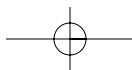
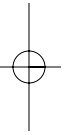
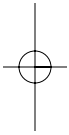
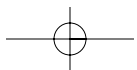
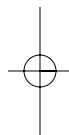
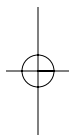


LASSITER





Prologue

Women's Jail Annex, Miami . . .

I presented my Florida Bar card at the security window and eased onto a metal bench that would likely throw my back out if the wait lasted more than a few minutes.

It did.

I stood, stretched, and studied the frescoes covering the cracks in the plaster walls. Island scenes of towering palms along a placid sea. Laughing mothers and hopscotching children in splashy Caribbean colors. The paintings made the place even more dreary, the inmates' lives even more hopeless.

Finally, a female guard brought my client from her cell. With her face scrubbed of makeup and her dark hair in a ponytail, Amy Larkin looked more like a college cheerleader than a woman charged with First Degree Murder.

"I didn't kill him, Jake," she blurted out. "Honest, I didn't."

"Hold that thought."

I settled into a straight-backed chair, and we faced each other across a table with cigarette scars from the days lawyers smoked in the visitors' room, just to cover the smells.

"Where were you last night?" I asked.

"Nowhere near Ziegler's."

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An alibi? Attending Mass with a hundred witnesses would do just fine.

"I was with a man," Amy said.

Not as good as church, but better than the scene of the crime.

"Who's the lucky guy?"

"Can't tell you."

"Why the hell not?"

"It's too dangerous."

I gave her my big, dumb guy look. It's not much of a stretch. "What's that mean?"

"If he testified, his life would be in danger."

"What about *your* life?"

She fingered the opening of her jailhouse smock, flimsy as crepe paper.

"He wants to help, but I won't let him."

"That's my decision, not yours. Give me his name."

"I can't."

My lower back was throbbing again. Too many blind-side hits had knocked a lumbar vertebra off-kilter.

"I'm thinking your alibi is bullshit."

"You just have to trust me, Jake."

"The hell I do."

I get my hands dirty for my clients. I fight prosecutors in court and occasionally in the alley behind the Reasonable Doubt tavern. I stand up to judges who threaten me with contempt and to Bar Association bigwigs who would love to pull my ticket. But I won't tote my briefcase across the street for a client who deceives me.

"Lie to your priest or your lover. But if you lie to me, I can't help you."

"I'm not! I wasn't at Ziegler's. I didn't shoot anyone."

I looked for the averted gaze, the tightened lips, the nervous twitch. Nothing.

"I'm innocent, Jake. Dammit, isn't that enough?"

"Innocence is irrelevant! All that matters is evidence. So give me your alibi, or the jury will give you life."

She took a moment to think it over before saying, "I'm sorry, Jake. You'll have to win without an alibi."

I pushed my chair away from the table and got to my feet. "Enjoy your stay, Amy. It's gonna be a long one."

1 A Brew and Burger Guy

Eight days earlier . . .

When the hot brunette in the tight black skirt waltzed into the courtroom, I was cross-examining a stubborn cop who wouldn't agree to "good morning."

"Isn't it true my client passed the field sobriety test?" I asked him.

"No, sir. He couldn't walk a straight line."

"Just how wide is that line, Officer?"

The cop shrugged, bunching the muscles of his neck. "Never measured it."

"Why not?"

He smirked at me. "It's imaginary."

"Really?" Pretending to be surprised. "And how long's that imaginary line of yours? Six feet? A mile? What?"

"I guess you could say it's infinite."

The brunette shimmied into a front-row seat, tugged the hem of her skirt, then fixed me with a look as friendly as an indictment.

"So, my client stepped off an imaginary line, which has an infinite length and an indefinite width. An invisible line. Is that your testimony?"

"Not at all. I can see it."

"You can see imaginary lines." I paused. "So you're delusional?"

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The cop's eyes flicked toward the prosecutor. *Help*. But he didn't get any.

"Officer . . . ?" I prompted him.

"I'm trained and experienced. I've arrested hundreds of drunk drivers in the last—"

"I'm sure you have," I interrupted. "Now, what other imaginary objects do you see?"

"None I can think of."

"No unicorns?"

"No, sir," he said, through gritted teeth.

"Leprechauns, then?"

"No."

"Not even a chupacabra crawling out of the Everglades?"

"Objection!" Harold Flagler III, the young pup of a prosecutor, belatedly hopped to his feet.

"Grounds?" Judge Wallace Philbrick asked.

"Mr. Lassiter is badgering the witness."

"It's my *job* to badger the witness," I fired back.

"Judge Philbrick," Flagler whined.

"I get *paid* to badger the witness."

"Your Honor, please admonish—"

"C'mon, Flagler. Didn't they teach you trial tactics at Yale?"

"Mr. Lassiter!" Judge Philbrick wagged a bony finger at me. "Address your remarks to the court, not opposing counsel."

"I apologize, Your Honor." Sounding so sincere I nearly believed myself.

I swung around, as if pondering my next question. In truth, I wanted a good look at the woman in the gallery. Slender with military school posture, an angular jawline, and a somber expression. Tucked into her pencil skirt was a silk blouse, red as blood, with those big, puffy sleeves, as if she might be hiding an Ace of Hearts, or maybe a derringer. Chin tilted up, she stared me down.

I gave her a quick, crinkly grin and looked for any hint of interest. No inviting eyes or playful smile. *Nada*. Maybe if I wowed her in closing argument, she'd lighten up and slip me her phone number.

Occasionally, I get a groupie or two. Women attracted to a big lug with a

craggy profile, a broken nose, and hair the color of sawgrass after a drought. Two hundred thirty-five pounds of ex-linebacker crammed into an off-the-rack, wrinkled brown suit. A brew-and-burger guy in a Chardonnay-and-paté world. I wrapped up my cross-exam, while sneaking peeks at our visitor. She pulled something out of her purse. I walked toward the rail and saw it was a photo, but I couldn't make out any details.

Flagler stood, fondled his Phi Beta Kappa key, and announced the great State of Florida rested its case.

My turn. No way would I let the presumably innocent Pepito Dominguez testify. He was a twenty-year-old smart-ass with a diamond earring and a barbed-wire tattoo circling his neck. With no witnesses, I rested, too.

The bailiff tucked the jurors into their windowless room where they could surf for porn on their PDAs, and the judge turned to me. "Mr. Lassiter, Ah assume you got some legal mumbo jumbo for the record." His Honor came from a family of gentleman farmers in Homestead by way of Kentucky, and his voice rippled with bourbon and branch water.

"Motion to exclude the breathalyzer test," I began, going through the motions of making my motions.

"Grounds?"

"No evidence the operator was properly trained, the equipment properly maintained, and the test properly administered."

Boilerplate stuff. No chance.

"Denied." *De-nahd.*

"Motion to exclude my client's statements to the arresting officer."

"Denied."

I checked the gallery. Mystery Woman was still there, eyes drilling me.

Who the hell are you?

I'd had multiple concussions on the football field. Still, I thought I remembered all my disgruntled ex-clients and infuriated ex-girlfriends. Maybe she was a Florida Bar investigator, building a case against me for yet another insult to the dignity of the court. Or maybe just one of those women with bloodlust. You see them at boxing matches and bullfights and murder trials. Not usually a rinky-dink DUI.

At the next break, I intended to plop down beside her. If she didn't serve me with a subpoena, I might ask her out for a drink.

"Motion for directed verdict. Do you want to hear argument, Judge?"

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“About as much as Ah want to hit Dixie Highway during rush hour.”

“For the record, I’d like to state my grounds.”

“You can pour syrup on a turd, but that don’t make it a pancake. Got any more motions you want denied, Mr. Lassiter?”

“I’m plumb out.” Adopting a Southern accent of my own. Judge Philbrick peered at me over his spectacles, wondering if I was mocking him.

At the prosecution table, Flagler gave me his Ivy League snicker. If I wanted, I could dangle him out the window by his ankles. But then, I’d been picking up penalties for late hits while he was singing tenor with the Whiffenpoofs. Okay, so I’m not Yale Law Review, but I’m proud of my diploma. University of Miami. Night division. Top half of the bottom third of my class.

“You two want to talk a minute before Ah bring the jury in for closing?” Judge Philbrick picked up a cell phone and wheeled around in his chair to give us some privacy.

Flagler sidled up to me and said, “Perhaps it is a propitious time to discuss a deal.”

“If my client wanted to plead guilty, he wouldn’t need me.”

“We could recess, have a latte downstairs, and work it out.”

“I don’t drink latte, with or without a hint of nutmeg.”

“If I win, I’m asking for jail time.”

“Ooh, scary.”

Shaking his head, Flagler returned to the prosecution table and picked up his neatly printed note cards. The jurors filed back in, and Judge Philbrick ordered them to listen carefully to closing arguments, but to rely on their own memories, not those of the lying shysters. Actually, he said “learned counsel,” but everybody knew what he meant.

I glanced toward the gallery. Yep, the woman was still there in the front row. I gave her a neighborly nod. She took it and gave nothing back.

Flagler bowed obsequiously to the judge and thanked the jury for leaving their fascinating jobs and coming to the courthouse in the service of justice.

Or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

After twenty minutes, he sat down and I stood up. “How did my client blow a point-six when stopped by the police officer but only a point-zero-nine at the station?”

Judging from their blank looks, math was not the jurors' favorite subject.

"I'll tell you how," I continued. "There's *no* way! At point-six, my client's breath could have ignited charcoal in a hibachi."

Fearing he'd belch beer into the cop's face, my too-damn-clever client had squirted enough Listerine into his mouth to disinfect a knife wound. The mouthwash vaulted the kid's *mouth* alcohol off the charts, while the *blood* alcohol test accurately pinned the number at a notch above the lawful limit.

Oftentimes, complete dickwads are undeservedly lucky, while the good get crapped on by life's endless shit storm. So it was with Pepito Dominguez, who inadvertently, but fortuitously, screwed up the alcohol tests.

"If the tests don't fit, you must acquit!" I boomed.

Rest in peace, Johnnie Cochran.

After some more double talk and sleight of hand, I thanked the good citizens for not falling asleep and sat down. The judge recited his instructions, and the bailiff returned the jurors to their little dungeon to deliberate.

I spun through the swinging gate and plopped down next to Mystery Woman. Up close, she had full lips and a flawless complexion, without the hint of foundation, blush, or war paint. Her eyes were green with a touch of a golden sunset, her dark hair pulled straight back and held by a squiggly elastic band. Late twenties or early thirties.

"Hey there." I gave her a lopsided grin that has been known to charm a number of barmaids.

"Hello, Mr. Lassiter." No smile. No warmth. No nothing.

"Have we met before?"

"My name is Amy Larkin."

She waited a moment, as if the name might provoke a reaction. It didn't.

"So what brings you to the courthouse, Amy Larkin?"

"You do, Mr. Lassiter. I need to ask you some questions."

Something in the way she said "questions" convinced me we weren't going to be chatting over Happy Hour.

"Fire away," I said.

She handed me the photo she had been holding. A small cocktail table

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in front of a stage. Pole dancer in the background. Front and center, two young women in string bikinis were draped over a thick-necked guy with shaggy hair and a bushy mustache the color of beach sand. The Sundance Kid with a shit-eating grin. Young. Cocky. Stupid.

I should know. The guy was me.

Embarrassing to look at now. I was a glassy-eyed drunk in a Dolphins jersey. Number 58. Not even traveling incognito. A red scab ran horizontally across the bridge of my nose. If you make enough helmet-first tackles, your face mask will take divots out of your flesh.

“Long time ago. Birthday party my teammates threw for me,” I said. “Where’d you get the picture?”

She ignored my question and shot back her own. “Do you know the girls?”

One of them, a big-boned blonde, had her arms locked around my neck, her enhanced breasts squashed against my chest. The other one was younger. Slender. Auburn hair. Girl-next-door looks. She was kissing my cheek.

“The one with coconut boobs was a stripper. Sonia Something-or-other. She hung around with one of my teammates. I don’t know the younger one’s name.”

“Krista.”

I flipped the photo over. On the back, someone had scrawled, “*The Whore of Babylon.*”

“Okay. The girl’s name is Krista. We’re in a picture together. So what?”

She gave me a look hard enough to leave bruises. “She was my sister.”

“Was?”

“She’s gone.”

“Gone meaning dead?”

“Disappeared and presumed dead.”

Except for the two of us, the courtroom was empty now and silent as a mausoleum.

“I’m sorry. I’m very sorry to hear that.” She studied me through hard, cold eyes. “But what’s all this have to do with me?”

“I think you know, Mr. Lassiter.”

“No, I don’t. So why not stop dancing around and just tell me?”

“You seem agitated, Mr. Lassiter. Why is that?”

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“Because you’re playing me and you’re not very good at it. Where’d you learn your interrogation technique, *Law & Order*?”

“Why would I need to interrogate you? Have you committed a crime?”

I stood up. “Cut the crap. If you’re not going to tell me what’s going on—”

“It’s quite simple, Mr. Lassiter.” Her eyes locked on mine, daring me to leave. “You’re the last person who saw Krista alive.”

2 Jake the Fixer

I long-legged it down the corridor, Amy Larkin in pursuit. The Justice Building was emptying now, just a few straggling girlfriends and wives of defendants who show up at hearings, some blowing kisses, others hurling insults about unpaid child support and broken promises.

“So you’re not going to talk to me, is that it?” Amy raised her voice to my back.

“I don’t know anything about your sister’s disappearance. Got nothing more to say.”

“What happened that night? You can tell me that.”

“It was my birthday party. There were some girls. There always were.”

“That’s it?”

I stepped onto the down escalator, Amy right behind.

“It was a long time ago. I don’t remember one night from another, one girl from another, okay?”

I hopped off the escalator and turned the corner, coming alongside Joseph Gillespie, proprietor of Let’em Go Joe Bail Bonds. He tipped his Florida Marlins cap and let me pass, so I could hit the next escalator in full stride. Amy Larkin was a step behind. Three more floors, then the lobby, then the parking lot. She was going to be on my tail for a while.

“So you’re not interested in clearing your name?” she called after me.

"I don't know what happened to your sister. Hell, I don't even remember her."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care!"

"Was she just another easy fuck for you?"

"Jesus!"

Three steps ahead, on the escalator, a young female probation officer turned around and glared at me.

"Did you hurt her?" Amy demanded.

I kept quiet.

"Did you kill her?"

Most people would say, "Hell, no!" But having spent fifteen years asking questions under oath and having read thousands of transcripts, I knew the questions wouldn't end with my simple denial.

Who else was there?

What happened in the strip club that night?

Did you ever see my sister again?

It would be endless, and there would be questions I wouldn't want to answer. Not truthfully, anyway. It was all so long ago. That guy in the picture. It was me, but a *different* me. Today, I would behave differently. I would be a better man. Or would I?

"Did you know how old Krista was?" Amy pressed me.

Again, I forced myself to keep quiet. It's the same advice I give my clients. Even the innocent ones? Yeah. Because no one is a hundred percent innocent. I wasn't. Not that night.

Amy was still jabbering when we hit the deserted ground floor. The lobby lawyers, guys who scrounge for clients near the elevator bank, had given up for the day.

She grabbed me by the sleeve of my suit coat. "If you had a shred of decency, you'd tell me everything you know." Her voice tight, her pain palpable.

She had that right. A shred of decency was about my ration.

"Walk with me," I said, figuring she wouldn't let up. "But stop pecking at me."

We exited the building on the 12th Street side and crossed into the park-

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ing lot. My old Biarritz Eldo was resting under a skinny palm tree at the far end of the lot, by the Miami River. A rust bucket freighter, its top deck covered with used bicycles, was steaming east, toward the ocean, and a distant port in the islands.

"I'm truly sorry about your sister," I said. "And for your pain."

She waited. I wasn't about to tell her *everything* I knew. But, ignoring my own counsel, I planned to tell her enough to get her off my ass.

"I *do* remember her." Hell, yes, I thought. Krista would be hard to forget.

Still, Amy waited.

I took a deep breath. I looked Amy Larkin in the eyes. Then I told her the story.

It had been Rusty's idea. Throw his pal a birthday party at Bozo's, a strip club on LeJeune Road near the airport. Not that I objected. I was a free agent, one year out of Penn State, busting my ass to hang on to the Dolphins' roster. Rusty MacLean was a flashy wide receiver with deceptive speed, best known for slanting hard across the middle, his long red hair flapping out of his helmet like flames trailing an engine. He was a bad boy and, of course, women loved him.

Rusty knew the guy who owned Bozo's. Hell, he knew all the guys who owned strip clubs, massage parlors, and peep shows. Rusty paid for the booze and half a dozen strippers. Lap dances included. Anything in the Champagne Room in back was between the stripper and the partygoer. Tips *not* included.

Rusty had been seeing Sonia What's-her-name for a couple months. He called her his favorite, but that's like Tiger Woods calling a seven-iron his favorite club or his wife his favorite woman. There were plenty more in the bag, when the need arose.

On that night long ago, I remember Rusty swooping down on the table where I sat with Sonia and the new girl. Sonia was all plastic boobs and hair extensions. The kid, Krista, had a sprinkling of freckles and a wide, innocent toothpaste commercial smile. Even toasted, I realized she didn't belong here with a bunch of degenerates like Rusty, my teammates . . . and me.

The offensive line sat at the bar, looking like giant beer kegs on a load-

ing dock. Models of teamwork, the guys maintained their usual positions, the center in the middle of the group, flanked by both guards, and then the tackles. The tight end must have been taking a piss. One of our defensive backs—a showboater, but aren't they all?—was demonstrating his karaoke prowess, with a soulful rendition of “Midnight Train to Georgia.” Half a dozen strippers were offering companionship in exchange for tips.

I had just won a drinking game called “Who Shit?” Yeah, I know, very mature. In those days, fueled by testosterone and tequila, I often engaged in clever activities, such as pounding holes in plasterboard with my forehead.

Rusty staggered over, grabbed Krista by the shoulders, and hoisted her out of her chair. “Wanna ride the wild stallion?”

Her body stiffened.

“How old are you, kid?” I asked, realizing she wanted no part of Rusty’s rodeo.

“Twenty-one.”

“Right. And I’m gonna make All-Pro. Rusty, why not pick on someone old enough to vote. Or at least old enough to drive?”

“Stay out of this, benchwarmer.” Rusty slung her onto his back and gave her a horsey ride to the Champagne Room, a dark place separated from the VIP Room by a beaded curtain.

I gave Sonia a look, but she just shrugged.

Rusty will be Rusty.

We left it at that. Rusty was a star, and I was a free agent linebacker, specializing in kamikaze tackles on the kickoff team. My deepest concerns involved running faster and hitting harder. I read the sports pages and the Dolphins’ playbook and little else. I was not given to profound thoughts.

A few moments later, I heard a scream from the back.

A man’s scream. Rusty yelping, then cursing. The words starting with “motherfucking” and ending with a word that rhymes with “punt.” I tore through the beaded curtain and flicked on the lights.

“Bitch stabbed me, Jake!”

Rusty was sprawled naked on the floor. A knife handle protruded from his right buttock, blood seeping around the blade.

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"She had a fucking knife in her boot!" Rusty was gasping for air, and I was afraid he was going into shock.

"Calm down, cowboy. We'll get you to Jackson."

"No hospitals, Jake. No police. That doc in Hialeah. Get me there."

The girl was curled in the fetal position in a corner of the sofa. Sobbing. Nude except for one white patent leather boot. She had a bloody lip and her neck was ringed with red marks. Four fingers and a thumb had pressed into her flesh. I could even make out the imprint of Rusty's Super Bowl ring.

"Jesus, Rusty, what the hell did you do to her?"

"I paid for it rough." He hacked up a wet cough. "She knew what she was getting into."

By now, three of our larger teammates had crowded through the doorway. They debated who would take Rusty to Dr. Toraño in Hialeah, finally deciding all of them would go. Offensive linemen believe in teamwork. My job was to take care of the girl, or more accurately, make sure the girl caused no problems for Rusty or the team.

I stripped off my jersey and handed it to her. She put it on, sniffled, and wiped her nose with her arm. "You're not gonna call the cops on me, are you?"

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"I stabbed your friend."

"Knowing Rusty, he deserved it."

She gave me a look, somewhere between relief and disbelief.

"Some women I know would give you a medal," I said. "And trust me, the cops would be worse for Rusty than for you." I opened my wallet and pulled out several twenties.

Jake the Fixer.

I jammed the bills into her hand. Years before I became a night-school lawyer, I was already massaging the justice system. "Everything's gonna be okay."

She touched her neck with one hand, feeling where she had been choked.

"Let's get you cleaned up." I dabbed the blood from her lip with a napkin. Our faces were just inches apart, her green-gold eyes staring into mine.

"I need to get out of here," she said.

"Good idea. Do you have a car?"

"Out of Miami. Out of this . . ." Her gesture took in the stained vinyl sofa, the cheesy nude prints, the entire mildewed, sleaziness of the place. "Can you help me?"

"I'm not a social worker. Come on."

"You're kind of cute. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Dozens. Now, where do you live? I'm gonna get you a cab."

"Let's go to your place."

"Nope. Too many sharp objects in the kitchen."

"Just for the night."

"And then tomorrow, what?"

"I never worry about tomorrow."

"Poetic. Where do you live?"

"Please. I'll do anything you want." In case I didn't get the point, her tongue darted between painted lips. When I didn't respond, she grabbed my hand and slipped it under the jersey and onto a warm, natural, silken breast. She took my other hand, raised it to her face, and stuck my thumb into her mouth. She sucked it. Hard and with plenty of tongue and slurping sound effects. Subtlety was not the girl's strong suit.

I was tempted. Who the hell wouldn't have been? But I was still thinking about Rusty and cops and curfews and Coach Shula. A human cold shower.

"Not gonna happen, kid," I said.

She pushed my hand out from under the jersey and spit my thumb out of her mouth. "Asshole!"

"Right. Okay, where do you live?"

"Miami Springs, but I don't want to go back there. There's this guy. . . ."

"There usually is," I said. Figuring she lived with some punk. A drug dealer or a pimp.

"An old guy," she continued. "Like almost forty. He pays my rent and wants me to do these gross movies, and—"

"No time for life stories. I'm paying for a cab. You decide where to go."

She looked at me then, her eyes empty and defeated. Another man letting her down. I imagined a father or a stepfather, a creep who did things that pushed her out the door and into a seedy place like this.

But I can't save the world. I can't even save one lost girl.

We didn't exchange another word, and after I tucked her into the cab, I never saw her again.

3 The Road to Hell

That was the story I told Amy Larkin.

Most of it was true. Rusty. The knife. The busted lip. The cash.

But I had left things out and cut the story short. I hadn't sent Krista home. No way would I tell Amy Larkin what really happened. The unedited version would feed her suspicion that I had a motive for wanting Krista to disappear.

"I don't believe you," Amy said, flatly.

"Why the hell not? If I was gonna lie, I'd have a better story."

"It's a smart story. Better than if you claimed to be a hero."

"Right. Who would believe that?"

"You come out looking like a shit, but not a rapist or a killer."

We were standing next to my Eldo convertible in the Justice Building parking lot, nearly empty now, the afternoon sun beating down on the pavement. A snowy white egret had migrated across the street from the river and was scratching at the asphalt where someone had spilled a bag of potato chips.

"Problem is, you're lying," she said.

"So you're a human polygraph, that it?"

She pulled out a leather case and handed me a business card. Amy G. Larkin. Fraud Investigator. Auto Division of some insurance company in Toledo, Ohio.

"I interview liars every day," she said.

"Lot of fender-bender cheats in Toledo, I'll bet."

"Do you have any witnesses? Anyone see Krista get into that cab? Who'll back up your story?"

That's the problem with lies, I thought. To keep them going, you have to fertilize and water them. Then they grow like strangler weeds.

"I told you the truth. Take it or leave it."

"So even by your own account, you had a chance to be a Good Samaritan, and you turned away."

"That's one way of looking at it. Another is that I'm not the last person to see your sister alive."

"The cabdriver you can't name?"

"And the guy she didn't want to go home to."

"And his name is...?"

"No idea."

Three toots of a horn came from the direction of the river, a freighter asking for the drawbridge to open, pissing off motorists who'd be stuck for the next five minutes.

"You might want to track down where Krista was living in Miami Springs," I said. "Maybe there's some record of who paid her rent."

"I know how to investigate, Lassiter. It's what I do."

"Great. Then if there's nothing more you need from me..."

"Why so anxious to get rid of me?"

I imagined her asking the same question to a guy with an inflated bill to repair his rocker panel.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "Why's it taken you so long to find me? Your sister disappeared what, eighteen years ago?"

"That's not your concern."

"Fine." I pocketed her card. "I'll call you if I think of anything else."

"No, you won't."

She turned and headed toward her rental at the other end of the lot, forgetting to say what a pleasure it had been to meet me. I stood there a moment in the tropical heat, watching her go. Only when she had ducked into a red Taurus did I bring up the remaining memories of that long ago night.

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The whole truth? I did not put Krista Larkin in a cab and send her home. Oh, I tried. But she refused to get in. Instead, standing in the street in front of Bozo's, she thrust out a thumb and tried hitchhiking up LeJeune Road. It took about thirty seconds for a car to stop. Four guys were inside, windows down, hooting and hollering, and bragging about the size of their equipment. I grabbed her and dragged her to my car.

She was laughing as soon as her butt hit the seat. She'd gotten what she'd wanted. I drove to my apartment, telling myself it was with good intentions. Yeah, yeah. I know what paves the road to hell.

I gallantly gave Krista my bedroom. I'd sleep on the sofa, and in the morning, we'd figure out what to do.

Deep inside, I knew it was bullshit, and so did she. Teenage girl, beautiful and willing. Horny jock—or is that redundant? It was a sure thing, and no guy I knew would have turned it down.

The mating dance was a simple two-step. I asked if she wanted to shower. *Yes*. She asked if I wanted to join her. *Yes*. I took her standing up under the steaming water, her legs locked around my hips. Then on the chaise on the balcony, Krista wanting to feel the breeze from the bay. Finally in the bed, where we conked out until close to noon.

When I awoke, I had no regrets. No pangs of conscience. My only worry was making my one o'clock practice. Being late would cost me \$500 and enhance the possibility of finishing my career with the Saskatchewan Roughriders.

Krista found a white dress shirt in my closet. She wore that and nothing else and padded off to the kitchen, where she tried making French toast, creating a lake of egg yolks on the counter. Getting all domestic after one night of play.

My head ached from the booze. She was already talking about how we might spend the weekend.

"How old are you?" I asked. "Really."

"Twenty."

"Bullshit."

It took some persuading, but she finally admitted the truth. "Almost eighteen."

Shit. Jailbait.

"You gotta go now, kid."

"Whadaya mean?"

"I'll drive you to your place."

"I wanna stay with you."

"Not gonna happen."

"The stuff I did last night. I can do even better."

Her eyes brimmed. I felt sorry for her, just as she supposed I would. Still . . .

"Get dressed Krista. We gotta go."

"Asshole!" She tore off my shirt, popping all the buttons. She stamped into the bedroom. Fifteen minutes later, I was driving west on 36th Street through a frog-strangler of a storm, thunder rattling the windows of my old Camaro. When I pulled up to the curb, I saw a man standing under the awning of Krista's apartment building, smoking a cigar. Blocky build. Blue jeans and a brown suede jacket, an urban cowboy look. Thinning hair with a bad comb-over. He tossed the cigar into the bushes as we pulled up.

"Shit, it's Charlie," Krista said.

The guy's hands were balled into fists at his sides.

I did the semi-chivalrous thing. Double-parked next to a puddle and said, "see ya," as she got out of the car. The guy she called "Charlie" stayed under the awning, the rain drilling the canvas like gunshots.

"In the car, babe." He gestured toward a lobster red Porsche, the water beading on its waxy finish.

"I gotta get cleaned up, Charlie."

"Now! You're late and you're costing me money."

"You gonna be okay, kid?" I called through the window.

"Fuck you, asshole." She shot me the bird and headed for the Porsche.

Charlie stepped off the curb and splashed toward my door. He sized me up and didn't seem impressed. "Have fun, stud?"

"What's it to you?"

"Lemme guess. Best you ever had."

"Fuck off."

"Hell, she's the best I ever had, and I've had a helluva lot more than you."

"I don't keep score," I said.

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“We all keep score. Even Boy Scouts like you.”

From the Porsche, Krista yelled, “You coming, Charlie? Thought we were late.”

He ignored her and looked at me with a mirthless smile. “Did you play rough? That’s the way she likes it, you know.”

“This how you get off? Talking to guys about fucking.”

“You didn’t leave any bruises, did you, stud?”

“Fuck you.”

“If you did, it’ll cost you.”

“Who are you, her pimp?”

The guy laughed. “Pimp. Manager. Fuck buddy. Man for all seasons. But you, stud? You’re just a john.”

4 People Change

I have no excuses, other than being 23, with more sex drive than brain power. I seem to remember rationalizing my conduct: *Hey, she was a stripper. It's not like I deflowered her after catechism class.*

But the truth is that I didn't care about her. I simply took what was offered and gave nothing in return, except some crumpled twenty-dollar bills.

That was then. And now?

I didn't want to get involved in Amy's life, either. All I needed was to convince her that I wasn't the last person to see her sister alive. There was "Charlie." Problem was, my story of a rainy day and a mystery guy with a comb-over would sound like bullshit. The truth often does. If I could find Charlie's last name, I'd have something solid to give Amy. Then I would bid her good-bye, good luck, and have a nice life.

Jake Lassiter, still the escape artist.

Fifteen minutes after leaving the Justice Building with my DUI jury out, I was cruising across the MacArthur Causeway, headed toward my office on South Beach. It was a crystalline clear, breezy afternoon, the sun bursting into diamonds on the bay. To my right, one of the big cruise ships was steaming out Government Cut, headed to the islands.

I tried calling my old teammate Rusty MacLean. Back in the day, he'd

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known a lot of sleazebags. Maybe he could pin a last name on “Charlie.” Rusty’s voicemail promised he’d ring me right back, if he wasn’t fishing, riding his horse, or coaching his daughters’ field hockey team.

With the top down, my car attracts whistles, horn toots, and tail-fin envy. It’s a 1984 Caddy convertible that’s gone to the moon, according to the odometer.

The Biarritz Eldorado was my fee from Stan (Strings) Hendricks, a Key West piano tuner, who was picked up on the Overseas Highway with three hundred pounds of Acapulco Gold in the trunk. If I didn’t win the case, Strings would do a dime for trafficking, and I’d get squat.

The sheriff’s deputy testified that he had kept pace with the Caddy, which was supposedly speeding. After the stop, the cop said he smelled marijuana, giving him probable cause to search the car. But I subpoenaed the cruiser’s videotape, and by counting the seconds between a clearly visible bridge and a gas station, I proved that Strings was going only 43 mph. Search quashed, marijuana excluded. My client went free, and I got his cream-colored Biarritz Eldorado with red velour pillowed upholstery. The car looked like a Bourbon Street brothel on wheels, and naturally, I loved it.

My cell rang just as I passed the Fisher Island ferry port.

“Jake, you worthless SOB,” Rusty greeted me. “Where you been hiding out?”

“Unlike some people, I have to work for a living.”

“Screw that. C’mon down to the Keys and let’s chase some bonefish.”

When he wasn’t at his house-on-stilts in Islamorada, Rusty lived on thirty acres of what used to be mango orchards in the Redlands. He’d married a lovely woman and fathered twin girls. In his spare time, of which he had plenty, Rusty ran a foundation that kept at-risk kids in school and out of trouble. After Rusty the Reprobate retired from the game, he had changed. I respected him for that.

We swapped insults, and then I asked Rusty what he remembered about the night at Bozo’s.

“I don’t wanna revisit that shit,” Rusty said. “I was a total dog back then.”

“One hundred percent pussy hound,” I agreed. “But it’s important, okay?”

"I've pretty much erased the nineties from my memory bank. Except for '91 when I made the Pro Bowl."

I could have said, "*As an injury replacement*," but that would have been unkind.

"Let me refresh your recollection, Rusty," I said, as if cross-examining a hostile witness. "You got rough with the girl, she stabbed you, and a friendly doc in Hialeah stitched you up under a tequila anesthetic."

"Yeah, still got the scar. All right, what do you want to know?"

"The girl ever mention a guy named Charlie?"

"Who the hell can remember?"

"Try, okay?"

"You got a last name?"

"That's what I'm looking for."

"Can't help you. Sorry."

"Ever see the girl again?"

"Why would I? What's this about, anyway?"

I told him about my meeting with Amy Larkin.

"Bummer," Rusty said, reaching back decades for the word. "But don't blame yourself, Jake. Jeez, compared to me, you were a gentleman."

"Compared to you, the Marquis de Sade was a gentleman."

"You want my advice, let it go."

"I intend to. But I'd like to give the sister a lead, some nudge in the right direction. Then I'm done."

"Wish I could help you, Jake."

"What about the other stripper?" I asked. "Sonia something."

"Sonia Majeski. You need her number?"

"You're still in touch?" I couldn't believe it.

"She called me a couple years ago after reading about Rusty's Scholars."

One of the New Rusty's good deeds. He selected several of the best—and poorest—students at Miami Central High School and took them on Caribbean cruises, along with volunteer guidance counselors and SAT tutors.

He told me that Sonia had gotten out of the life. Studied accounting at Miami-Dade, married a Customs agent, and snagged a job with Royal Caribbean. Now she was a purser on a cruise ship and got Rusty hefty discounts for his scholarship cruises.

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He promised to text me Sonia's number as soon as we hung up. I told him I'd chase the wily bonefish with him soon. He called me a liar. I told him to fuck off. Translation: We're still asshole buddies.

In ten minutes, I would be sitting at my desk, punching the phone. With a little luck, Sonia Majeski would know what happened to Krista Larkin. With a lot of luck, maybe Krista wasn't dead. Maybe she'd changed her name and married a dentist and was living in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea in a four-bedroom house with two kids, a swimming pool, and a hybrid SUV parked out front.

Yeah, and maybe I'll be the first ambulance chaser appointed to the Supreme Court. Chances were, Krista was long gone. I just didn't want her sister running around town shouting that I had something to do with it.

5 A Man Named “Charlie”

My office is on the second floor of a building that’s too old, too boxy, and too gray to be called art deco. My “suite,” as the advertisement on craigslist called it, consists of a waiting room I share with a marriage counselor, a narrow book-lined corridor that ends at my assistant’s cubicle, and my twelve-by-twelve slice of heaven with a window overlooking a municipal parking garage.

It was not always this way. I started in the Public Defender’s Office, where I learned how to try homicide cases without pissing my pants. I moved into private practice with a deep-carpet firm of paper pushers who settled all their civil cases and pled out all their criminal clients. I was an oddity there, a guy who’d hit more blocking sleds than law books. They discarded me after one-too-many contempt citations. So now I fly solo and follow my own rules. It’s the only way I can live.

The building is owned by Jorge Martinez, who runs Havana Banana, a Cuban restaurant on the first floor. A few years ago, I saved Jorge’s *huevos con bacon* by keeping the Health Department from shutting the joint down. That’s more than I could do for his earlier restaurant, Escargot-to-Go, which landed in bankruptcy. Turned out there wasn’t much of a market for fast-food snails in paper cups. These days I defend food poisoning lawsuits involving cockroaches in the *caldo gallego*.

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I do a few divorces, too. Mostly, they're referrals from the marriage counselor next door. His failures become my paychecks. I kick back one-third of the fee to him, which is dicey under the ethical rules, if you pay attention to that sort of thing.

I found Cindy, my assistant, in her cubicle, grooming her cuticles. She's Gothic pale with purple hair exploding in different directions like the twigs of an osprey nest. Today she wore a black sleeveless leather vest with dangling silver chains. Two chrome studs poked out of the flesh above her left eyebrow, and werewolf tattoos covered her toned upper arms.

"Hold my calls, Cindy," I ordered, moving past her.

"What calls?"

"And clear my calendar."

She waved a hand like a genie. "Poof! Done."

Sonia Majeski answered on the first ring. I told her who it was and she hollered into the phone, "No way! Lord, how long's it been?"

We did the pleasantries. She was aboard ship in St. Thomas. The passengers were sightseeing and buying duty-free liquor. American tourists will happily skip historic sites and forgo exotic meals for a chance to save a few bucks on their booze.

"I need to ask you about a girl from the old days," I said.

"I don't remember her."

"Whoa. I haven't given you a name."

"I've spent a long time forgetting the 'old days.' Not gonna start remembering now."

"This is important. I think the two of you might have worked together in a strip club."

"Not going there, Jake."

"Help me out, Sonia. This girl was underage."

"Lots were back then. So what?"

"Her name was Krista. Krista Larkin."

The pause on the line told me I had hit paydirt.

"Sonia?"

"Did they find her body?" she asked, softly.

I told Sonia about my meeting with Amy. Told her that Krista was missing but no body had been found, and I asked her to tell me everything she remembered.

Sonia said she'd been living in an apartment in Miami Springs, near the airport. The place was filled with stewardesses, as they were still called. Eastern Air Lines had recently gone under, and the building was only half full. Sonia was stripping in a club owned by Russian gangsters.

"One day, I get a new neighbor," she said. "Krista. She looked like a high school girl. Hell, she *was* a high school girl. But when she got dolled up, Jesus, Jake, bar the door."

"Did you know a guy named Charlie she hung around with?"

"That sleazebag. Charlie's the one who got her into porn."

I remembered what Krista told me that night at Bozo's. "*There's this guy. . . . An old guy. Like almost forty. He pays my rent and wants me to do these gross movies. . . .*"

And I was the dumb bastard who delivered her to the dirtbag.

"Any chance you remember his last name?" I asked Sonia.

"You don't want to be messing with this guy."

"So you know. Tell me."

"He's connected, Jake."

"Organized crime?"

"Political connections that are even scarier."

"Just tell me, Sonia. What's his name?"

"Ziegler. Charlie Ziegler."

It hit me then. "Charles Ziegler" was a bold-face name on the society page. There was a Ziegler wing of the hospital in South Miami. A Ziegler charity golf tournament in Coral Gables. But why fear that guy? He seemed more like Daddy Warbucks than John Gotti.

"You talking about the Ziegler who gives all that money away?" I asked.

"That's him. Went legit and made a bundle in cable TV. Back in the day, he was the prince of porn and Krista's sugar daddy. Rented a mansion on Sunset Island he called the 'Fuck Palace.'"

Change, I thought, was in the air. Rusty Sonia. Even the prince of porn

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had become respectable. Which made me think again about the lunkhead in that photo at Bozo's. Just how much had I changed?

"His videos were called 'Charlie's Girlz,'" Sonia continued. "With a 'z,' as in 'Ziegler.'"

That was all I needed. I had a name to give Amy Larkin, crack insurance investigator from Podunk, Ohio. Now I could get the hell out. But something kept me on the phone with Sonia, asking questions. Maybe it was just curiosity. Or maybe, subconsciously, I was trying to make amends for having been such a shit all those years ago.

"Was Krista involved with anyone else?" I asked.

"Depends what you mean by 'involved.' Ziegler passed her around to his friends."

"Know any of their names?"

"Not really. Rich, older guys. Sick fucks, from what she told me. Into drugs and kinky sex."

The list of possible suspects just multiplied, I thought. Nothing is ever as simple as it seems.

"I tried to warn her, Jake. The men, the drugs, the violence. But she was a kid and you couldn't tell her anything. She started shooting four or five videos a week. Ziegler just cranked them out, using up girls and finding new ones."

"She get involved with any of the actors or crew?"

"Not that I know of. But she was doing her drug dealer off and on. A guy who called himself 'Snake.' Rode a Harley. Smelled like motor oil, but handsome as sin in that bad-boy way."

"A biker named 'Snake'?" I couldn't hide my rolling eyes from my voice.

"It's true. Tattoos, leather, the big ass Harley. He wanted Krista to go to California with him."

"You sure she didn't go?"

"Doubt she would have left Ziegler. He was paying the bills, giving her a sense of security."

"And the last time you saw her . . . ?"

"The parking lot of our apartment building. Said she was going to Ziegler's house for some wild party with the high mucky-mucks."

Whoa. That was big. If Krista was last seen heading to Ziegler's, he just stepped to the front of the line called "persons of interest."

“Any idea who might have been at the party?”

“All I know is Krista said there were always cops and politicians. Even judges, if you can believe that.”

I could. Easily.

“Her car wasn’t in its space the next morning,” Sonia said, “but that wasn’t unusual. A couple days later, she still hadn’t shown up. All her clothes were still in the apartment. I didn’t know what to do, so I drove over to Ziegler’s office. They said they hadn’t seen Krista, and Ziegler was out of town.”

“Anyone file a missing persons report?”

“Me. But you know how it is. Stripper and porn actress. Not the cops’ highest priority.”

Over the line, I heard two quick whistle blasts and the exhalation of steam in the background.

“I found Krista’s home number in her things,” Sonia said, “and called her father. He flew down the next day.”

That solved one small mystery. “You gave him the photo from Bozo’s.”

“Yeah. And I told him the truth about what Krista was doing. You could see the light in him just die. Maybe I did the wrong thing, Jake.”

“The truth is always best.”

A policy I didn’t really believe and clearly didn’t adhere to.

“I could tell from her dad’s face,” Sonia said, “he wasn’t going to look for her. He just wrote her off.”

We were both silent a moment. I heard two more whistle blasts. Then I asked the same question I leave with every friendly witness. “Can you think of anything else that might be useful, Sonia?”

After a moment, she said, “There’s one thing, but I almost hate to say it.”

“What?”

“I knew a couple girls who worked in one of Ziegler’s clubs. They were always stoned, so you can’t believe half of what they said. But one of them told me something really scary.”

“Yeah?”

“That Ziegler was making snuff films in Mexico. Whenever one of the girls gave him a problem, he’d say, ‘How’d you like your next movie to be your last?’ Or ‘You’re worth more to me dead.’ Creepy stuff like that.”

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“Did she see any of the films herself?”

“No, she was just repeating what she’d heard.”

“Hearsay on hearsay.”

“I know, Jake. But that day I went to Ziegler’s office, looking for Krista, they told me he was out of the country.”

“So?”

“They said he was in Mexico.”