

FAKE I.D.

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ONE

The gates to Milford Jai-Alai didn't open for another hour, but instead of driving to some diner to kill time, I figured I'd just hang out in my car, reading the *Racing Form*.

I had just started going over the daily double at Aqueduct when I heard someone knocking on my passenger-side window. I looked up and saw a short fat guy smiling at me. At first, I had no idea who he was, then he started to look familiar. He had dark eyebrows and a big mole on his chin. His eyes were bloodshot, like he was drunk, but maybe it was because he was squinting against the cold wind. He was wearing one of those black wool winter hats that can make anyone look like a mental patient.

I turned on the ignition and opened the window a few inches. A blast of cold air came into the car.

"How's it goin'?" the guy asked.

I still couldn't place him. He looked forty-five, maybe fifty--at least ten years older than me.

"Not bad," I said.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"Your face looks kind of familiar but--"

"Your name's Danny, right?"

"Tommy," I said.

"I knew it was something with a Y at the end of it. Remember me? You know, Pete. Pete from Yonkers."

Now I remembered. A few years ago, I used to go to Yonkers Raceway a few nights a week to bet on the trotters. Pete was one of the regulars.

"I remember," I said. "It just took me a couple seconds to place your face. How's it going?"

"Could be better," he said. "Just came back from Vegas last night. Hit a few things, nothing too big. Shoulda gone to the Cayman Islands. Hear about those racebooks they got down there?"

"With the eight-percent payback."

"Un-fuckin'-believable. They give you eight percent back on all your action. If you're a big player you can't afford not to go there. I mean it might be a good idea to bring a gun with you into some of those joints, you know what I mean? But when you're playing horses what do you want, a classy time or eight percent back on your action?"

"I'd take the eight percent," I said.

"Damn fucking right you would," Pete said, "any serious player would." He turned away and spat. It was getting cold in the car with the window open.

"Ever been to Vegas?" Pete asked.

I shook my head.

"You're kiddin' me? You gotta go to Vegas, man. But casino gambling is a whole different ball game. When you're gambling in a casino you want class. You go to Vegas, whatever you do, don't go to Bally's. You want Bally's go down to Atlantic City and play at those Mickey Mouse tables they got there. You want a classy joint to spend a weekend, go to Caesar's Palace. Now that's a place they'll treat you like a fucking king. And I'm talkin' about service, not shows. You want shows you can turn on the fuckin' TV. You go to A.C.?"

"Once in a while," I said.

"I'm in A.C. almost every fucking weekend," Pete said. "Where do you hang out?"

"All over," I said.



"It's tough to go to A.C. after you've been to Vegas," Pete said. "That's like going back to a Chevy after you've driven a Porsche." He coughed. "Hey, you mind if I sit down in the car with you? I'm fuckin' freezing my balls off out here."

I was going to say no, make up some excuse, but I couldn't think of a good one. Besides, I had some time to kill and I had nothing better to do. Leaning across the seat, I lifted the door handle and said, "You gotta pull." Pete used all his might, but the door still wouldn't open. My car was such a piece of shit it was a miracle it had gotten me all the way to Connecticut. It was an eighty-nine Olds, but there were so many dents in it you had to be Mike Tyson to get in and out of the fucker.

"Harder," I said.

Pete tried a couple of more times then, finally, the door swung open. He sat down next to me and I almost passed out. I had BO once in a while, especially after I worked out in the gym in a tank top, but Pete reeked. I opened my window a crack, to let in some fresh, cold air, but it didn't help.

"What was I just saying?" Pete said. "That's right--AC I usually stay by the Sands. A guy I know runs the junkets from Brooklyn--gets me a deal on the rooms. If we're ever going down on the same weekend, maybe I can get you into my room. They got two beds in those rooms and the other one just goes to waste. My bed goes to waste too. When you're in Vegas or AC who the fuck uses their bed? I mean unless you're getting laid, but nobody sleeps in their bed. The room's just a place to store your luggage for two nights."

"I don't mean to be rude or anything," I said, "but I was trying to just go over the card at Aqueduct here..."

"Yeah?" Pete said, not getting the hint. "You like anything?"

"Not really," I said, "but I was just hoping I could concentrate a little bit, you know?"

"No problema," Pete said. "I won't bother you anymore."

He leaned back and took a handkerchief out of his jeans' pocket. He coughed some more into it, then put it away. The smell in the car was getting worse.

For a little while, Pete stared out the window on his side of the car, taking deep breaths, then he turned back toward me and said, "So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm an actor," I said.

"Really?" He sounded surprised or impressed, I couldn't tell which. "In anything I've heard of?"

"Doubt it," I said.

"Come on. Try me."

"Just a few things here and there," I said. "Nothing too big."

"I imagine acting must be a tough biz," Pete said, "tough to make a living anyway. So what else you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I assume you don't make a living as an actor."

"Why do you assume that?"

"No offense--I mean I'm not trying to knock you. I'm sure you're great and everything. You look the part, that's for sure. Big, good-looking guy. But do you have--what do they call it--'a survival job?'"

"I work in a bar," I said.

"Really? Anyplace I know?"

"O'Reilly's." Then I said, "It's on First Avenue."

"The city," he said, like he thought I was trying to be a snob about it. "So what do you do up there?"

"I'm a bouncer," I said.

"No kiddin'?" He stared at me for a second or two. "So you live in the city?"

"I got a little place near the bar."

"Yeah? You must make a few dollars at this job, huh?"

Now I was starting to get pissed off. Who the hell did this guy think he was, asking about my salary?

"I hold my own," I said.

"What do you work, five, six nights a week?"

I worked six nights a week like a fucking dog.

"Why are you asking all these questions?"

"I'm just curious," he said. "Believe me, I don't mean any offense by it."

"My salary is my own business."

"Believe me, I realize that. I don't really care how much money you make. The only reason I asked is I'm a businessman, and my friends are businessmen, and I just thought if you had any extra cash lying around your apartment--"

"I don't lend money," I said.

He started to laugh. The laugh turned into a deep cough.

"Please," he said, catching his breath. "Do I really look like I need your money?"

Yeah, I thought.

"I just wanted to find out what kind of income you had because an investment opportunity came my way recently and I figured a guy like you might be interested."

"I told you, I don't lend."

"This isn't lending, it's investing. Lemme explain." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then said, "See, I know this guy--Alan Schwartz. You know, Jewish guy. Anyway, Schwartz works down on Wall Street and he's starting up this syndicate. Not one of those big-time syndicates that own Derby horses--this is just a bunch of guys putting some money together to buy a horse, or a couple of horses. The idea was to put five guys together--guys who love horse racing--and they'll go down to the track and buy a claimer. At first, I didn't trust the guy--I mean I'm not stupid. But then I checked it out and it was all legit. They have a trainer lined up and everything. You heard of Bill Tucker?"

I nodded.

"I met Bill a couple of weeks ago," Pete said. "Nice Southern, grits-and-collard-greens type of guy. Anyway, he's gonna advise us on what horse to claim and we'll see what happens. Who knows? We might wind up with another John Henry."

I knew the John Henry story--how he was claimed for twenty grand and went on to win millions--but I just sat there, staring.

"Anyway," Pete went on, "that's why I asked you how much money you were making. Not because I was being nosy, but because we have four guys lined up right now and we're looking for a fifth. Each guy is putting up ten grand. I don't know if that's in your ballpark or not, or if you even want to own part of a horse, but I figured it couldn't hurt to ask."

The whole thing sounded like a big scam to me. Asking a stranger in a parking lot to join a horse syndicate? Obviously, Pete was just a con man, trying to sucker me out of some money, and I wasn't the type of guy who got suckered.

"Sorry," I said. "Not interested."

"Just thought I'd ask," Pete said. "Figured a racing fan like yourself would love to get in on the ground floor of something like this, but I'm sure we'll find somebody else. Hey, if you're ever in Brooklyn make sure you stop by one of my stores. I'll give you an actor's discount."

"Your stores?"

"Didn't I tell you? I own a couple of shoe stores out in Brooklyn. You know Kings Highway?"

"I grew up in Brooklyn."

"No shit? I heard an accent, but I thought it might be Staten Island or Jersey. Where you from?"

"Canarsie."

"You're shitting me? I grew up in Coney Island, by Neptune Avenue. Now I live in Manhattan Beach. Got a big house, right by the water. Anyway, I got two stores in Brooklyn. The main one's on Kings Highway. It's called Logan's after me--Pete Logan."

I'd bought a pair of shoes at Logan's when I was in high school, and now I remembered Pete. I could picture him, twenty years ago, standing behind the register, or he might've been the guy who sold me the shoes.

"Anyway," he said, "just drop by one of my stores next time you're in the neighborhood. If I'm not there just mention my name and you'll get the discount. It was nice running into you again."

I watched Pete walk across the parking lot and get into a shiny black Mercedes. So the guy owned some shoe stores and he drove a Merc, that didn't mean he wasn't a scammer.

I tried to get back to reading my Racing Form, but I couldn't concentrate. It was that odor. My damn car smelled like somebody had died in it.

TWO

Of course I couldn't catch a break at jai-alai. The sport was so fixed I always felt like a sucker the second the teller printed my tickets. After losing two games in a row I ripped up my program and went to play horses and dogs in the simulcast area in the back of the fronton.

Usually, when I didn't have any auditions to go to--which was pretty much all the time these days--and when I wasn't working at the bar, I hung out at the OTB or at the Inside Track tele-theater on Fifty-third Street. Today I'd thought it would be nice to gamble someplace else for a change, but the way things were going in another hour I'd be back on the Turnpike, on my way back to the city.

I wasn't hungry, but I decided I needed something to bite into, to let out my aggravation, so I got on line to buy a hamburger. A few seconds later, I turned around and saw Pete, standing at the counter, squirting catsup onto a hot dog. I made a U-turn, heading toward where they were showing the dog races. I knew I couldn't dodge him forever. The place wasn't very big and if they were lucky they had three hundred people today.

I never won betting on dogs, but I opened the Plainfield program anyway. I bet fifty to win on the number five and then watched the five get wiped out by another dog on the first turn. Cursing, ripping up the ticket, I went back to the concession stand and saw that Pete was gone. Thank fuckin' God. After I downed two burgers, I counted my money. I had 216 dollars in my wallet, but I had to save at least twenty bucks for gas and tolls back to the city. I decided that I'd bet a hundred on the horse I liked in the second at Aqueduct and play with whatever money I had left for the rest of the day.

I went to the bathroom and took a leak. I was by the sink, splashing cold water against my face, when I looked straight ahead, into the mirror, and saw Pete coming up behind me. In the bright florescent light the mole on his chin looked bigger, and the hairs growing out of it were darker. He wasn't wearing his wool cap anymore. His black and gray hair was curly and messy.

"How's it goin'?" he asked.

"All right," I said.

"I was looking for you before," he said. "I couldn't find you anywhere so I figured you took off."

I unwound some paper towel and started wiping my face.

"I'm still here," I said.

"I can see that," he said. "So how you doing? Catch any winners so far?"

I didn't want to tell him that I was losing my balls.

"Hit a few things," I said.

"Wish I could say the same," Pete said.

"Your luck's gotta change eventually."

"So where you hanging out?" Pete asked. "Maybe I'll come by and visit."

"I'm just walking around a lot," I said. "I'm not sitting anywhere."

Now I could tell he got the hint.

"Whatever," he said. "Maybe we'll bump into each other later on."

In the mirror, I watched Pete leave the bathroom.

I bet the Aqueduct race, putting one hundred to win on the ten horse and then I bet another fifty in exactas with the ten on top of a few other horses. The ten broke good out of the gate, then dropped back and closed late, missing by a head. I screamed at the TV and kicked a garbage can so hard a security guard came over and told me if I did that again he'd have to toss me.

Now I only had sixty-six dollars left, including gas-and-toll money. I knew this wouldn't be enough to last me the rest of the day so I got on line at the ATM machine to take money off my Visa card. There were four guys ahead of me. They looked like degenerates--wearing dirty jeans, sneakers, and old winter jackets. Then I thought, How was I any better? Wasn't I on the same line, waiting to take money off my credit card? A couple of minutes ago I probably looked like even more of a loser, kicking that garbage can and screaming like a maniac.

I only had sixty-four dollars left on the card so I took out an even sixty, figuring it would last me another couple of races. There was no doubt about it now--I wasn't winning today. In a couple of hours I'd be back home, in my living room, watching TV. Then, at six o'clock, I'd be back at work--another exciting night of sitting on a bar stool, checking IDs.

After I lost the third at Aqueduct, I started looking over the rest of the card. Now it wasn't a matter of "if," but "how" I'd lose--and then I looked up from my Form, at the TV screen. The winner of the Aqueduct race was in the winner's circle. The jockey was off the horse, standing between two guys in suits, probably the trainer and the owner. Next to the guy on the right was a good-looking blonde in a white dress and high heels.

Every racing fan dreams of owning a horse someday, just like every Little Leaguer dreams about playing in the majors. I always figured that after I became a famous actor, I'd own a whole stable of horses out at Hollywood Park in California. A lot of famous actors owned race horses and I'd always imagined myself going to the track with my girlfriend--some model or actress I was dating--and sitting in an owner's box, watching my horses run.

But the way things were going I had a better chance of hitting Lotto than I did of making it as an actor. My manager hardly sent me out on casting calls anymore and I couldn't blame him. He had to eat too, and I'd probably gone to at least five hundred auditions over the past nine years and I only got two parts--an understudy in some Off-Broadway play that closed after six performances, and a bit role in a Kung Fu movie that went straight to video. I did some extra work, when it was available, and I used to do a little catalog modeling, but lately I hadn't gotten any work at all. It was always the same story--whenever I went to auditions for "big dark guys with blue eyes," there'd be a hundred actors there who looked just like me. It was like being in a house of mirrors--looking around, seeing myself everywhere.

Six years ago, I almost had my big break. I screen tested to be in a romantic comedy with Melanie Griffith. The director, guy named Simon Devaux, loved me. I met Devaux at his penthouse on the West Side and he told me I reminded him of a young Brando. He said after this movie came out I was going to be one of the hottest stars in Hollywood, that I'd be able to write my own paychecks.

The day before I was supposed to fly out to the coast to meet with the producers and Melanie, my manager called me and said he had some bad news. I thought he was going to say my flight was canceled, but then he said no, it was a lot worse than that--Simon Devaux was dead. He drove off a cliff in Big Sur, on his way to L.A. from San Francisco. I felt like it was all some sick joke. I was so close to making it then, all of a sudden, the dream was dead again. My manager told me not to worry about it--other offers would start coming in--but so far that hadn't happened, and it was getting harder and harder to stay positive.

If I didn't make it as an actor I had no idea what I'd do with the rest of my life. I did two years at Brooklyn College, but I couldn't see myself going back to school--not at thirty-two years old. One thing for sure, I wasn't going to be a bouncer forever. If I was forty and I was still sitting on a bar stool every night, I was going to stick a gun in my mouth and blow my brains out. I needed a back-up plan--something to do when my acting career fell apart for good.

I went toward the front of the fronton, out to the grandstand. I walked up and down the aisle a few times, looking for Pete in the stands, but I didn't see him anywhere. I started to walk faster, looking around in every direction. I looked all over the building--in the bathroom, in the simulcast area, near the concession stands. I was about to go outside and look for his car in the lot, when I saw him walking away from one of the betting windows. I jogged toward him, reaching him right at the entrance to the grandstand.

When I called out his name he turned around. He didn't exactly look happy to see me.

"I was looking around for you all over the place," I said. "I thought you might've taken off."

"Why were you looking for me?" he asked.

"Just wanted to say hello," I said. "I also wanted to say sorry for before. I was a real asshole."

The lights in the grandstand dimmed, and the usual loud trumpet music came on as the jai-alai players marched on to the court for the next game.

"I don't want to miss the game," Pete said.

"I'll come watch it with you," I said. "Where you sitting?"

"I got a reserved seat--up front."

"The usher won't bust my balls if I sit with you for one game," I said. "I mean they have what, fifty people here today?"

I could tell that Pete was still pissed off, but he motioned with his head for me to come sit with him anyway.

We sat in the center section, in the fourth row. The elevated court was at eye level, and we had a head-on view of the game through the mesh that separated the players and the stands. Pete still smelled, but for some reason it didn't bother me anymore.

"So who do you got here?" I asked.

"The one in exotics," Pete said.

"I'll root you home," I said.

The one served to start the game. The two hit a weak shot back that the one put away for an easy chula.

"That's one," I said, but Pete wasn't looking at me.

The one took another point from the three, then lost to the four, hitting an easy shot right into the mesh. As usual, the game looked completely fixed and some people in the crowd started to boo.

"You'll get'em in the next round," I said.

As we watched the four play the five I said, "So I was thinking about what you told me before--I mean in the car outside--about buying into a share of that horse. I was wondering if you could tell me a little more about that."

"I thought you weren't interested," Pete said. He sounded pissed off again, but I didn't think it had to do with me anymore. He was probably still mad about the one missing that easy shot.

"Yeah, well I've been giving it a little more thought," I said. "I was thinking it might be kind of fun to own a piece of a race horse."

The five missed an easy shot to give the four his second point. The whole crowd booed.

"It has to beat coming down here," I said, "throwing your money away on these crooks."

Pete smiled. I could tell he forgave me completely now for the way I had acted in the bathroom.

"The only problem is it's a big risk," Pete said. "Hopefully, we'll make some money, but chances are we're just throwing away ten grand a piece. The only reason I asked you to come on board in the first place was because I didn't know what you did for a living. I thought you might have some expendable income or--what do the stockbrokers call it?--risk capital. But if you're gonna have to go out on a limb--"

"Money's no problem," I lied. "I just wanted to know more details about it. You know, the way the contract works and shit like that."

"I don't have all the details with me," Pete said. "But if you're telling me you're interested in this, Alan Schwartz, the Jewish guy I was talking about, can give you all the info. He has this package he printed up--you know, a prospectus. It explains how it all works. But I need to know one hundred percent because Alan's a big-time Wall Street guy and I don't want to waste his time."

"I'll have to think it over," I said. "How about I let you know for sure in a day or two?"

"The sooner the better," Pete said. "We're looking to find somebody else by the end of the week. For all I know Alan already found somebody."

The four made a great play, climbing the side wall to pull down a shot, then he back-handed a chula. A few people cheered.

"You're right to stay away from this bullshit," Pete said to me. "I have to be out of my mind, throwing my money away on these fucking banditos."

"There's just one thing I'm still wondering about," I said, hardly paying attention to the game, "but I don't want you to take this the wrong way."

"Shoot," Pete said.

"You own Logan's shoe stores so you must have some serious money. Why don't you just buy a horse on your own? Or, if you don't want to buy a whole horse, why don't you just buy the fifth share for another ten grand? Why do you have to go find somebody else?"

Pete smiled, like he was thinking about some old joke, then said, "You kiddin' me? I'd love to own a horse myself, and if I had my way I'd own a whole stable of horses someday. But you can't just jump into the horse business overnight. You have to know what you're doing, you need contacts. That's why I figured I'd go in on this syndicate. Alan Schwartz knows the trainers, knows all that shit. I figured it would show me the ropes, then I go out and start buying my own horses. But the reason I can't put up the other ten grand--because, believe me, I would if I could--is Alan wants us all to be even owners, twenty percent a piece. He's afraid if one guy got forty percent of the horse he'd start making all the decisions and he's right. This way, with five guys, we vote on everything and the majority rules."

Pete was checking his tickets, ripping them up one by one.

"That's it for me," he said. "I've given these assholes enough of my money for one afternoon."

"Taking off?"

"Maybe I'll hit Yonkers on my way back to Brooklyn," he said. "See how I feel."

I was thinking about asking Pete if he wanted some company at the trotters, but then I remembered how I was almost broke and how I didn't even have any money left on my credit cards. So instead I said, "So how do I get in touch with you when I make up my mind?"

Pete dug into his pocket and took out a thick wallet. From one of the compartments he slid out a business card and handed it to me. "This is my card, but it's not me you're gonna have to talk to, it's Alan. I'm gonna give you his work number. If he's not there leave a message on his voice mail and tell him I told you to call. But don't call him if you're not serious. Alan's a busy guy--he doesn't fuck around."

I looked at the front of the business card and saw the little picture of a shoe--the logo of Logan's shoe stores--then the listing of the two locations in Brooklyn. PETE LOGAN, OWNER was printed in bold lettering across the top of the card. On the back of the card he'd written a phone number and "Alan Schwartz," underlined twice.

I shook Pete's sweaty hand then I watched him walk up the aisle toward the exit. I pissed the rest of my money away on a couple of dog races and a few minutes later I was back on the Turnpike.

I was driving in the right lane, going about forty. I took out Pete's card and put it on the dashboard. It looked like a real business card, but how hard would it be to print up some business cards saying you own the Logan's shoe stores in Brooklyn? The whole thing could've been the old "give and take away" routine. Tell a guy he can have something, like a share of a horse, then when he wants it tell him he might not be able to have it and that makes him want it even more. Why else would Pete have said that they could've "already found somebody." In the parking lot, he made it sound like the whole thing was up to me then, all of a sudden, it wasn't.

I put on the radio on WFAN, listening to Mike and the Mad Dog talking about the Jets' playoff chances. A tractor trailer ahead of me moved into my lane, cutting me off.

"Motherfucker!" I yelled, breaking hard. The business card shifted on the dashboard, almost falling down the heating grate.

"Jesus," I said.

I took the card off the dashboard and put it away in my wallet for safe keeping.

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