

Chapter 1

That evening, I headed out to meet with Simon Bundy, a lawyer acquaintance of mine known to be in the employ of a cabal of power players who ran this town. One of his clients requested my services and I felt sure he meant to engage me in some dirty business.

Turning fifty with an empty bank account had me crossing red lines I'd never contemplated. With few job prospects and little time to build a nest egg, I considered a criminal turn to fast-track a fortune instead.

Bundy had been a colleague of a legal aid attorney who represented me a few years back, when I faced charges for possession of an illegal firearm and impersonating a city employee. That court-appointed attorney acted in good faith, but he couldn't keep me out of prison. Lawyers who get their clients off a rap are paid a fortune. An empty wallet bought me a stretch at a state penitentiary.

The coffeehouse we'd arranged to meet at stood near the shore just off Main Street in Santa Monica. We were there to flesh out my personal recollections as a novice private detective and as a former courier for an L.A. gangster currently serving time. Simon Bundy said he'd turn all that into a movie script and said my story was a walking goldmine. He promised to start putting it down on paper at our next meeting.

I'd seated myself at a small outdoor table and nursed a cappuccino. The summer sky grew dark as I waited around for Mr. Bundy, conjuring ways to promote my P.I. adventures and past transgressions. Writing screenplays was a near obsession in this town and even high-paid lawyers dabbled in their spare time.

Mr. Bundy appeared from the dimly lit street. "Sorry I'm late," he said, and dashed inside.

Ten minutes later he returned with a latte concoction and seated himself across the table.

"A client of mine dropped by the office and kept me longer than I expected."

"Time is money," I said. "I'm sure you made it worth your while."

“I always do.”

Bundy smirked, and a pair of blue-gray eyes darted out from behind rimless glasses. He tied his hair in a ponytail, and a longish nose went somewhat off to the side. A disaffected client might have put it out of place, I thought.

An extended waistline and sluggish gait put him out of step with most professionals in town who spent precious time in the gym each day.

He presented himself as a throwback to another era — the radical left-wing lawyer and public defender of the nineteen-sixties, waving the flag for every cause out there.

His façade didn’t fool me. Bundy was a businessman — a well-paid practitioner of the law in the entertainment field. Word had it you couldn’t throw a legal curve past him and was on top of his game in the cut-throat terrain of Hollywood deal-making.

“Where did we leave off?” I said, “I’ve got another story for you—”

“Let me enjoy my latte first.”

Bundy sipped his coffee and tapped on the brown leather portfolio he’d set on the table. His face softened.

“How are things with you, Klayman?”

He didn’t need to know. I was there to paint myself an action hero and nothing less.

“I’m getting by,” I said.

“Good.”

“Are you sure we’ll find a Hollywood producer?”

“Your story as a rogue private detective prowling the streets of Los Angeles has great potential.”

I wanted to believe him, but his darting eyes told another story.

“More importantly it has commercial appeal,” he continued. “It’s not a typical spec script since it’s based on fact.” He pulled out a small digital recorder from his pocket.

“Spec script?”

“It’s an industry term for a fictional story by an unknown author. No one wants to put their money behind a spec script. It’s too risky.”

“I thought Hollywood thrived on original work—”

“Sequels are the moneymakers now. But we can sell a true-life story if it has the right action, drama, conflict.” He studied me for a moment. “How low are you on money?”

“I’m struggling, like everyone else.”

“You need to make a score, Klayman.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Enough to set you straight for the rest of your life?”

“What are you getting at?”

“That piece of business I spoke to you about over the phone.”

He drew out a slip of paper from his wallet and handed it to me. It had the name and address of one of his clients, the banker he’d referred me to regarding the job he’d mentioned.

“You said you’d do anything to get out of the gutter, right?” Bundy pointed to the note. “That’s your ticket out of Palookaville.”

This lawyer thought he sounded smart borrowing a line from an old movie. People did that a lot around here, like preachers quoting the Bible.

“When does he want me to head up there?”

“He’ll be expecting you Sunday at four p.m.” Bundy leaned in over the table, affecting an urgency in his voice. “There’ll be a modest gathering at his house, mostly colleagues from his firm. He’s hosting a barbecue on his lawn. Dress more formally than you usually do.” He hinted at the jeans and sweatshirt I had on. “But no suit. Slacks, polo shirt, and loafers would do fine.”

“A suit? Who the hell wears a suit around here?”

“Wall Street types like Hawthorne do.” Bundy stared down at his crumpled linen suit and almost brought out a laugh. “You’ll need to make the right impression. Hawthorne is very uptight.”

The Bel-Air address he’d written down was in the hills where film stars and movie producers lived in luxury. I pictured his place like a Hollywood mogul’s secluded villa, with naked statues spurting water from marble penises that pointed the way. He probably had a gazebo seating a small orchestra to serenade his rich friends.

“He’ll know who you are,” Bundy said. “Blend in and don’t be conspicuous.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Don’t look around for him. He’ll throw you out if you’re too hungry for work. Let him initiate the conversation.”

He treated me like an amateur, yet he was writing about my exploits facing down an international crime ring. This lawyer didn’t believe a word of it.

“I need to clear something up,” I said. “What I’m about to relate to you isn’t the actual screenplay, correct?”

“I’ve told you, it’s part of a series of true crime articles I’m putting together for a major magazine. If we get a good response, we’ll turn it into a screenplay. This has major motion picture written all over it.”

I felt confident of his assessment. I only had to tell my story— to a point. There were a few facts I couldn’t divulge, which would put me in the slammer for good.

“I don’t want my name in it,” I said.

He slumped back in the chair. “It would add a measure of authenticity that wouldn’t be there if I used a pseudonym—”

“I have to think about it.” It didn’t take long. “All right. But no one else.”

“Of course not. We’d have lawsuits flying all over the place.” He looked at his watch. “It’s late. I have to meet with a client in the morning.”

“We haven’t even started. I wanted to tell you about my first P.I. job—”

“We’ll get it all down in time.” He put away the digital recorder and grabbed his leather portfolio. “Remember to dress properly on Sunday and don’t come on strong with Hawthorne. Call me and let me know how the meeting went.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll do that.”

He walked away in a hurry, and disappeared around the corner. These lawyers were always on their way to something more important.