



Lowertown

by Richard A. Thompson

Chapter One The Tenacity of Bad Judgment

Public defenders don't believe in evil. Not the ones who keep at it, anyway. Their clients, they say, are all just victims of circumstance and bad luck, poor souls caught up in the cosmic equivalent of a bad hair day.

Maybe they have to think that way, just to keep their sanity. They are, after all, highly overworked and severely underpaid. Even when they are skilled and dedicated, they seldom win a case. In fact, they seldom even get a compliment on one. And they never, ever get to choose their clients.

I don't have any of those problems. I'm a bail bondsman. My name is Herman Jackson, and I work with whomever I damn well please. And if some of them are evil from the ground up, at least I have no illusions about it.

"Herman, all I'm asking is that you talk to him. How bad could that be?"

The woman making the plea was a public defender named Trish Hanover. She was a tallish, thin-faced blond whose rather ordinary features were made attractive by her perpetual look of eagerness and energy. She wore her hair pulled back in a French roll, and she wore a severely tailored gray suit with an electric blue silk blouse. Considering her budget, I figured it was probably her best outfit, put on just to charm me, as was the radiant smile. And I was charmed. At the moment, she wore a tiny gold stud on one nostril. It matched her earrings, and I took it to be an act of mild rebellion at the severe dress code of the court, where she would not be allowed any such tribal baubles. If so, it was a little forced.

We were having a late breakfast at the last of the downtown Saint Paul greasy spoons. The plastic-laminated menu said they served breakfast any time, so I ordered steak and eggs in the Middle Ages. The waitress was not amused. Trish at least pretended to be. She beamed an intense, approving smile at me and locked her eyes with mine. Again the charm. Though I liked her well enough, I had never thought of her in any way but professionally, and I didn't know how to react. I looked down at my coffee and pretended I had just noticed the secret of life floating around on top of the oily black liquid.

"What about it, Herman?" she said.

"Look, Trish, from what I hear, the DA has an iron-clad cinch on a conviction here, and your guy has to be smart enough to know that. If I bond him out, he's guaranteed to skip, and I'm out a very large chunk of change. I can't believe you're asking me to do that."

"I only asked you to talk to him, Herman."

“Yeah, right.” I took a sip of the coffee and found that I had been wrong; the secret of life was not there.

“How much money can you lose talking to somebody?” she said.

“Ask anybody who has a stock broker.”

The smile was still there, but her lips thinned. I could see she was getting very frustrated with me but was trying hard to stay sweet.

“Anyway,” I said, “if I talk to him—not that I’m saying I will—then what?”

Her face brightened a notch.

“Maybe you’ll see he’s not such a bad guy.”

“I’m so sure.”

“And the DA’s case isn’t half as good as he thinks it is. A lot, and I mean an *awful* lot, of the evidence was obtained illegally.”

“Inadmissible is not the same as invalid, Trish. People can be totally railroaded and still be guilty, you know.”

“You’re a legal scholar now?”

“The best.”

Give me an example, then.”

“Sacco and Vanzetti. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. They were as guilty as unoriginal sin, but the cases against them were completely bogus.”

“That was a long time ago, a whole other era.”

“Charles Manson.”

“Also another era.”

“All right then, in our era. Bad cops or bad prosecutors can taint every shred of evidence they touch or even allude to, and that still doesn’t make the suspect innocent.”

“This isn’t L.A., Herman.”

“No. But are you seriously telling me you think this guy is innocent?”

“I don’t know, Herman. I really don’t. You know, there’s some set of circumstances that can make you, me, or anybody else into a vicious killer. Or make us look like one, anyway.”

“I’ve never bought that.”

“Oh, all right. But even so, there’s something about him, some...”

Her words trailed off, and she got a look like a person remembering some deep secret from early childhood, something wonderful but also slightly disturbing. Had this guy charmed the sense right out of her? If the cops and the newspapers were right, that’s what he typically did to his victims. If Trish had fallen under his spell, I felt sad about it. I liked and respected her, and I hated to see her being made into a patsy. Which was all the more reason for distancing myself from this case.

“The man is evil, Trish. From what I hear, he practically has a tattoo on his forehead advertising it. Do you really want to be a party to letting him flee the jurisdiction?”

“If you want to use that kind of talk, Herman, everybody is evil.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Martin Luther said so.”

“I’m a Neo-Buddhist Skeptic,” I said.

“So did Robert Penn Warren. ‘Man is conceived in evil and proceeds from the stench of the diaper bag to the stench of the shroud.’” She waved her hand. “Or something like that.”

“But some are way more evil than others, including, as I recall, the character you just quoted. The answer is no.”

“Aw come on, Herman. One little talk, and then you do whatever you want. Please? I’ll make it worth your while.” Again the take-no-prisoners smile, and again I was charmed.

“Come over to my apartment tomorrow night, and I’ll make you a nice home-cooked dinner.” She wrote her address on the back of one of her cards. “How long has it been?”

“One year, two months, and three days, but who’s counting?” We both knew what she was referring to. That was the length of time since Anne Packard had gone east, to write for the *New York Times*. We thought our relationship had more to it than old-fashioned jungle lust, but emails and long-distance phone calls had proved insufficient to hold it together.

“I know how you feel, Herman. I really do. A blind person could see it. But hasn’t it been long enough?”

“Has it? I’m new at this game. I don’t know the rules yet, much less how the smart money bets.”

“Come and have a nice dinner with me. No strings. She would want you to.”

I had to admit, that was probably true. Anne would wish me happiness, whatever that meant. Trish put her hand over mine and gave me a different kind of intense look, one that radiated more genuine good will and concern than I thought any one person had a right to.

“Tomorrow night, Herman. Seven-ish?”

“If I talk to Valento,” I said.

“Please?”

With or without the dinner, you couldn’t turn down a please that looked like that. I couldn’t, anyway.

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Ray Valento was on the other side of the Mississippi, in the Hennepin County jail. But they didn’t put him in the new, enlightened facility, where the arrestees are allowed to check themselves in, get their orange coveralls and sandals, and find their assigned wards by reading prompts from video monitors. Instead, they held him across the street in the old dungeon-like jail, with windowless stone walls, small cells, and high, intimidating security. The spaces there were reserved for violent criminals, suspects with blatant attitude problems, and people who had just pissed off the staff in one way or another. A uniformed cop escorted me through a tunnel under the street, then up in a sterile-looking elevator to a series of dim corridors with mauve-colored stone walls. The place managed to smell damp and musty at the same time. *Dust on the Dismal Swamp* flashed into my mind. Our footsteps rang on the old terrazzo floors, and our voices echoed.

“You going to bond this piece of shit?” The cop was young, big, and serious looking, as was most of the guard staff. Every Minneapolis cop begins his or her career doing a year as a jail guard. Few find that they want to stay with it.

“I don’t know yet. I promised a friend I’d talk to him, is all.”

“The Minneapolis bondsmen all turned him down, you know.”

“Really?” I didn’t know. “Why is that?”

“Maybe because we asked them to. You want to keep being welcome over here, maybe you’ll do the same.”

“I don’t come over to this side of the river much. I don’t get the scuttlebutt. Tell me what I’m missing.”

“He’s a bad actor, is what you’re missing.”

“Well, there’s never been any shortage of them.”

“Not like this guy. I don’t know if the DA can make this case or not,” he said, “but if he gets back on the street while we’re waiting to find out, something bad is going to happen, if you get my meaning. And that could get a good cop in a lot of trouble.”

I didn’t think for a minute that he merely meant the perp might hurt somebody else. What he was telling me was that if this guy walked, some cop was definitely going to waste him.

“Got it,” I said.

“But of course you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Hear what?”

“Good man. You still want to see him?”

“I promised I would.”

“Okay, then. Just remember how things stand.” We stopped at a metal-clad door that looked like it belonged on a firewall on a battleship. The cop peeked into the spy hole and then picked out a key from the ring on his belt.

“The door stays open.” He inserted the key and turned it. “And I stay right behind you in the corridor. You talk through the phone set. I hear it all, and it’s all recorded. You want to pass something to the prisoner, you give it to me. He is not allowed to pass anything to you. Nothing. Are we clear?”

I said we were. He swung the heavy door out into the corridor. Inside, there was an alcove maybe three feet deep and eight wide, with a window that looked into a tiny cell. In front of the glass were a narrow counter, a chair, and a wall-hung phone receiver. I didn’t know how they got the prisoner into the cell, but the door we had just opened obviously wasn’t it.

He was tallish, maybe six feet, and fairly fit-looking. His orange jail jumpsuit did not bulge at the belly, but it did at the shoulders and chest. I knew from his booking sheet that he was forty-two, but he looked younger. He had a boyish face with fierce, clear blue eyes and curly, very short blonde hair. His nose had a bit of a hook to it and looked as if it had been broken at least once, but I suspected most women would find him attractive anyway, or at least interesting. I did not. To me he looked like a dangerous smartass, one of those characters who invade somebody else’s space just to show that they can. He smiled slightly when he saw me, a crooked, arrogant smirk. I knew that smirk and the kind of person who wore it. He would smile like that and look you right in the eye while he stuck a knife in your guts. And that would just be the beginning.

He walked over to the chair on his side of the glass. Even his walk radiated menace. We picked up our phones.

“About time,” he said.

“You think it’s a good idea to start our conversation by bitching at me?”

“Like I give a rat’s ass what you think. You just write me a bond. You want to get kissed, go someplace else.”

“When you put it so charmingly, how can I refuse?”

“They said you like to think you’re cute, Jackson. Am I supposed to giggle now? Is that what my lawyer does? Does she do that before she fucks you?”

“That wouldn’t be any of your business, would it?”

“Don’t try to tell me you’re not getting any off her.”

“I wouldn’t waste my time trying to tell you anything. How much is your bail set for?”

“A hundred and fifty big ones, okay? That’s an easy fifteen gees for you, and no hassle.”

“Oh, I can see how little hassle there is, all right. You own anything that’s worth a hundred and fifty thousand? Come to think of it, do you even own anything that’s worth fifteen?”

“Information.”

“I’m not looking for any information.”

“I think you are.”

“You think wrong,” I said. “Try the DA.”

“Yeah, I’m so sure. The DA hates me. Take my car, then, if you have to show you got something. See here?” He produced a glossy photo and pressed it up against the glass. “I’ve got a cherry sixty-eight Shelby Mustang GT. It’s a classic.” In the middle of the colored picture was a white rectangle, probably a post-it note. I bent closer to read it, my body hiding it from the view of the guard behind me. Then I sat down again. The hair on the back of my neck was standing up.

“I’m not a collector,” I said. “And even if I were, cars are no good for security. They take up too much room to store, and the value fluctuates worse than sowbelly futures. No dice.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Do I look amused?”

“Hey, this is the genuine goods, the real shit.”

“Unless it isn’t. See you around, okay?”

“Not okay. But you’ll be back, after you think it over. You won’t get what I’ve got any other way.”

“We’ll see.” I stood up and told the guard I was ready to leave. As we were walking back down the corridor to the elevator, he asked again if I was going to bond his least favorite prisoner. I didn’t answer him. My shrink would say I was too busy being conflicted.

According to the cops, Ray Valento was a garden-variety sociopath who sometimes ran complicated con games but more often talked his way into women’s homes and then tortured, raped and robbed them. Sometimes he killed them too, but not always.

The cops had caught him by sheer luck. His last victim was in the middle of a phone call when she answered her door. Her friend on the other end listened long enough to hear that something very wrong was happening and had called 911. So the guy was not very smart. The fact that he had a PD for an attorney meant he was not connected, either. Could he have something I needed anyway, or did he merely know enough about me to think I’d be interested? I tried to think of another way to find out.

The note on Valento’s car photo had been in pencil, in simple block printing and all caps, so it could be read from a couple feet away. It had said, simply: I KNOW WHO ATTACKED YOUR WIFE.

The problem with that, of course, was that I didn’t have a wife.