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Hardball

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ANACONDA FURY

Johnny Merton was playing with me, and we both knew it. It was a fun game for him. He was doing endless years for crimes ranging from murder and extortion to excessive litigation. He had a lot of time on his hands.

We were sitting in the room at Stateville reserved for lawyers and their clients. I couldn't believe Johnny was stringing me along, thinking I'd get him out early. It had been too many years since I'd practiced criminal law for me to be a good bet for any convict, let alone someone who needed Clarence Darrow and Johnnie Cochran working double shifts before he had a prayer.

"I want the Innocence Project working for me, Warshawski," he announced that afternoon.

"And you are innocent of exactly what?" I pretended to make a note on my legal pad.

"Whatever they're charging me with." He grinned, inviting me to

think he was clowning, but I didn't smile back. Whatever else he might be, Johnny Merton was no buffoon.

Johnny was past sixty. During my brief stint as his lawyer when I'd been with the Public Defender's Office, he'd been an angry man whose rage at being assigned yet another new-minted attorney made it almost impossible to stay in the bull pen with him. He'd earned his nickname, "The Hammer," because he could bludgeon anyone with anything, including his emotions. The twenty-five intervening years—many behind bars—hadn't exactly mellowed him, but he had learned better ways of working the system.

"Compared to you, my wants are so simple," I said. "Lamont Gadsden."

"You know, Warshawski, life in prison, it takes away so much from you, and one of the things I've lost is my memory. Name does not ring a bell." He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. The snakes coiling around his biceps, looping down so that the heads rested on his wrists, seemed to writhe against his dark skin.

"Word is, you know where every Anaconda past and present is. Even to their final resting places if they've left the planet."

"People do exaggerate, don't they, Warshawski? Especially when they're in front of a cop or a state's attorney."

"I'm not looking for Lamont Gadsden for my health, Johnny, but his mama and his aunt want him found before they die. Even though he hung with you, his auntie continues to think of him as a good Christian boy."

"Yeah, every time you mention Miss Claudia, I start to cry. When I'm by myself and no one can see me, of course. You can't afford to get a reputation for softness in the joint."

"I doubt your tender heart will ever be your downfall," I said. "You remember Sister Frances?"

"I heard about her, Warshawski. Now, there truly was a fine

Christian woman. And I hear you was with her when Jesus took her home."

"You hear a lot." I put just the right amount of admiration into the sentence, and Johnny preened. But he didn't say anything.

"You don't care what she said to me before she died?" I prodded.

"You can make up anything a dead person said. It's a good angle, but I'm not biting."

"What about the living, then? You care about what your kid has to say about you?"

"You been talking to my girl?" This was news to him, and rage swept him off his feet, making the veins in his throat bulge. "You been harassing my family, and I hear about it from you in here first? You stay away from my girl. She's living a life any father'd be proud of, and I won't have scum like you bring her down. You hear?"

The guard came over from the corner and tapped his arm. "Johnny, take it easy, man."

"Take it easy? Take it easy? You take it easy when this bitch, this cunt, comes after your family . . . I wouldn't run you as a whore, Warshawski, you stink so bad."

The guard was summoning help. Someone came in with manacles for Johnny.

"The Innocence Project, huh?" I pulled my papers together. "About the only thing you're innocent of is the smarts to keep your sorry ass out of jail."

I went through the search even lawyers undergo on their way out of Stateville. I hadn't brought anything in with me, and I was leaving empty-handed, too: Johnny and I certainly hadn't exchanged anything in our forty-five minutes together. Just to be on the safe side, the guards searched the trunk of my car.

As soon as I was clear of the prison grounds, I pulled off the road to stretch my arms. Tension builds in the calmest muscles when those

gates close on you, and nothing about time in the Big House made me calm.

Joliet, where the prison stands, lies on the far side of Chicago's heaviest exurban sprawl, and I'd be hitting the road at the same time everyone in the western suburbs was going home. The thought of the traffic knotted my shoulders even more. As I crept forward, I jotted a note in my time log. Forty-five minutes on the Lamont Gadsden inquiry. I'd long passed the point where I was making money on the case, but I couldn't let the inquiry go, not as deeply mired in it as I'd become.

I oozed through the I-PASS lane at Country Club Plaza and finally found myself near streets I recognized, where I could take shortcuts around the expressways. It was almost seven, and the September sun was close to the horizon, blinding me every time the road curved west.

I needed to run in the fresh air with my dogs. I wanted to blow Stateville out of my lungs and hair, then curl up with a drink and the Cubs-Cardinals game. But I had two reports to finish for my most important bread-and-butter client. Best swing by my office and get them done so I could enjoy the game.

Nothing warned me that my drive from Joliet was as relaxed as I was going to be for some time. When I tapped in the code at the entrance to my building, everything looked normal. The lock mechanism released with a wheeze like a dying goose. Nothing unusual about that. I had to use my shoulder to shove the door open. Also normal.

It wasn't until I opened my own door that trouble hit me. I switched on the overhead lights. And saw every paper I owned on the floor. The file cabinets had been dumped, the drawers flung aside so that they perched at crazy angles. My ordnance maps dangled from the lips of their shelves.

"No," I heard myself whisper. Who hated me so much they'd wreak this kind of fury against me?

I shivered, wrapping my arms across my chest. My office is a big barn with little rooms planted in it, little dollhouse rooms. Lots of places for someone to hide. I backed into the hall and carefully set down my briefcase, as if it were a carton of eggs that needed protecting. I pulled my cellphone out of my jacket pocket and dialed 911. Phone in hand, I tiptoed around the partitions.

The invaders had fled, but they'd vented their rage everywhere. I sidled into the back, saw my daybed had been tossed, the copy machine disassembled. I skirted the upended drawers and went behind the partition where my desk stood. Those drawers had been flung to the floor hard enough to crack the wood. The same violent hands had dismembered my reference manuals. Pages of the *Illinois Criminal Code* were strewn like remains of a victory parade. The frames of my mother's engraving of the Uffizi and my Nell Choate Jones print had been pried apart and splintered, the pictures lying under the shards of glass.

I squatted on my haunches and picked up the Uffizi, cradling it like a child. After a time, my frozen brain started to work. Don't touch stuff, just in case an evidence team takes it seriously.

And what about Tessa, my lease-mate? I crossed to the studio where Tessa welds big metal chunks into space-age sculptures, but everything there was in order. She must have been here this afternoon—a faint sour-sharp smell of solder lingered in the air. I sat at her drafting table, hands sweaty, heart pounding, all those signs of fear and anger, and waited there for the cops.

When I heard the siren, I went out front to meet them. A squad car pulled up, its strobes staining the twilit streets a ghostly blue. Two cops bounced out, a young woman and a middle-aged guy with a gut.

I stopped them at the entrance to show them the keypad. Someone

who knew the combination had been here or someone with a sophisticated bypass device. The guy with the gut made a note. He asked how many people knew the code.

"My lease-mate. A couple of people who work for me. I don't know who Ms. Reynolds—my lease-mate—has given the combination."

"What about the rear exit?" the woman asked.

I led them down the hall to the back door. It was self-locking, with no exterior keyhole or pad. The woman shone her flashlight around the concrete slab outside the door.

I saw a white band on the slab—one of those rubber bracelets that the kids wear these days to show their support of everything from breast-cancer research to their college field-hockey teams. I knelt to pick it up, but I knew before I looked at it what it would say: ONE. When you looked at it, you were supposed to want to work for a planet unified in love, fighting AIDS and poverty as one. My cousin Petra owned a bracelet like this. It was big on her, and, when she was excited, it flew off her arm.

Petra. Petra here in this office while the tornado from hell whirled through it. My vision blurred, and I found myself sprawling on the concrete slab.

The two cops got me back on my feet, back inside, and asked me what I'd found.

"My cousin." My mouth was dry, my voice a squawk. "My cousin Petra. This is hers."

Young, confident, beautiful Petra had come to Chicago fresh out of college to work as an intern on Brian Krumas's Senate campaign. For another moment, my brain stayed frozen. Then I remembered my video monitor. I have one because the front door is remote from my office and invisible from the hallway. My fingers trembled as I tried to boot up my computer. The modem had been yanked free from the

port. The middle-aged cop stood over me while I found the wires and got my system hooked back together. I pushed the ON button. The Apple gave its opening chord, and I breathed a little prayer to the God I don't believe in. Saint Michael, patron of police and private eyes, get me my video files.

While the cops watched, I pulled up the images. My lease-mate had come in at 11:13 and left at 4:07.

Four-seventeen, while I was walking away from Johnny Merton, three people showed up, hats pulled low over their heads, coat collars hiked well up, faces and sexes both unrecognizable. They were all roughly the same height; in their bulky coats, it was hard to tell if they were all the same girth. I thought the one on the left was the stockiest, the one in the middle the thinnest, but I couldn't be sure. We could hear the buzzing as they rang the front door, and then one of them tapped in the door code.

"Who else knows that code?" the male cop demanded. "Who besides the people you mentioned?"

"I—my cousin knew it." I could hardly get the words out. "I let her use my machine one night when she lost her Internet access."

"Is she in this picture?" the woman asked.

I froze the image on the screen. A professional might be able to decode race or sex from these grainy pictures, but I couldn't make them out. I shrugged helplessly.

I called Petra's cellphone but only got her voice mail. I tried the Krumas campaign, but they'd shut down for the night.

The cops sprang into action, calling codes in—44, 273, 60—possible kidnapping, possible assault, possible aggravated burglary. The possibilities were endless and chilling. Squad and tac cars began pouring in while I made the hardest of all the phone calls: the one to my uncle Peter and his wife, Rachel, to tell them their oldest child had disappeared.