

**TOWER OF  
BABEL**

**MICHAEL  
SEARS**

**SOHO  
CRIME**

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**LITTLE RICHIE WAS A** hard man to like. Though if Ted had known Richie was going to be dead in three days, maybe he would have tried a little harder.

Or maybe not. Richie Rubiano was a nasty weasel with a long list of annoying habits.

It was a warm Friday in May, the Mets were at home, three games up on .500, and the bookies were predicting a sweep. Four hours till game time. Ted Molloy was having a late lunch in the back booth at Gallagher's Pub on Grand Ave.—and anticipating a pleasant weekend at Citi Field—when Richie dropped a stack of marked-up file folders on the table. “I got you some grade A today, bro,” he said. “Check this out.”

“Nice to see you, Richie. You hungry?” Ted rescued his iced tea as the pile of folders began a slow-motion avalanche across the table.

Richie made no effort to assist in heading off this disaster. He looked at the remains of the house pad thai in front of Ted and shuddered. “How do you eat that grass?”

“I'm offering to buy you lunch.” Richie was bone thin everywhere except for his gut. He always looked both undernourished and overweight. He also had a drooping eyelid and wore a greying ponytail that looked like something you might find on the rear end of a very wet squirrel.

“No, man. I don't eat Chinese food.”

Gallagher's Pub, a short walk from Ted's apartment and a quiet place to get work done in the middle of the day, had been a faltering business when Henry Zhang bought

it four years ago. He'd made only two important changes. First, he fired all the bartenders who had been robbing Gallagher blind, installing in their place a troop of his female cousins. Then he upgraded the menu to better reflect the changing neighborhood, adding Asian, South American, and Middle Eastern dishes. The weekend dim sum brunch was a hit. And the place still made a great cheeseburger.

"How about a beer?" Ted asked.

"Well . . ." Richie twisted his face into a reluctant frown. He wanted the beer, but he mistrusted hospitality.

Lili, the twentysomething-going-on-forty day-shift bartender, was watching the talking heads on one of the two televisions over the bar. A grinning real estate developer with a glistening, almost reflective bald pate was holding forth on the local economy of Queens. From what Ted had picked up, the guy was taking credit for job creation, tax reduction, and resodding the soccer fields in the park. The cameras liked him.

Ted managed to catch Lili's eye, a not terribly difficult feat considering that the only other customer was Paulie McGirk, who occupied the last barstool against the far wall every day from opening until dinner rush, or until he passed out, whichever came first. When Henry bought the pub, Paulie had been included with the other fixtures.

She raised an eyebrow in response. Ted pointed at Richie and she nodded.

Ted turned to Richie. "What've we got?"

Richie had a penchant for committing short cons and other small-time property crimes, but Ted had kept him marginally, and legally, employed for four years. Richie was almost old enough to be Ted's father and had grown up in one of the least diverse enclaves in Queens, the United States' most ethnically and culturally diverse county. This perspective gave him a singular belief in his

innate superiority and catholic ability to understand—and hoodwink—anyone from any background. The fact that he had repeatedly failed at this—and had the police record to prove it—was testimony to his true talent: self-delusion.

In their work together, Richie did the research. Ted closed the deals. They were not partners. Neither would have allowed it. Richie because he had never learned to play well with others, Ted because he knew better. Richie looked through public documents for foreclosure auctions that resulted in “surplus money.” When, for whatever reason, an owner walked away from a property—commercial only; Ted avoided the heartbreaks of residential foreclosures—and stopped paying the mortgage or taxes or water bill, the building was eventually sold at auction. If some Trump wannabe paid more than the claimants were demanding, the resulting funds were called “surplus money.” If the original owner did not claim these funds, they went to the government and were eventually absorbed by that great maw. These kinds of opportunities were neither common nor rare. Ted made a living off them, but only because he worked at it.

His part of the job took over where Richie’s left off. Ted examined the files and attempted to locate and cut a deal with the original owners, taking a hefty finder’s fee for reuniting these hapless businessmen with the last recoverable scraps of their failed real estate empires. Sometimes it worked; more often it did not. Not everyone wanted to be found or, when found, appreciated being contacted regarding a painful and destructive phase in their lives. Ted managed to have more good years than bad by concentrating on hitting singles and doubles. There were few home runs.

The bartender arrived with a Bud Light and a chilled glass.

“Put that on my tab,” Ted said.

Richie ignored the glass and took a hefty swallow from the longneck. “She’s always trying to get me to up my game. You see that? Trying to get me to show some class.”

“Yeah, well, she’s young. She’ll get over it.”

They had met four years earlier when Ted was coming out the door of the Capital One bank near the courthouse and Richie had approached him with his sad face and a story. Ted had let him spin his whole pitch about having lost his wallet and needing help to cash two checks from his employer and how he’d gladly pay 10 percent—\$200—for assistance. It was an old con, and Richie, though glib enough, was unlikely to inspire confidence in anyone in possession of either eyes or brain.

But Ted was new to the surplus-money game and already disheartened by the amount of time he was spending on research, both online and at the courthouse. He bought the hapless con man a few beers, and by the end of the day, they had arrived at a working arrangement. A year later, when Richie was arrested for scamming senior citizens with an IRS spiel, Ted bailed him out, found him a good lawyer, and put him back to work. Ted didn’t think of it as either altruism or heroism. He didn’t want to waste time finding and training some other researcher.

“What do I owe you?” Ted asked.

“I got eleven. All winners.”

“So, that’s two seventy-five.” Ted passed him the cash and reached for the top case file. “Anything I should know about these?”

“The one in your hand. You read that and tell me it’s not solid gold.”

He flipped it open. The top page listed the property address, the defendant, the claimant, the amounts sought by claimant, and the sale price. Ted slammed it closed.

“Gimme back twenty-five,” he said. “You know I don’t hunt elephants.”

“You gotta read it first.”

“I read it. It’s a million-two. That’s all I need to know.”

There were no guarantees in his business. People who fail to appear at their own foreclosure hearings may be confused, angry, disorganized, broken, or, in some cases, just nuts. It could be a little like juggling rattlesnakes. The process itself could be devastating for the defendants, or for any number of reasons, they could be victims of their own design. Early on, Ted had made some rules to protect himself, and he observed them more religiously than he had ever followed the Ten Commandments.

One of those rules was “Thou Shalt Take a Pass on the Big Ones.” Normal people don’t leave a million dollars lying around. There’s always a story. A divorce, trouble with probate, criminal activity, people fleeing the country or disappearing into the wind. The really big ones were a waste of time. The sweet spot was fifty to a hundred thousand. In a stretch, he would go as high as a quarter million, but he had regretted it every time.

“There’s got to be an army of lawyers circling something this large, Richie. It’s a sucker bet.”

“You’re a lawyer. You could work your magic and get by ’em.”

Ted had a law degree but no license. He’d let it lapse and no longer gave much thought to it.

“It’s the property. The family owned it since the 1880s. One heir. Some lady who never married. She’s like nine-tysomething.” Richie was excited. That was never a good sign.

“You mean 1980s.”

“No, like since the Civil War. You know where they started clearing that big lot in Corona? You hear about this?”

About a mile from where they sat, a full four-block area was to be razed and cleared in preparation for the transformation of the neighborhoods surrounding Flushing Meadows Park. There would be a new on/off ramp for the Grand Central Parkway, luxury hotels with views of both the Mets' ballpark and the tennis stadium, and a combined shopping mall and mixed-use high-rise that would throw a late-afternoon shadow as far as the Nassau County line. The three-letter name of the development corporation, LBC, was chiseled into the cornerstone of dozens of projects around the borough, a brand as recognizable to Queens residents as IKEA or Con Ed. Members of the local community had been fighting this monstrosity in the courts for months. But a day did not go by without an appearance on television of the Chairman and CEO, Ronald (Ron) Reisner, smirking at their failure to stop him. Whether Reisner and his family owned the company or simply acted as if they did was a source of constant speculation in the New York press. Nevertheless, Ted was not surprised that Richie seemed to have only recently become aware of the project.

"I heard someone mention it," Ted said.

"It's a big deal," Richie assured him.

"Mr. Reisner was on the television not two minutes ago." Ted saw that Reisner had been replaced by a photo of the mayor shaking hands with a parking lot tycoon, who had recently been indicted for extortion, defrauding employees, failure to pay sales tax, and witness tampering.

Richie glanced at the set. "Nah. That ain't him."

"I'm sure you're right." Conversations with Richie often took these veering turns, and Ted had learned that the only way to keep his sanity was to allow his mind to float above the words and focus on the horizon.

"This was the whole northwest corner," Richie said,



stabbing the file folder with a finger. “This old lady owned *six* lots. She lost it all for two years’ water and taxes.”

“And interest and legal fees and—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“I’m not interested,” Ted finished.

The weasel pouted. “Okay, but if I go after it myself, will you back me?”

“Back you? You mean with cash?” Ted cut off a laugh. Richie was serious.

“If I can cut a deal.”

“Why don’t I just take the money and burn it?”

“Not to buy her out. Just enough to show her I’m for real. Say, fifty grand. Or a hundred.”

“You’re dreaming.”

“I got some ideas.”

“Really?” Ted flipped open the file again. “How do you propose to find a ninety-three-year-old woman named Barbara Miller? That’s like looking for John Smith. According to the docs, she never once appeared in court.”

“Yeah, but . . .”

“And if, by some bit of magic, you do locate this lady, and she’s not so far into dementia that she can’t understand the words you’re saying, how are you going to keep her from running to her lawyer here? What’s his name?”

Ted shuffled pages until he found the settlement page listing all of the parties involved and their representatives. The name jumped up and smacked him between the eyes. Jacqueline Clavette. He slammed the file closed.

“What?” Richie cried.

“Nothing. Look, Richie, keep the twenty-five bucks. I don’t care. But leave this alone. Can you?”

“You know this lawyer.” Richie tried to take the file.

Yes, he knew the lawyer all right. Jacqueline Clavette was married to Ted’s ex-wife.

Richie snatched the file. “We’ll talk again, and when we do, I’m gonna show you how this shit gets done.”

The talk never happened. Three days later Richie was dead.

**THE REFRIGERATOR HUMMED IMPATIENTLY.** Ted had been staring at the near-empty shelves for long minutes, imagining a carton of eggs, some cheese, butter, a red pepper or maybe a few mushrooms. He slowly closed the door on the remains of a six-pack of Stella, a near-empty container of steamed brown rice, and a carrot. If he wanted breakfast, he would have to put on pants and shoes and go find it.

It was raining lightly but enough to sway his decision. The Honduran bodega was closest. He pulled his sweatshirt up to cover his head and dashed down the street.

There was a line at the counter, and the three tables along the wall were already full. It took an agonizing fifteen minutes to get his to-go order of two foil-wrapped chorizo *baleadas* and a medium black coffee.

As he fumbled with his key at the street-level door to his building, a familiar voice called, “Molloy, my friend. He’s gone.”

Israel Ortiz was peeking out the door of his storefront office. Ted was wet, hungry, and in no mood for cryptic conversations. “Who? What the hell are you talking about?”

“The policeman.” Israel waved him in.

Mr. Ortiz, Ted’s landlord, accountant, mail drop, and sometime lawyer—he filed documents that the no-longer-licensed Ted could not—ran his law, real estate, and accountancy office out of the storefront of a two-story taxpayer. He also used the space to sell Bibles; incense; framed images of white, black, and Hispanic Jesuses and Madonnas (separate and together); and Santeria candles. His secretary and bookkeeper—a woman named Phateena whom Ted had

never seen wear anything but brightly colored caftans and flip-flops—also did palm and tarot card readings.

Ted shook the rain off his shoulders and rested one hip against Israel's desk. "A cop was looking for me? What for?"

Israel stood uncomfortably in the middle of the room, thrusting his hands into his pockets and then jerking them out again. "A detective. Big man. Are you in trouble, Mr. Molloy?"

"Did he say why he was looking for me?"

"I can't have no trouble here. You are good tenant. You pay, no noise, no complaints. But I don't want no police. I got clients."

"I understand, Israel. I have no idea why a cop—a detective—would want to talk to me. Did he leave a card? A name?"

"No. He's got your card. He said he'd call you."

Ted thought of his breakfast getting cold. "Then we'll just have to wait and see."

"But no trouble? Okay?"

**THE HEAD OFFICE OF** Molloy Partners—Gallagher's Pub being merely a satellite—was the IKEA kitchen table in Ted's second-floor apartment. Though the apartment had been advertised as a one bedroom, the kitchen, living room, and bedroom all flowed into a single space. It was all Ted could afford after his stumbling descent from Park Avenue and a brief plateau in a Lexington Avenue sky pad—which should have been a bachelor's dream but had felt more like a lonely monk's cell for the recently divorced. But now that he had enough money in the bank to get something better, he realized that he didn't need to.

He had returned to his roots, though this was a neighborhood he had spent his first twenty years trying to escape. But both he and Queens were much changed. He rarely saw a face

he knew from his youth, but he at least recognized himself on these streets.

His living space consisted of a queen-size bed with night table and matching dresser; an amateurishly constructed closet protruding from one wall that predated Ted's tenancy by a generation or two; an ancient metal two-drawer filing cabinet that served as repository for dormant deals and the few nearing resolution; an IKEA table and two chairs of which he was ridiculously proud, having put them together himself; and a television, precariously hanging on to the far wall, on which Ted watched old movies on TCM and *Law & Order* reruns on four different channels. His cave, his castle.

The phone was ringing as he came up the stairs. The landline. A minor event. Ted did most of his business on a cell phone but kept a landline because it came with the cable/Internet package. Sometimes he even used it. The number had found its way onto his business card along with the cell phone number, but as he hardly ever handed cards out, incoming calls were few.

He took a breath before answering. "Molloy Partners. Edward Molloy speaking." There were no partners, but maintaining the fiction reassured some of the customers.

"Good morning, Mr. Molloy. This is Detective Duran. NYPD. Do you have a moment for a couple of questions?"

Like all mostly honest people, Ted had a great reluctance to speak with the police on any subject. "Questions" sounded ominous.

"I was trained as a lawyer, Detective. I'm happy to assist in any way I can, but I have to ask: Am I the target of an investigation?"

"Not at this time, but if you feel a sudden urge to confess to anything, I would be glad to caution you." The cop chuckled as if they were old friends joking and sharing pleasantries.

Ted wasn't buying. "That's reassuring, but as I check my schedule, I find that I'm in meetings all week."

"My mother says I can be overly persistent."

Ted was curious. In a fit of escapist desperation, he had once gone on a shark-feeding excursion in Cancún; answering a few questions from the police couldn't be any more dangerous than that. "You were just by here. My landlord was a bit spooked."

"Five minutes," the detective said. It was both a pledge and a request.

"Five minutes," Ted agreed. "How can I help?"

"Do you know a man named Richard Rubiano?"

That was an easy one. "I do. I helped Richie out of a jam a few years back. I don't represent him, though. I'm no longer licensed. Is he in trouble?"

"How would you characterize your relationship?"

Another floater over the plate. "He does odd jobs for me from time to time." This was met with an expectant silence. Wary of swinging at a slider, Ted added, "And when he needed a lawyer, I helped him find one. Does he need one now?"

"No, sir. Mr. Rubiano will not need a lawyer."

"So are you ready to tell me what this is about?"

"Mr. Rubiano was the victim of a homicide, Mr. Molloy. He had a few business cards in his wallet. Yours was one."

A flicker of grief surprised Ted. A shooting pain that was gone even as he put a name to it. Richie was not a friend and never had been. But since his divorce, Ted's world had continued to shrink to the point that now any regularly repeated human contact had significance. He would miss the weasel.

The shock of how Richie had died took a moment longer to register.

"He was murdered?" Incredulity beat all. People in his life died by disease, rarely by accident, and never before by

murder. Ted sought words to define or explain it. “He was a not very successful con man years ago, but I can’t imagine any of his marks showing up to take revenge.”

“Would you be willing to come down and give a statement?” Detective Duran managed to make the request sound casual.

Sirens and flashing lights went off in Ted’s head. The shark was inviting him home for dinner. “Only with my lawyer present. And that would cost me money, and you would learn nothing that might be of use to you.”

“I would think you’d be more cooperative. We’re looking for the person who killed your friend.”

Ted noted the feeble attempt at inducing guilt and ignored it. Bitterness had long replaced guilt as a motivating factor in his life. But people he knew were not murdered. He felt himself being pulled in despite misgivings.

If there was any chance that Richie had stirred up some hornet’s nest by looking into the old lady’s surplus money, there was also a chance of that trouble leading back to Molloy Partners. A chance only, but Ted did not want to take that risk. He needed to know more, and if that meant trading information, he was willing.

“I have a proposal, Detective. If you’re willing to answer a few of my questions, I will try a little harder to be more open. But only if the conversation is one-on-one and on my turf.”

The cop sighed, signaling that Ted was making his difficult job more so. “Counselor, I am an overworked civil servant just trying to make a living. Cut me a break.”

“I’m trying. Listen, I’ll go you one better. Let me buy you a burger. Lunch. Tomorrow. Do you know Gallagher’s? On Grand?”