Horse on his personal computer. I'm recording all of his key strokes. I'll download the data tonight when he's asleep. I should have his passwords and bank account data for you in the morning."

"Good, Jennifer's going to court on it tomorrow afternoon."

Jennifer Trask was Catrina's best friend, attorney and sometime employer. Jennifer often hired Catrina's firm to do investigations for her cases.

The Murray case was going to be a good income producer. Charles Murray owned three car dealerships in the Seattle area. When his wife, Georgia, filed for a divorce, Jennifer knew that millions of dollars were at stake.

But Murray was a cagey bastard. When he presented his financials, Jennifer knew that he had been squirreling away his money anticipating this moment. She and Catrina now depended on Ted to find the truth.

"I've got some good stuff for you already," Ted said. He stepped past Catrina and led her to his office.

"Right here." He picked up a file folder from the tray on his desk. "Emails. Some really hot stuff between Mr. Murray and his honey."

"Hmmm . . ." Catrina scanned the printed emails.

"I've got receipts too. From his credit cards. Hotels, restaurants. I got a couple of airline tickets to Cabo."

"Lookin' good, Higuera."

Catrina's smile made him want to cuddle up to her like a love-sick puppy.

"Keep at it." Catrina turned and walked out of his office.

Ted stared at her a moment. Watching her walk away from him was a pleasure all in its own. She was one good looking woman.

His smart phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket and saw a text message from Maria. His face glowed red with embarrassment.

The short, dark man rose from his chair and reached for the yellow legal pad on the table.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” Abe Weinstein said, walking slowly to the polished oak bar around the jury box. “First of all I want to thank you for your service. I know that you are taking time away from your busy lives to perform your civic duty. I commend you.”

He studied the jury for a moment. Eight women and four men. The women were all middle aged or older, the men were all retired. Not a good mix. He really needed younger people on this jury. They just hadn’t been in the jury pool.

“The prosecutor has failed to prove his case,” Weinstein began. “He has tried to confuse you with obfuscations and inaccuracies. The truth of the matter is that my client, Richard Randall,” Weinstein turned back towards the defense table and spread his open palm towards the graying middle aged man at the table, “did not know that the young lady in question was a minor.”

Weinstein was a stocky man, with a full beard. It showed traces of gray, to match his graying temples. There wasn’t much hair left on the top of his head. He wore gold wire-rimmed granny glasses that kept sliding down his long nose and he constantly pushed them back up with his right index finger.

“Richard Randall, Dick as his friends call him, is innocent of any wrong doing. He runs a completely legitimate business. He checks his employees ID to insure that they are of legal age. He has written rules against lewd behavior. He requires each of his employees to sign a form stating that they understand the rules and that they will live by them. They know full well that breaking those rules will result in their dismissal.”

Weinstein was hitting his stride. He turned back to the jury. He placed both hands on the bar surrounding the jury box. He looked directly into the jurors eyes. He was open, honest, pleading with twelve solid citizens to consider the facts and return the only verdict possible.

“My learned colleague, the prosecutor, has paraded witness after witness to prove his case. He has put Mr. Randall’s employees on the stand to support his case. I ask you to consider this: each of these employees faced charges of prostitution or lewd behavior. As a reward for their testimony, those charges have been dropped.

“Now I ask you, can you trust these women? The prosecutor himself has portrayed them as women of questionable character. Can you really believe what they tell you? They had a clear choice. They could tell the truth and face jail time, or they could lie and walk free. Which choice do you think they made? What choice would you make?

“Look at the facts. We have questionable witnesses saying one thing and we have written rules and signed documents saying another. These very women who testified against my client signed the documents in question. They promised, in writing, that they would not perform lewd acts or acts of prostitution, yet the prosecutor would have you believe that my client encouraged such acts.”

Weinstein paced back to the defense table. He plopped down his yellow legal pad. He stood and stared at his client for an instant.

“I ask you, who do you believe? A bevy of tainted women or a man who has been a pillar of this community? A man who served on the Edmonds School District board for three years. A man who coached little league baseball and soccer. A man who has provided employment for dozens of people in our community.

“I ask you to consider the facts. I ask you to deliberate long and hard. I ask you to return the only verdict possible. I ask you to find my client not guilty.”

Weinstein stood frozen in front of the jury box for a moment. Then a slow smile spread across his face.

“Thank you for your service to this community. I could ask no more of you.”

He turned and slowly made his way back to the defense table.