

The Venetian Haul, Chapter Three

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Deep in the canals of Venice lies a secret so valuable people are being killed trying to obtain it. Chapter Three in the ongoing novel.



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PROLOGUE

It was just after midnight when the lock finally opened on the door to the pawn shop, allowing the two elderly burglars access. 1/2 There had been a great deal of grumbling about the length of time it had taken and the deterioration of one's skills and such talk didn't stop once they were inside.

"You never could open a door on time, not in all the years I've known you," Harry Foster complained. 1/2 He removed his gloves and crossed to the glass partition, aiming his diamond tipped saw just near the edge. 1/2 Harry was sixty-eight and in good shape for his age, which was remarkable considering he'd spent a large part of his life abusing his body with a mixture of alcohol, tobacco and women.

"Fine. 1/2 Next time you try opening the door," Benny shot back. 1/2 "We'll be there until Christmas." 1/2 Benny Jamison had been Harry's partner for almost forty years now. 1/2 He was older than Harry in all ways except chronologically. 1/2 His vision was blurry, his reflexes were slower, his hearing impaired. 1/2 He had been bald for the past fifteen years and wore a toupee which Harry never lost an occasion to mock. 1/2 Still, Harry never had a closer friend. 1/2 1/2

Benny sat down as Harry continued cutting the glass. 1/2 He stared out at the dark sky through the window. 1/2 He checked his hands. 1/2 Sure enough, they were shaking. 1/2 Again.

"This is it for me, Harry," he said.

Harry didn't look up from what he was doing. 1/2 "What's 'it' for you?"

"This is my last job. 1/2 I'm too old, too slow and too damn tired. 1/2 We'll do this, get whatever we can from it, then I'm out."

Harry grunted non-committedly. 1/2 He knew Benny was right, he'd known it for some time. 1/2 He'd almost suggested it himself but would never hurt Benny's pride like that. 1/2 It had just been dumb luck that Benny hadn't been caught on the past two jobs. 1/2 They both knew you didn't get too many chances in this business.

"Let's talk about it later," Harry said. 1/2 "Maybe it's time we both took a break."

"You're as good as you ever were. 1/2 In some ways better. 1/2 You're smarter, more cautious. 1/2 Me, I'm just old. 1/2 I'm not complaining, though. 1/2 We had a hell of a run. 1/2 Made more money than I ever dreamed of. 1/2 Bought that house on the lake with cash. 1/2 Man, did Emma's eyes light up when she saw that."

"Well, we're not going to buy any house on a lake with this lot," Harry said ruefully. 1/2 "Looks like they only keep one or two pieces worth anything out here, the rest is back in the safe, no doubt. 1/2 And I'm not in the mood to take on a safe at this hour. 1/2 We'll just grab what's here and call it a day. 1/2 Just a few more..."

"Shit!" Benny exclaimed as the flashing red lights turned into the parking lot. Both men dove behind the counter as quickly as they could, Harry gathering up his tools and putting them in his back pocket.

"I thought you said they had no alarm!" Harry whispered.

"That's what the guy told me," Benny shot back. "He swore on a stack of Bibles."

"Jesus on a stick," Harry muttered and peered through a mirror on the wall. A flashlight was shining inside the store window, searching. The doorknob was being turned. Harry wondered whether or not Benny had been smart enough to relock the door after their entrance. The door creaked open and Harry had his answer. Benny shrugged apologetically.

The flashlight shone throughout the store. A hand pressed against the wall, searching for a light switch. They were in luck there at least, Harry thought. The lone fluorescent bulb overhead had a cord reaching down the side of the wall which most likely would be hard to see unless one was looking for it. With any luck whoever it was would go check out the back room where the safe was, allowing them to escape. That seemed to be the case as the light shone towards the back corridor and the footsteps moved away from the two burglars.

Benny slowly raised himself up and started making his way quietly to the front door. His eyes were fixed on the man with the flashlight. In his younger days he might have noticed the small step stool in front of him used to reach high objects on the wall but this was far from his younger days and since the step stool was black it might not have mattered even then. He stumbled over it, losing his balance. The ensuing crash told Harry that their luck had finally run out.

"Freeze!" yelled the voice in the dark. Benny tried to stand but his feet were caught in the stepstool. He lunged forward, throwing his hands out to try and break his fall, his fist coming into contact with a case of metal bracelets, flinging them to the floor with a loud clatter. A shot rang out, then a second. Benny felt the first bullet enter his stomach and the second one below his shoulder. Benny grabbed hold of the closest item near him and in desperation flung it at his assailant. One more shot rang out, followed by a loud gurgling noise. Harry fell to the floor and covered himself up, waiting for it to be over.

A loud siren pierced the night air as two additional police cars roared into the parking lot of the pawn shop. Harry rose, his arms lifted high above his head. "Don't shoot!" he yelled out.

"Get your fucking hands up in the air!" a deep voice boomed out, ignoring the fact that Harry's hands were indeed already stretched as far as they could go. Harry waited while two police officers entered the store, both their flashlights covering him. One of them obviously knew the layout of the pawn shop and made his way over to the wall where the cord hung off the fluorescent bulb. He pulled on the string and the light turned on, blinding them all temporarily. When Harry's eyes finally adjusted, he almost wished they hadn't. Benny was slumped down on the floor, three bullet holes in him, the last one directly through the front of his head. On the other side of the room was a young police officer sitting down, his eyes staring straight ahead, vacant. Harry's diamond tipped saw was lodged in his throat. Blood poured down the front of the young officer's shirt.

The older of the two policemen went to examine the young man. He clucked his tongue a few times and shook his head sadly at Harry.

"Boy, you don't know what you just done," he said in a thick Cajun accent. "This here's the Mayor's nephew. You just went and killed royalty."

Harry looked over to Benny and sighed. 'Hell and damnation, Benny,' he thought morosely to himself. 'Why couldn't you have retired one day earlier?'

CHAPTER ONE

Louisiana State Penitentiary, or Angola Prison as it was more commonly known, was built in 1836 and had the distinction of being the largest maximum security prison in the country. For more than a hundred years it operated pretty much as it wanted to, outside of public scrutiny. It had its own law and handed out its own justice, treating inmates in illegal and barbarous fashion, even by Louisiana standards. In 1961 Wilbert Rideau arrived at Angola. Rideau was a black man convicted in three successive trials of murdering bank teller Julia Ferguson. His three trials had several things in common, most notably the fact that in all three cases he was pronounced guilty by a team of all male, all white jurors. In 2005 he was retried, this time in front of a mixed jury consisting of ten women and two men, who lessened his charge substantially. The years he had already served were taken into account and he was freed immediately. While still in prison he wrote about the practice at Angola of treating some of the weaker inmates as slaves and sexual cattle, a practice not only condoned by but often initiated by prison guards. The ensuing publicity forced Angola to reform its policies and ensured at least somewhat better treatment of its prisoners, the latest of who was Harry Foster.

Jack Dodger drove his rental car up to the prison's parking lot and parked it in the visitor's section. He turned off the air conditioner and was immediately hit with the wall of heat which was typical of Baton Rouge in the summer. The weather man on the radio cheerfully announced it was 110 degrees outside, expected to rise to 115 by mid afternoon. Not for the first time Jack decided that people who lived there were clearly insane. Instinctively he locked the car before realizing where he was. If there was one place in all of Louisiana which was safe from car theft it was probably Angola Prison.

Jack was thirty-six years old with dark black hair and an athlete's body which, unlike Harry, he worked hard to maintain. It wasn't vanity which sent him to the gym five times a week but rather the knowledge that his specialized line of work required one to be at the top of their game, mentally and physically. Both Jack and his brother Bobby had been top athletes at their schools, and although it had been ten years since he had picked up a basketball he felt he could still handle himself fairly well on the hardwood if he needed to.

He was required to show his identification three times before finally gaining admittance to the interior. At the last checkpoint a burly guard who looked as if he'd been there all his life scrutinized

Jack's driver's license carefully before handing it back to him.

"Relation to the prisoner?" he asked.

"He's my uncle," Jack replied.

The guard looked at him closely as if trying to decide whether or not Jack was pulling his leg, then apparently decided he couldn't care less and waved Jack through. Jack smiled what he hoped was a non-threatening smile and proceeded. He moved towards the waiting room of the immense prison complex, surrounded by armed policemen. He felt claustrophobic and wondered if Angola had this effect on most people or just those who...like him...made a living by breaking the law.

He sat waiting for nearly ten minutes behind the glass partition and watched while other prisoners talked to their visitors. A striking blonde in her late twenties sat next to him arguing quietly with a man who appeared to be her boyfriend. She wore a low cut yellow blouse and short black skirt which rode up on her extremely well formed legs. Jack took her to be either an exotic dancer or cocktail waitress. He tried hard not to listen in to their conversation but the blonde's voice rose dramatically as she tried to assure the man of her fidelity. He kept shaking his head and scowling, unconvinced.

Harry finally appeared. It had only been three days since the night of the pawn store break-in but Jack was shocked at the change. Harry looked fifteen pounds thinner than when he'd last seen him and his hair had gone from an elegant grey to almost totally white.

"Jesus," Jack swore. "You look like hell."

"If you think I look bad you should see Benny," Harry replied as he sat down. He stretched his arms out over his head as though testing to see if they still worked.

Jack nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry about that. I liked Benny. He was always there when you needed him. A solid guy."

"Well, when I see him again...which, according to the state of Louisiana should be any day now...I'll give him your good wishes."

"How bad?" Jack asked.

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't get any worse. Murder of a cop during a felony. Just my luck the kid who died was a relative of the current mayor of Baton Rouge, a guy so right wing that even the NRA considers him extreme. The governor's no help. He already holds the record for state executions. With mine he'll get a set of steak knives, I imagine."

"Did you kill the cop?" Jack said.

"No, but only three people know that and two of them are in the morgue."

Jack exhaled slowly. "Christ, Harry, you need a miracle."

"Tell me something I don't know."

The blonde suddenly rose from her seat next to Jack and stormed out of the waiting room. Her boyfriend slammed his fists up against the glass partition, startling the others in the room and capturing the attention of the guards. Sullenly, he put his head down and strode out of the visitor's quarters. Harry shrugged.

"My next door neighbor," he said. "He's in here for life, no chance of parole and he expects her to be waiting when he gets out. And I thought I had problems. Hey, where's Bobby?"

"Flying in from Los Angeles. His cell phone was turned off for the past two days, I just got word to him this morning. He'll be here tomorrow morning."

Harry nodded gratefully. "You're good kids. The two of you. Best thing my sister ever did. I sometimes wish you never followed me in my line of work. You've got brains, you could have been a CEO or something. Living in New York, vacationing in Hawaii, dating super models. Hell, you could have even taken after your father, just become a carpenter."

"Our father was only a carpenter when he was sober, which wasn't often."

"Lord knows that's true."

Jack hesitated a second before he spoke. "Harry, look. Bobby and I were talking. Throwing out options. There is one possible way out of this, you know."

Harry sat back and folded his arms, looking bemused. "Now, this I gotta hear. But if you're thinking of baking a cake and sticking a file in it, forget it. I'm diabetic."

"The Venetian Haul."

There was a long silence as the two men stared at each other. A minute passed by. Then another. Finally, Harry started to get out of his chair. "It was nice seeing you, Jack. Really. Take care of yourself."

"It could work."

"No!" Harry shot back. "As a matter of fact, it can't work. As a matter of more specific fact, it's suicide. I appreciate the thought, but do me a huge favor and forget the Venetian Haul, forget I ever told you about it."

"You don't have much of a choice," Jack said.

Harry moved in close to the glass, his voice lowered. "If that's what you consider a choice, you're crazy. Let me remind you that everyone who has ever gone after the Venetian Haul has wound up dead. Or worse."

"Except you," Jack said.

"That was thirty years ago and I was damn lucky. Benny and I lasted as long as we did because we never even considered going back after it. It's not just cursed, it's the goddamn Michael Jordan of curses. Now look. I've lived a good life, had some laughs. My time has come. I can accept that. What I can't accept is you and your brother throwing your lives away on a pipe dream; on something that can't be done. You're getting killed is not going to make my final days any easier."

"Harry, it's two hundred million dollars. Oddly enough, we don't see it as throwing our lives away."

Harry's finger shot out. "Two hundred million dollars means nothing to a dead man. No. That's my final decision. It's far too dangerous. Go home, Jack. Go home and get it out of your mind."

With that, Harry signaled for the guard. He stood and followed the guard out of the chambers, never looking back.

Jack walked out the front door of Angola Prison and towards his car. Standing outside the gate, an unlit cigarette in her hands was the blonde who'd been sitting next to him. She called out to him as he passed by. "Hey. Got a light?"

Jack shook his head. "Sorry. I don't smoke."

"Neither do I," the blonde said and crushed the cigarette underfoot. "I just use it as a conversation starter. So, are you heading into town?"

Jack nodded. "I am. You need a lift?"

Her face broke into a big smile. "That'd be great. I took a cab ride out here and now they tell me it'll be a half hour before they can send another one. If I don't get to work on time I'll be fired."

Jack opened the passenger door. "Hop in."

The blonde quickly moved to the side of the car and sat in her seat. Her dress rose even higher on her legs and she did nothing to correct it.

Jack got in the driver's seat and put the car into reverse. The air conditioner felt great as it blasted over the two of them.

"By the way, my name's Glory," she said as they pulled away from Angola. Her hand had moved in between them, almost touching his leg.

Jack glanced down at her perfectly manicured hand before making a right on to the road. "I'm Jack."

"Are you married, Jack?"

Jack saw no reason to lie. "No. I was engaged at one point but she passed away."

Glory looked horrified. "Oh, my God. Are you serious?"

"It's fine. It was a long time ago."

"Still, I'm so sorry. Was that your father you were visiting?"

"No. My uncle."

She nodded her head sympathetically. "It's nice that you were there for him. So many of them have no one they can talk to. I'm a big believer in loyalty."

"I could tell," Jack said. "Was that your husband?"

Glory laughed out loud. "God, no. Just someone I used to date. I feel sorry for him on account of he's there because of me. A jerk was hitting on me at work and he came and rescued me. Kind of messed the guy up pretty bad. The guy might have died, even. I'm not really sure. So I visit him every now and then."

"Out of loyalty," Jack said.

Her eyes twinkled. "That's right."

Glory's hand inched closer now until it was actually resting on Jack's leg, squeezing it slightly. He looked over to her.

"So what kind of work do you do?" he asked.

"I'm a dancer. A performer, actually. I do the late shift at the Red Rooster Pussycat Lounge. It's a gentlemen's club. Are you a gentleman?"

"Not always," Jack smiled. "The late shift? It's only four o'clock. I thought you had to get to work."

"Oh, I do, eventually," she said, grinning. "But I don't work until tomorrow night. If you make a right at the next exit we can probably make it to bed in less than ten minutes."

CHAPTER TWO

It turned out to be a three hour session with Glory, who owned more sexual apparatus than Jack had seen in his entire life. Eventually he managed to untangle himself from her arms, legs and various other body parts and make it to the airport just as his brother's plane was landing.

Bobby was dressed in short sleeves, jeans and two hundred dollar Italian shoes. He was laughing with one of the stewardesses as Jack pulled up to the curb. She was handing him something Jack was pretty sure was a business card, a cell phone number or both. Bobby waved to the stewardess as he got into Jack's car.

"New acquaintance?" Jack asked.

"People in the south are so friendly," Bobby answered as the car started out. "You ever notice that?"

"How is Los Angeles?"

"There's an old saying about Los Angeles," Bobby replied. "When it's 103 degrees in New York, it's 78 in Los Angeles. And when it's 23 degrees in New York, it's 78 in Los Angeles. But there are eight million interesting people in New York. And 78 in Los Angeles. How's Harry?"

"Harry is in some pretty deep shit," Jack said, pulling out on to Highway 110. "Murder one right now and they're calling for the electric chair. He's been on the front page of every paper and the lead on every local TV show. Vegas is giving odds on whether he'll last the weekend. Personally, I'd take the under."

Bobby nodded. "Did you mention the Venetian Haul?"

"I did."

"What he say?"

"He said exactly what we thought he would say."

Bobby leaned back and looked out at the Louisiana landscape passing them by. There weren't a whole lot of houses along the main strip and the ones that were there didn't look too inviting. Katrina may have devastated New Orleans but Baton Rouge suffered as well. All state and federal money that was going into the area suddenly got diverted to New Orleans, leaving Baton Rouge without some much needed capital.

"So what's next?" Bobby asked.

"We meet with the mayor himself. One of the big congressmen here owes Harry a favor and set it up. It's not going to help but it might make us feel better."

"When?"

"That's where we're headed right now."

Bobby glanced at his watch. "Now? Isn't it a bit late for a business meeting?"

"Apparently not in Baton Rouge."

They pulled into the crowded parking lot of The Stuffed Pig around 11pm. Country music blared from speakers high above the two story restaurant and if people nearby minded they were reluctant to say anything, probably because of the four or five patrol cars parked there every night. Bobby looked questioningly at the wood sided establishment and then back to his brother. "We're meeting here?"

"That's what the man said," Jack replied and got out of the car.

A large bosomed hostess with big hair and a mouth full of teeth greeted them as they entered.

"Well, howdy, ya'll," she yelled, somehow making herself heard over the music. "This your first time at The Stuffed Pig?"

"Believe it or not, yes." Jack answered. "We're here to see Mayor Langley."

She nodded understandingly. "You want the back room then, sugar. You go up those steps in the back, make a right past the mechanical bull, a left at the popcorn machine and knock on the door. I think they're waiting for you."

"You get all that?" Jack asked as he and Bobby walked inside.

"She lost me at mechanical bull."

After a few mis-turns the brothers found themselves at the late night impromptu office of the Mayor of Baton Rouge, one Theodore "Teddy" Langley. They were ushered in by a large uniformed policeman who looked as if he hadn't smiled in ten years. A fully stacked bar stood off in one corner, maintained by an equally stacked red-headed female bartender. Teddy Langley sat behind a large oak desk, a phone in his ear. He waved them in as he continued his conversation. Sitting next to him was a tall, lean man with intelligent eyes. He gazed over Jack and Bobby sharply as they stood waiting for the mayor to conclude.

"And I'm telling you, if they don't get that mess cleaned up by the end of the weekend, I am going to personally come down there and shove it up their collective hillbilly asses! You got that? This ain't Mobile, Alabama, for Christ's sake!"

The mayor slammed the phone down and looked up, almost apologetically. "People don't realize how much of my job is sanitation. Have a seat, boys. Brandy, get these youngsters something to drink."

Jack asked for a scotch on the rocks, which Bobby repeated. They sat down in two wooden chairs across from the mayor as Brandy served them their drinks. Mayor Langley was in his early sixties. A stout, mustached man, used to living on deep fried cooking and beer, he presently wore a ten gallon hat, black pants with a silver buckle and a cowboy shirt.

How he got to be mayor was something of an urban legend, although Jack had it on good authority that most of it was probably true. Langley won his first election in 1982 despite trailing in the final weeks by double digits. That lead shrank considerably when his opponent's head was found floating down the Mississippi River. The body itself was never recovered. Since then 'Teddy' - as he was known in the community - enjoyed a minimum amount of competition come election time.

"Jack and Bobby, huh? Your parents must have had a sense of humor."

"It's even funnier when you consider that they were Republicans," Jack said.

"Look, I know why you're here," the mayor said once they all had drinks. "Any friend of Congressman Conway is a friend of mine. And I wish I could help you. I hold no grudges, none at all. To tell you the truth, I never even liked that bastard nephew of mine, not from day one. The only reason he made it to the force was my sister nagging me all the time. I'm surprised the idiot didn't get himself killed sooner. But my hands are tied."

Jack nodded towards the thin man sitting to Langley's side. "Who's he?"

The thin man pursed his lips sourly. "I am the Assistant Deputy Mayor and also the personal legal attorney for Mayor Langley. My name is Lionel Hempstead. I am here to inform you that this conversation never took place, that whatever is said here has no legal bearing in a court of law and that you may not use the information you receive here in any way against the mayor, his staff or the city of Baton Rouge."

"Our uncle never killed anyone," Bobby said.

"His fingerprints were on the murder weapon," Hempstead pointed out.

"The 'murder weapon' was thrown thirty feet in the air, in a pitch black room, by a seventy year old man who had just been shot," Jack countered. "You couldn't duplicate that feat again in a million years."

Langley held his hands out in a defenseless gesture. "Be that as it may, we've got one dead police officer, one attempted burglary, fingerprints on the cutter and your uncle left holding the bag. The people of this city would expect me to hang this man whether that moron was my nephew or not. His being kin means there's no way I can cut him some slack. Now, I'm sorry, I really am, you tell the Congressman that. Your uncle's gonna swing and there just ain't a damn thing I can do."

Jack looked over to his brother, who gave a small shrug. The two rose.

"Thanks for the drink, Mayor," Jack put his glass down on the Mayor's oak desk. "Guess there's nothing more to say for the moment."

"Well, that's not exactly true," the Mayor intoned slowly. His eyes were no longer friendly and Jack saw for the first time what a dangerous man he could be. "See, Mr. Lionel Hempstead here ain't what you call much fun at parties. Hell, nine times out of ten he bores the crap out of me with his legal mumbo jumbo and all that, but what he's good at...I mean, really good at...is digging up stuff on folk. There he's a pro. What I know about you boys I don't like. What I don't know about you I like even less. One thing I'm aware of is you pulled off some of the slickest capers I ever did hear of. I tip my hat to you. But I don't care how smart you are, or who you're connected to, you come making any sort of trouble in my town and I'll stick you off in a place so remote the Lord God Almighty won't be able to find you. Do I make myself clear?"

Jack hesitated for a moment, then smiled. "We'll be in touch."

As they were leaving the Stuffed Pig Bobby looked back to see whether or not they were being watched and was not surprised to find out they were. "That went well," he commented.

"Didn't expect it to go much better, did you?" Jack asked as they got into the car.

"So what's the next step?"

Jack slipped the car into reverse and headed out into the hot Louisiana night. "Now we put together the team."

"Who first?"

Jack thought about it for a second. "Frankie. I think Frankie first."

CHAPTER THREE

ATLANTIC CITY

Francis O'Reilly was a wanted man in Los Angeles, which was why he was currently hiding out in Atlantic City. Francis was a bookkeeper who had made a few bad investments recently. Ordinarily this was not cause for a man to be on the run for his life but the investments were *really* bad and the money lost was not exactly his. Until recently Francis had been keeping the accounts of the Paichino family in California, an organization which specialized in restaurants, automobile repairs and assorted shakedowns. Their reported profit per year was several million dollars. Their unreported profit was three times that amount...that is, until Francis lost most of that money trusting in Bernie Madoff. Because Francis was the one in charge of the accounts it had taken the Paichinos almost a year to figure out where their money went and who was responsible, but eventually the truth dawned on them. The result was Francis' hiding in an Atlantic City hotel room with a hooker and an assumed name.

Francis went to the window of the hotel room and looked out, as he had done a dozen times since they arrived. He was on the eleventh floor; his room overlooking the parking lot. He wasn't even sure what he was looking for. If they were sending someone after him it certainly wouldn't be someone whose car he recognized. Still, he couldn't stop the impulse to check. His hands were sweaty, a condition which hadn't changed since he left the warm climate of Los Angeles.

"Hey, you got anything to drink here?" the hooker wanted to know.

"Yeah, sure, check the mini bar," Francis responded. He'd picked her up at the casino downstairs, drawn by her incredible legs and pretty face. She was from Belgium, which explained her accent. They chatted for a while and had several drinks. He hadn't figured her for a pro until he suggested they go back to his room and she mentioned her price. He was a bit taken aback at first. He'd actually never been with a prostitute before, but he reasoned that he was in no position to make moral judgments and invited her back to his hotel room. If this was to be his last night on earth he might as well enjoy it.

His cell phone rang. He checked the incoming number and recognized it as one of his few friends left in the world. "Talk to me," he said.

"They know where you are," the voice responded.

Francis cursed. "That's impossible. Even I don't know where I am. I just signed in."

"All I can say is that we got word ten minutes ago that the 'O'Reilly Problem'...that's what they're calling you these days...is about to be resolved. I can't talk anymore. Wherever you are, get the hell out. Go somewhere no one will suspect."

The phone went dead. Francis considered his options. It would be one thing if he'd been able to keep the money he stole from the Paichinos. That might buy him a way out of this mess, but Madoff made the whole thing disappear. He was living on his savings from an unnamed account and that wouldn't last forever.

"Trouble, baby?" the hooker asked as she sat on his couch, her long legs stretched over the side. She had poured herself a Johnny Walker Red with one ice cube. Francis couldn't remember her name was, although for some reason he thought it started with an I. Iris? Irene?

"Yeah, just a little," he answered and went to pour himself a drink as well. "I'm sorry but it looks like our night might get cut a bit short. I'll pay you for your time, of course."

The hooker frowned and shook her head. "I don't take payment for services not rendered. It's a rule I have. It's fine. The night is young and there are plenty of others downstairs looking for company. But you look incredibly stressed. Why don't you let me give you a quick shoulder massage?"

Francis smiled. "You know what? That would be really nice, actually."

He sat on the couch facing away as the hooker - Ingrid? - brought her surprisingly strong hands to his shoulders and started working on his muscles.

"You've done this before," Francis remarked.

"Once or twice."

Francis stared out at the window and turned his thoughts back to his current problem. He had family in North Carolina but he figured that would be the first place they would look. Besides, he didn't want to bring trouble down there. His mother was old and there was thought she had the beginning stages of Alzheimer's. Of course, he could always...

The cord went quickly around Francis' neck and started to squeeze. His hands reached for it but he was too late. The pressure continued. He kicked out violently, trying to escape but the strap continued digging into his skin. His mind clouded over. Eventually his hands dropped to his side and his body slumped down onto the couch, his problems permanently resolved. He was quite dead.

Isabelle Francesca Lairen removed the cord from around the victim's neck and slipped it back into her purse. She washed the glass she'd been drinking from and removed any trace of her presence from the hotel room. She was happy the job went quickly, the money she was getting paid from the Paichino's would allow her to put a down payment on the new Miata she'd been considering. She was a little sorry they didn't get to have sex before he died, but one can't have everything.

As she was leaving, her own cell phone started vibrating. She viewed the number and smiled.

"Frankie here," she answered warmly. "Nice to hear from you, Jack. How's Louisiana?"

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