



CONFIDENTIALITY

a novel by

PETE WILKE

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by Pete Wilke

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***CONFIDENTIALITY*: the Case**
Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles

Civil Lawsuit Complaint:

CALIFORNIA CRUSH, INC.

Plaintiff

v.

ALLIANCE VENTURES, INC.
PHILIP PEARSON
SWEDISH STEAM, INC.

Defendants

Civil Lawsuit Cross-claim:

SWEDISH STEAM, INC.

Cross-claimant

v.

ALLIANCE VENTURES, INC.
PHILIP PEARSON

Cross-defendants

Appearing for Plaintiff California Crush, Inc.:

Shabiz, Phillippe, Donderfoil, Lutz & Crawford, PLLC;
Franklin Dubrey, Rebecca Jane Noone, Benjamin Wong

Appearing for Defendant Cross-defendants Philip Pearson & Alliance Ventures, Inc.:

Robert Sinclair, Esq.

Appearing for Defendant/Cross-claimant Swedish Steam, Inc.:

Cutlass & Associates, Attorneys at Law;
Torrie Cutlass, Sasha Lopez

ONE

A Wonderful World

HE LOVED THOSE Saturday morning beach walks in El Porto. Solo. A chance to clear his head. Take stock in life. Watch the surfers glide on white waves in the bright blue water; maybe even a few dolphins or porpoises, he couldn't tell the difference. But that probably only mattered to the dolphins and porpoises.

El Segundo next, and lunch at his favorite cantina. Chips. Salsa. Guac. Cerveza. Maybe two. Always two; maybe three. It was September, he caught a little of the Washington-Stanford game on the big screen. Ah, Saturdays.

Walking back to his parked car, he stopped at the Chevron mini-mart to purchase a favorite frozen confection, one of those flat-topped "drumstick" cones with chocolate chips on top and a hunk of chocolate at the bottom, all wrapped beneath a round lid. Heavenly. A tradition. Among many.

He stood under a nearby tree to shield his extravagance from the sun and allow for concentration on the task in hand. Remembering a promise to be home in time to spend the afternoon with his young son, he tossed the wrapper in the trashcan and stepped into the

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crosswalk toward his car. *It's a wonderful world we live in*, he marveled to himself.

He glanced down to see if the last morsel was small enough to pop in his mouth, and, looking up, he only had time to say, "OH, SHIT," before a car making a left turn from across the median careened toward him in unavoidable impact. He instinctively jumped up on the hood, his left shoulder smashing the windshield. The car screeched to a stop, and as he flew off onto the asphalt pavement, he tried to spit the ice cream cone from his mouth, sending it dribbling down his chin.

In the chaos of the moments that followed, all he knew was he couldn't breathe. There was pressure in his chest, any movement was excruciating, and the surrounding scene swirled at nauseating speed.

A young man was suddenly standing over him, casting a shadow in the blinding sun. With a phone in his hand and little affect in his voice, he intoned, "You'll be OK... I wasn't going that fast."

Call an ambulance, the man thought but couldn't say out loud. Still couldn't breathe. Panic was setting in. He thought of his wife and son. He couldn't breathe. He started thrashing on his back, sensing the looming dark of unconsciousness. Or worse.

At that moment, a woman knelt down next to him and cupped her hands under his head, resting it between her fingers and the street surface. In a soft voice she said, "Calm yourself. This is not your time." As she leaned forward, her head blocked the sun from his eyes and he thought he saw mid-length blonde hair. She caressed his cheek and kissed him gently on the forehead. "The paramedics are here; they will take care of you."

Then she was gone.

TWO

Madre Dios

IT WAS ONE of those shimmering, oppressively hot summer days in the rolling hills and dales of California's Central Valley. A table grape vineyard. Nothing moved that didn't have to except a light breeze that delivered no relief. There were endless rows of grape plants, whether table or wine, squarely in the center of California's agricultural mother lode.

Juan and Frankie Hernandez wandered through vineyard rows. They were accustomed to working in these conditions, or so they told themselves. Juan was short, heavy set and mustachioed, with a face that looked like a worn leather glove scalded on a campfire grill, and a limp that kept his pace frustratingly slow. His son, Frankie, dressed in cleaner wear and a straw cowboy hat; taller and lighter on his feet than his father, was cheerfully going about his duties.

Juan spat out a stream of tobacco juice. Some of it landed on his tattered left boot. "Madre dios," he exclaimed. As more chaw ran down his unshaven chin he wiped it on his permanently stained, long sleeve shirt.

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“That shit’s gonna kill you, hombre,” Frankie remarked with a smirk.

Juan shook his head and turned away. “At least I don’t smoke that damned weed you and your worthless friends spend all your dinero on.” He glanced toward his meandering son and snapped, “Come on, you’re wasting time, finish up.”

Frankie examined a nearby vineyard row, stopped at a plant, cut a grape leaf off at the stem and placed it in a crumpled, brown paper bag. The bag was full. The men continued their trek through the vineyard, slapping horse flies away as they crested a small hill. They came upon two almost identical, gleaming pickup trucks parked adjacent to a dirt road on the edge of the vineyard. As they reached their destination, Frankie wiped the sweat from his brow and handed the paper bag to his father. He jumped into his shiny red Ford F-100 with its garish, oversized chrome wheels, and started the engine; grinned and saluted Juan with a “La Cucaracha” blast from his truck horn. He dovetailed onto the road, leaving a cloud of thick dust in his wake.

Juan swiped at the dust floating around his face, shook his head in resignation. *Damned niño*, he said to himself, *no respect for his elders*. He climbed into his white Ford F-100, not so fancy but just as new and almost as expensive as his son’s, and pulled out, glancing around apprehensively. As he made the sharp turn away from the vineyard, and over the last hill before hitting the county road, Juan veered under a large walnut tree that had survived the grove clearing for the grapevine rows years back. He sat there with the engine running; his skin glistening in sweat, his heartbeat quickening, his hand clutching the crumpled bag of leaves. *What if this is the wrong place? What if this is a trap? Why did I get mixed up in this crazy—*

The passenger door suddenly opened, startling him. A figure slipped in and closed the door. “You scared me half to death, hombre!” Juan almost yelped. “Where did you come from?”

The man tugged a baseball cap farther over his eyes. “Not your concern. We got business.” He carried a brown paper bag of his own

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but quickly grabbed the one in Juan's hand. "Don't look at me," he warned. "You do not want to see my face."

"I'm not." Juan countered. "But, hey, why do you need these leaves?"

"Again, not your concern," the man snapped. "But my people want to know I've got the real leaves before I hand you theirs. Can't mix this shit up, man." After rifling through Juan's bag, seemingly satisfied, he tossed his own to Juan, exited the cab, and scurried away.

Juan slumped in his seat, wiped the sweat from his brow, and put the transmission into drive. He calmed himself with some deep breathing as the truck lurched forward, pulling onto the county road into town.

After driving several miles, the sun still hot and sweat streaming down his back, Juan reached his destination. Entering an industrial area, he headed for a one-story brick building at the end of a block of similar structures, this one boarded up with a sign that read, "MID-STATE AGRICULTURAL LAB."

Juan parked, got out of the pickup carrying the brown paper bag. Looking around furtively, he limped to the building's battered metal door and knocked. A beat, then the door slid open and he stepped inside. A few moments later, Juan came back out, his hands now empty. He once again peered around the deserted lot, then climbed in his truck and headed back to the vineyard to wrap up another seemingly endless day.

Mosquitoes, the scourge of Central California evenings, had not yet made their unwelcome arrival within the grape vineyard rows, but horse flies picked up the slack. The light from the setting sun diffused through the vineyard, as shadows lengthened and the dust and stifling heat showed no signs of letting up. But it was quiet; peaceful, in fact. Juan, exhausted, finished inspection of the last grape plant in the row, thinking ahead to his evening meal at home, shared with his wife of forty-five years, and began to shake off his anxiety.

CRACK.

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The stillness was broken by the sound of a twig snapping in the next row, maybe two rows away. Instantly alert and afraid, Juan looked frantically to the left, then the right, and started to limp toward his truck. Moving as quickly as he could, he stumbled on an oversized dirt clod, barely managing to stay on his feet and keep going. He could barely breathe as terror overtook him, causing his lungs to constrict.

He crept as softly as he could between vineyard rows, thinking bitterly that he couldn't be blamed for trying to improve his pathetic lot in life. Besides, his familia was threatened and he had no choice. *Life is unfair.* His ruminations were interrupted by a rustling sound in the foliage behind him. Juan began to run—if one could call it that—almost too afraid to move but impelled forward by sheer survival instinct. He tripped and fell heavily to the ground. Flipping over, he started to get up—

The bright flash of a machete blade.

“NO!” he screamed, his eyes blinded in the last sunrays of his final day on Earth.

In the explosion of sound that followed, blood and brains splattered his dirty shirt, but Juan Hernandez had already met his maker.

THREE

City of Angels

LOS ANGELES WAS a long way from the Central Valley of California, not just in terms of driving miles, but in life and ways of the world. There were still pickup trucks, but a lot more cars. Especially fancy ones. There was a lot more concrete and asphalt, but a lot fewer grape vineyards. In fact, there might not be any vineyards left in LA at all; at least none anyone could find. Just palm trees and sun-splashed lawns, the Rams, Kings, Lakers and Dodgers; boob jobs, movie studios, gigantic apartment and office buildings. Beaches, a million lawyers, and homeless people. Swimming pools, too many streets to count, and unyielding, damnable traffic that choked helpless souls and brought out behavior worse than one could possibly imagine.

City of Angels.

Litigator extraordinaire, Robert Sinclair, weaved his way east through traffic on Santa Monica Boulevard, headed for the centrally-located Stanley Mosk Los Angeles County Superior Courthouse. He was known around town as Robert, Rob, Bob, Bobby, Bobby-cakes or “SIN-clair,” the latter two by some of his less than admiring, or, perhaps, *more* admiring, colleagues, as the case may be. Robert piloted

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his pride and joy, a British racing green, '58 convertible Austin Healey, with the top down. The warm Los Angeles sunshine illuminated his "UCLA BRUINS" baseball cap, and generally improved his not-always-so-sunny disposition. A fucking head-turning, almost antique Healey. Cherry, wire wheels, hip, chick magnet. This was a car town and Bobby owned it this fine day.

He smiled smugly and removed his Bruins cap to let the sun flood in and envelop him. His disposition improved. He tucked his cap in the glove box where it would sit until the end of his court appearance and the drive back to his Beverly Hills office.

Southern California born and bred, Robert was a public school kid; the San Fernando Valley, Altadena, then out to the beach and Mira Costa High. He'd been a wide-out on the football team. In track, he anchored the sprint relay teams and excelled in the long-jump. He was Prom King his senior year and voted "most likely to succeed" by his classmates. He was a good enough student, if not a good enough athlete, to get into UCLA, and there he prospered.

What's not to like about UCLA? Hanging out in Westwood among the tree-studded hills of a beautiful campus, abundant sunshine, and coeds. The basketball team, a little weed, laid-back professors and classes; tank tops. Baseball at Jackie Robinson stadium, pickup games in Pauley; concerts in Royce Hall. And coeds. Always, coeds.

Law School at Pepperdine wasn't much of a challenge. He decided to take four years to finish, instead of the usual three. There was no rush and he began to focus on the latest in a long line of girlfriends, the pursuit of Tricia Williams. This girl was special. Blonde, dreamy green eyes; smart, playful, clever, and a great dancer. She loved the beach and evening walks along the Japanese Garden palisades in Santa Monica overlooking the sparkling Pacific Ocean. She was finishing up at UCLA Film School. They met during his senior year there. Tricia didn't take to him much at first, but Bobby wasn't one to back down from a challenge. During his last year at Pepperdine Law, they tied the knot. When he was hired by the downtown law firm of Roberts & Howe, they moved into a small apartment on Gower in Hollywood.

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Tricia signed on with a major independent movie production company with offices in Universal City. Life was good; they had made it in tinsel town. But there were a lot of stressful demands in their respective careers and even with the birth of their son, Dickson, they began to drift apart.

Robert was still thinking about how his marriage went wrong and what he might do to turn things around, if that was even possible, as he continued his drive toward Stanley Mosk Courthouse. Missing the intimacy, he decided he'd make an effort tonight when he got home.

If one were tailgating Robert, commonplace in Los Angeles, slow traffic or not, there would likely be notice of some thinning on top of his sandy blond hair. Robert was, however, an imposing and engaging presence in a courtroom battle. Tall, fit, Nordic, piercing blue eyes; the win-loss record in his big civil fraud cases was unblemished. "Civil" and "fraud" don't seem to go together, but that was Robert's brand as he advocated for the misunderstood moguls of commerce. Generally accepting of his lot, when his head wasn't killing him and his tinnitus was manageable, life was pretty damn good.

Santa Monica Boulevard fed into Sunset Boulevard, changing to Caesar Chavez Boulevard somewhere along the way. Robert passed Chavez Ravine, looked longingly to his left up the hill where Dodger Stadium perched. Truth be told, he'd rather be there than his destination. He would rather be just about any place than where he was headed: scheduling a trial date and arguing against a motion for sanctions in a civil case discovery squabble.

LA Superior Court. Not exactly a haven of goodwill.

FOUR

We're Number Thirty-Four

ROBERT SAT OUTSIDE the courtroom in the crowded, dreary hallway. He slumped on the bench, his back against the cold, marble wall. There was no way to sugarcoat it; motion dockets were just plain boring and a pain in the ass to boot. Billable hours, that's what it's all about.

The doors flung open and Robert entered the courtroom, taking his place well back in the line. The chunky, pink-faced bailiff entered and began checking in counsel for the morning's motions, throwing up her hands in mock exasperation. *Everybody's an actor in LA*, Robert mused to himself.

"OK, OK, people. Stay in line. Please. Pa-leeze!" the bailiff bellowed. "We'll stay here until we get it right. We've got fifty-three motions today."

In synch with the collective groan of his compatriots, Robert silently cursed. There was nothing he could do about it. He was dressed in his customary courtroom attire—shiny black shoes and dark grey socks; natty, grey pinstriped suit. His suit jacket unbuttoned, a gold chain dangled from the pocket watch resting snugly in his vest pocket.

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As he fidgeted in line with all the other overpriced, overworked attorneys, he glanced toward the back of the courtroom to notice he was being eyed by two attractive, dressed-to-the-nines attorneys: Nancy Baldwin, an imposing African-American in a smart red business suit with matching lipstick, and Margaret Newsome, a tall, thin brunette all in black, albeit fashionable black. He gave a cool, inscrutable nod to Margaret, who returned his acknowledgment with commensurate warmth.

“My, my, Nanc,” Margaret mumbled under her breath. “Look who we have here. Bobby-cakes SIN-clair. I was hoping he’d show up. Have you heard—”

“Wait—” Nancy, interrupted, eyes on Robert. “First things first, Mags. Refresh my memory on your little... whatever it was with Sir Bobby-cakes.”

Margaret rolled her eyes. “Not much to refresh. I was too hot for him, what else can I say that won’t embarrass the guy? But back to his new case, if you don’t mind? I found out he’s defending one of the biggest assholes in town, Philip Pearson—”

Nancy interrupted again. “The grapes guy, the fat cat? Man, would I *love* a crack at that son of a—”

“Whoa, take it down a notch, girlfriend! But yeah, he’s a beast and it’s a beast of a case; I read the Complaint.”

“You did? Why?”

“I’ve had a few run-ins with Pearson myself over the years,” Margaret said. “Did some transactional stuff for him. A real piece of work. When I saw his name I got interested; want to see what Bobby pulls out of his hat for this putz—and I might even have some inside info for him, we’ll see.”

“What are the particulars? Since I’m the litigator in our duo, I ought to at least get up to speed, don’t you think?” Nancy winked.

“I will happily enlighten you.” Margaret sat up as if readying for a lecture. “Pearson owns a business called Alliance Ventures. Another company, California Crush, is suing—three defendants: Pearson personally, Alliance Ventures, and some outfit up in Seattle—for one-

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and-a-quarter billion. It seems California Crush is the recent inventor and marketer of a new table grape varietal, ‘Fallencias,’ and it turns out there’s been some big-time shenanigans with their product.”

“Fallencias? Never heard of them. Though I *do* know my wine grapes!” Nancy grinned.

“Yes, you do.” Margaret laughed. “They are fairly new on the market,” she continued. “They’re big, like Golden Globes, but they’re seedless, which makes them a hot commodity. Anyway, according to the Complaint, Crush was planning to sell Fallencias all over Asia, primarily Japan, *and* was readying to buy up the first big crop for export from other independent growers, but they’re alleging that the defendants conspired to corner the Fallencia market before they could get it done.”

“How so?” Nancy asked.

“If I remember correctly, by lying about certain flaws in Crush’s science, and falsifying the existence of a virus in several of the Fallencia vineyards—”

“—which allowed the defendants to buy the grower’s grapes for far less than they were worth!”

“Bingo.” Margaret affirmed.

“Wow... that’s some dirty dealing.”

“No kidding.” Margaret nodded in agreement. “They basically ruined the entire seedless big grape export market in the process. Crush had to go into Chapter 11; the whole bit. Seems they’re a little upset about it.”

“Can’t blame ‘em. And Bobby’s defending *Pearson*... the putz?”

“Hey, a guy’s got to make a living, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he does. How’s he doing, by the way; still married?”

“Barely. His wife’s a cokehead indie movie exec. Nose, lips and tits, maybe more.” Margaret couldn’t disguise her disdain.

“My kind of broad... *no!*” Nancy suddenly grinned. “We need to hang out like this more often, Mags. You are a veritable fountain of information.”

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“Yeah... that’s me.” Margaret looked up. “OK, chill... let’s see what’s going on in here.”

As the two women turned their attention to the courtroom, Robert had just finished checking in with the bailiff. He took a seat and conversed softly on his cellphone—he hated to text; his fingers were too big. Call ended, he extracted his gold pocket watch from his vest pocket and began to wind it. A habit.

Robert always wore the old gold watch in his vest pocket while in court. His grandfather had given it to him and he was convinced it made him appear thoughtful and prosperous when he took it out of his pocket and pretended to check the time, particularly in the midst of one of his engrossing summations to a jury. It also gave the jury time to ponder his most profound lessons.

After all, a good trial lawyer is a teacher, and jury members were his pupils, apt students of Robert Sinclair. He recently had a federal district court judge in San Francisco remind him that he was in the midst of a bench trial, and with no jury to impress, he should put that “damned relic” back in his vest pocket and stop wasting the court’s time. Robert loved to tell that story in the midst of throwing back a few bourbons at the club with a handful of trial lawyer compatriots.

Sitting for what was turning out to be a longer wait than he’d like, Robert lapsed into one of his typical musings: *Trial lawyers love to hear themselves talk. When one lawyer pauses to draw a breath, another jumps into the void and is off to the races. Best thing to do when approaching a table of trial lawyers after hours is turn around and find someplace at the other end of the bar. Share your table with a librarian.*

His cell phone vibrated. “Robert Sinclair speaking,” he said softly, hoping to avoid the bailiff’s ire.

Attorney Franklin Dubrey, whose firm represented the plaintiff, California Crush, was on the line. Mid-thirties, a little younger than Robert, Dubrey was intense, handsome, and a mediocre actor when pretending to be earnest. “Robert? I’ve got an associate handling this for me this morning. I’m sure you’re going to miss me.”

“I’ll get over it, Franklin; what’s his name?”

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“Rebecca Jane Noone.”

“Ah... I owe you one, pal. Gotta take another call.” Robert shook his head and dove into his next call; it was going to be a long day, but at least now there was some intrigue involved. Rebecca Jane Noone?

Attorney Torrie Cutlass—attractive, thirty-five-to-forty, with a hard, uncompromising edge—was on the line. Cutlass & Associates were counsel for co-defendants Swedish Steam, Inc., the Seattle-based enterprise. To add further complexity to the case, Swedish Steam was also cross-claiming against Robert’s client, Philip Pearson and his company, Alliance Ventures, alleging that Pearson manipulated Swedish Steam, and its clients’ hard-earned cash, to scam California Crush.

“Good morning, Ms. Cutlass.”

“I’m late, Sinclair,” Cutlass informed Robert. “Save me a seat.”

“No rush, we’re number thirty-four.”

“I’ll just have to wait a little longer to put it to your boy, Pearson.”

Robert laughed sardonically. “Yeah, motion court gives you lots of opportunity to do that. Take your time, Tor; I’ll tell them you haven’t removed the stake from your heart yet.”

“You do that,” Cutlass replied, laughing. “I look forward to hanging Pearson up by his fat little ball sac. Later, Bobby-cakes.”

FIVE

Young Attorneyess

TIME INCHED ALONG so slowly it seemed like it should already be the next day, but still Robert waited on his unforgiving courtroom perch. At one point, he looked over his shoulder to see Margaret kibitzing with Nancy. *Yep, too hot for her*, Robert thought to himself. *Maybe Mags will introduce me to her friend with the outstanding Afro*. Attorneys sitting near Robert complained about how long they'd been waiting; not a good sign. The judge had left the bench to take an urgent call and the assembled were twitching.

The bailiff stood up and called out, "I just got the green light from Room 205. Those parties on the calendar to seek a complex-case trial date should pick up case assignments from me and go to Room 205 to obtain a trial date."

Relief for some at least, including Robert. He finished checking the time on his gold watch, shoved it back in his vest pocket, jumped to his feet, and grabbed his briefcase.

The bailiff continued. "Hold on, slow down! To avoid confusion and a stampede to Room 205, opposing counsel must identify one another and sit together before receiving your assignment and permission from yours truly to exit this docket."

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Simultaneously, most of the attorneys in the courtroom, and a few outside in the adjacent hallway, yelled out the calendar number of his or her case in a mostly futile effort to hook up with a counterpart. Robert joined in the cacophony and ultimately heard the number “thirty-four” called demurely from across the room. His eyes met those of Rebecca Jane Noone, a supremely attractive young attorneyess.

She motioned sweetly to Robert that she had a seat next to her. Robert eagerly waded through the still-clucking attorney crowd in her direction. Just as he arrived to sit next to the fetching Ms. Noone, Torrie Cutlass darted in front of him and occupied the vacant seat, crossing her own pair of shapely legs.

“Thank you for holding this seat for me, counsel. Such a gentleman.” She snickered.

Rebecca, nonplussed, recovered and gushed, “Mr. Sinclair. Ms. Cutlass. I’ve heard wonderful things about you both.” Cutlass and Robert looked at each other dryly. “My name is Rebecca Jane Noone; I’m assisting Mr. Dubrey and I’m pleased to meet you.”

Robert, somewhat flustered by her undeniable attractiveness, stammered like a teenager. “The pleasure is all ours. And I’m hoping to get better acquainted as we—”

“Get off it, Prince Charming.” Cutlass cut Robert off, rolling her eyes. “Let’s go downstairs and get this over with. I have a sanctions motion in Department D.”

It was Robert’s turn to roll his eyes. “Yeah, I heard about that one; beer distributor truck backed over an octogenarian. I suppose you’re trying to exclude the death certificate from evidence.”

“SIN-clair, I’m really going to enjoy kicking your ass.”

Rebecca looked at them both with an awkward smile. She was clearly out of her league.

SIX

From Philly

CUTLASS RASPED ON her black iPhone, all menacing gestures and angry retorts, as Rebecca and Robert got further acquainted in the line for Room 205. Rebecca, attired in a fashionable dark blue, tightly-fitted dress suit, complete with an appropriate amount of exposed cleavage, inspired Robert's appreciative gaze.

He, meanwhile, searched for any new topic to hold her attention. "What a way to make a living, right?" He looked around and sighed dramatically. "It must be ninety in here. I could be over at Catalina, fishing for Dorado and sucking down a Sierra Nevada."

"Catalina? What's that?"

Robert looked surprised. "Catalina Island. Twenty-six miles across the sea... waiting for me."

Rebecca frowned, unable to mask her confusion.

Robert continued. "Ah... Santa Catalina, the island of romance... you know."

"Sorry, I just arrived from Philly." Rebecca apologized with a smile.

Robert rubbed the back of his neck, pausing briefly to gather his thoughts. "No worries. It's an island. I take my boat over there; it's my main sanity getaway. A tradition."

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“Sounds restful. I hope this case doesn’t keep you from your sanity breaks. Mr. Dubrey directed me to file a three-month-long trial estimate with the clerk’s office.” Rebecca cast a sympathetic look Robert’s way.

Robert shuddered. “Did I tell you I’m going to hike down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon over Memorial Day? And I’m going to get in great shape and climb the two tallest mountains in the Sierras to celebrate my fortieth birthday this summer. You wouldn’t want to deprive me of all my pleasurable past times, would you, Ms. Rebecca Jane Noone? I need to stay fit and trim.”

She laughed. “Sorry, we’re going to cite exigent circumstances and witness availability concerns, and make a motion for an expedited trial date.”

Cutlass ended her phone conversation with a wicked cackle, yelling out, “SIN-clair, you and your scumbag client, Pearson, are mine now, even if I have to wait until hell freezes over.”

Robert exhaled slowly and wiped his sweat-beaded upper lip before massaging his temples, declaring under his breath to Rebecca, “Your engaging company excepted, I’m pretty sure I *am* in hell.”

Rebecca smiled charmingly as she rearranged her suit top in the heat.

At that moment, a bailiff appeared at the door. “Case thirty-four!”

Rebecca, Cutlass, and Robert snapped to attention, filing diligently into the room and standing motionless as the clerk declared from behind her desk: “Ladies and gentleman, I see from Mr. Dubrey’s case management statement that a three-month-long jury trial is expected, and there is concern that key witnesses will not be available unless the trial date is expedited. Motions in limine are scheduled for May seventeenth, and jury selection will commence on May twenty-fifth. You’ll be required to wrap this up by mid-August.”

Cutlass winked at Rebecca.

Robert’s shoulders slumped as he thought to himself, *these motherfucking big firms always get their way.*

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To be continued....