

Murphy wiped his drippy nose with a white handkerchief as he eyed the young man talking to Shaver near the store register. The guy looked like a college kid on Christmas break. Cherubic face, dressed in a cheap gray suit, needing money for a girlfriend, the next semester, or both. Probably doesn't know a thing about shoes.

The floor was already crowded with five salespeople, so why hire another? It was tough enough to make a book against Donovan and Irene. Then they transferred Crosby and Margot from Embarcadero three months ago. Murphy understood the new Union Square store was getting busier, but now he'd have to contend with a newbie gumming up the call system. And today was the Saturday sales contest. That meant six competing for the extra hundred bucks.

Every year the annual sale brought customers to the store from outside the city looking for deals on brands such as Ferragamo, Choo, and Jordan, among others. Pumps. Sandals. Loafers. Boots. No matter the style, the store stocked it. Then at Thanksgiving, they discounted what was left to make room for the next season. It was the same circus, always the same banal interactions.

*"Do you have this one my size?"*

*"What other colors does it come in?"*

*"Can you check in the back?"*

Donovan was the first call at the front of the store, where all the expensive merchandise was displayed. He'd deftly avoided the sale customers rummaging the racks and now had a shot at a regular. Murphy liked Donovan even though he cheated, but they all cheated. That was part of the game. There was an art to manipulating the system to jump someone's call. Crosby and

Margot were pros, but Irene was the best at it. No matter where her number was on the board, she always seemed to land a full-price customer.

It didn't take more than a couple of regular sales at ten percent commission to make it a good day. Add a handbag or double on the shoes, one in black and another in navy blue, at two hundred each, and you could position yourself to make your book and even win the contest. The extra hundred bucks paid in cash would make for a nice dinner at Flannagan's and a bottle of scotch he'd finish by morning. But that wasn't Murphy's biggest concern. He needed to make his draw, which he hadn't done in a month. A fact Shaver reminded him about it during the morning sales meeting.

*You're putting me in a difficult situation ... Bastard!*

"Excuse me," an elderly lady said, holding a black low-heel pump. "Could you bring me the left one? The right feels good, but my other foot is bigger."

Murphy looked at her feet and sighed. Bunions. Of all the crocks, he had to get this one on a Saturday. He reluctantly reached for the shoe, gave her a disingenuous nod, and pointed at a chair for her to sit. With his number at the bottom of the call board, he needed a sale to quell the stigma of an empty book. Hopefully, this wouldn't take long.

The stockroom was a labyrinth of shelves stuffed floor to ceiling with shoes organized by brand and size. Murphy headed for the sale wall, hoping to find the shoe quickly. Shaver was a stickler for keeping a tidy stockroom. Every morning before the store opened, they'd have a meeting then everyone would be given a section to organize. Ensure lids were on the boxes, sizes facing out, and colors not mixed—except for the sale wall. It was always a mess, and finding the matching shoe was always a challenge. Size five, Benny. Florsheim. Not many left. He scanned

the leftmost portion of the wall looking for the box, found it in the bottom row, and bent down to grab it.

*For Christ's sake!*

The box was empty. Murphy checked several adjacent boxes to see if the shoe had been put in the wrong one, but no such luck. Trudged back down the aisle with the empty box because he learned from his forty years as a shoe dog that the customer needed to see the box to believe the shoe was missing. Just as Murphy passed the workbench, he spotted a black shoe lying on its side. Picked it up and smiled when he read the insole and the size printed on the collar lining.

The lady was sitting where he'd pointed, and Murphy crouched to slip it onto her foot. He slid the shoehorn behind her calloused heel and guided the foot into the shoe.

"Oh," she exclaimed. "It's too tight. I was worried about that."

"Where's it tight?" Murphy asked, irritated.

"Across the toes," she said. "Such a shame. I really liked the shoe, and I need new pair."

"Lemme give it a stretch," he said, pulling the shoe off her foot.

"That never works," she said. "Some shoes just aren't a match."

"This is schmoo skin," Murphy said, stroking the leather. "It's designed to be shaped around—"

"I've never heard of that before," she interrupted. "What kind of animal is it?"

"A cross between a cow and a goat. They breed 'em in Nebraska."

"I was born in Nebraska."

“Gimme a minute.”

Murphy scanned the pegboard above the workbench for the correct size. Selected a small contraption with two separate wood sections shaped like the front of a shoe. The sections were attached to a threaded shaft; another wood piece was near the handle. He inserted the device into the shoe and twisted the handle multiple turns until he heard the stretching squeak of the leather. Murphy sprayed a clear solution on the shoe, gave the handle one more turn, and smacked the vamp with a hammer handle twice.

The store was bustling with customers when Murphy exited the stockroom. But the lady was not where he'd left her. He scanned the store. Irene was now in the front, and Donovan had a slew of boots scattered around a well-dressed woman and her two equally attired daughters. Crosby was at the register with a customer, and Margot was waiting behind him with another.

*Damn! The old hag snuck out. What a crock!*

Murphy snatched the empty box from the chair, stuffed the doctored shoe into it, and trudged into the stockroom. He jammed the carton into the sale wall and shuffled down a nearby aisle. Just as he turned the corner at the end, he saw Shaver talking to the kid in the breakroom; he tried to backtrack, but Shaver saw him.

“Murphy,” Shaver called.

*Dammit, dammit, dammit.*

Murphy sidled to the counter, deliberately ignoring the kid.

“This is Elliot,” Shaver said to Murphy. “I just hired him.”

“Nice to meet you,” Elliot said with his hand extended.

Murphy removed a white handkerchief from his coat pocket and blew his nose, then reached for Elliot's hand, prompting Elliot to withdraw his. Elliot looked at Shaver, who folded his arms across his chest and shook his head.

"I want you to show Elliot the ropes," Shaver said. "The stockroom, our call system protocols, and how to write a sale."

"Why me?"

"Because you're low book."

"I'm a fast learner," Elliot interjected.

"You hear that?" Murphy said in jest. "He's a smart kid. Just throw him on the floor and let him figure it out? That's how I learned back in the day. No one babysat me."

Shaver turned to Elliot and said, "Murphy'll show you the sale shoe wall and how it should be. You'll work the racks until you're up to speed, then I'll let you take calls at the front."

Elliot nodded, and Shaver walked away, giving Murphy a stern stare as he passed. Murphy stuffed the handkerchief into his coat pocket and poured himself coffee. He dumped sugar into the styrofoam cup and stirred in creamer with a wooden stick until it was the right color. A newspaper was on the counter, so Murphy opened it to the sports section and skimmed the horse race betting lines.

"Where's the sales wall?" Elliot asked.

Murphy gestured with a head jerk and continued reading.

"You gonna show me, or should I ask Mr. Shaver?"

Murphy belched. He tossed the coffee, folded the paper, and proceeded down the aisle. He turned right, left twice, and right again to mess with the kid. They continued to a long wall of shelves filled with colorful cardboard boxes.

“This is it,” Murphy said. “Left to right by size. Narrow to wide. Only the lefts are in the box. The customer tries on the right from a rack, and you fetch the left. Pretty simple.”

“What’s the difference between a seven A and a seven triple A?”

Murphy growled at the question. The kid knows nothing about shoes and sizes, let alone fitting and selling. Murphy gruffly explained that AAA was narrower than AA, B was average width, and C or W meant wide for fat feet. He could give a discourse on the shoe business and help the kid learn it, but he had better things to do: make his draw.

Elliot scanned the wall of shoes and said, “Not all of them are in the right order.”

“That’s your job,” Murphy said. “Everyone gets a wall. Shaver gave you this one. Make sure it’s right. Then come out to take a customer.”

He knew Shaver didn’t assign the sale shoe wall to the kid, but Elliot was new and probably wouldn’t figure it out for a while. Keeping him in the back would mean one less competitor on the floor.

Murphy left Elliot in the stockroom to sort through the disarray of shoes and navigated onto the sales floor. *Holy crap!* The store was busy. Donovan and Irene had customers; Crosby and Margot were doubled. Even Shaver was helping a lady at the handbag display.

*Why the hell didn’t they call him to the floor?*

A woman in a blue business suit was holding up a high-heel sandal near the racks, but Murphy ignored her and beelined to the front. A Filipino woman was browsing the Ferragamos, and no one noticed. She asked to try on a brown suede loafer in a six B. *What luck!* He hurried past the racks, grabbed the sale shoe from the businesswoman, and headed for the Ferragamo section of the stockroom.

He hoped he had the shoe in her size and felt his heart accelerate when he spotted the box in the wall. The shoe also came in smooth black leather and taupe; he had all three colors. Murphy stacked the boxes under his arm, grabbed a pair of boots, and went to the sale wall. Elliot carefully moved cartons up and down like a Zynga puzzle as though one wrong move could topple the entire wall.

“Bring the mate to the lady in blue near the back,” he said, tossing the rack shoe at Elliot. “She’s a tall skinny blonde with legs. You can’t miss her.”

When he returned to the floor, Murphy noticed Shaver staring at him. He knew Shaver didn’t like that Murphy grabbed a premium call, but he wouldn’t dare interfere because a sale was a sale, and Shaver was bonused on the store’s numbers, not his dislike of Murphy. It hadn’t always been that way between them, but Shaver was under intense pressure because Mr. Baron was giving him a second chance after the closure of the Mission store.

The Filipino lady lifted her foot, and Murphy guided the brown loafer using his left hand and a shoehorn in the right. He could tell by her reflected smile that she liked the shoe. Italian leather, hand-stitched, cushioned insoles. She walked back and forth, pausing at the numerous mirrors to admire her appearance. Murphy showed her the other two colors, and she nodded. The

woman tried the boot Murphy brought on a whim; she liked it and selected a couple of matching purses to match the shoes.

Murphy was elated because this was a big sale, over fifteen hundred, which meant one fifty in commission. He recorded the transaction in his book and wrote his sales number on the soles near the heel, a Shaver requirement. Placed the merchandise on the counter, escorted the woman to the register, and handed his ticket to a surprised Shaver.

“How was the service?” Shaver asked the woman. “Everything professional.”

“Oh, yes,” she replied.

“How would you like to pay, cash or charge?”

“My husband is buying suits across the street,” she said. “We’ll come back after lunch.”

Shaver nodded, asked if she wanted the boxes, and told her they’d have everything ready when she returned. Murphy bit his lip; he’d spent thirty minutes fetching shoes for this woman. He resisted the urge to say something snarky; instead, he forced a toothless smile and handed her his card.

Irene and Donovan whispered to each other near the racks because they suspected she was probably a crock. No husband was coming to pay for that bounty. Murphy sensed it, too, and needed the safety of the stockroom to cool his heels. When he turned to leave, he saw Elliot carrying six boxes and the long-legged blonde in blue following behind. Shaver grinned as Elliot stacked the shoes on the counter, excused himself, then returned with three more boxes and four handbags.

Murphy bristled; the damn kid stole his sale!



*He shouldn't have handed off the customer. Should've left the kid in the stockroom. Now he had a battle on his hands. No way will this kid out book him on his first day. Not happening!*

The scowl on his face evoked smirks from Crosby and Margot as he wrote his sales number on the board before escaping into the stockroom. He poured himself a cup of coffee but skipped the creamer and sugar. It was almost noon, and he hadn't booked a single sale. Murphy looked down the aisle, pulled a flask from his coat, and poured the whiskey into the cup.

"Tough break," Donovan said.

Murphy was startled, but it was Donovan, so he offered him the flask.

"Total crock," he grumbled.

Donovan shook his head, sat on a stool, and opened the newspaper.

"Might be back. Filipinos got money, ya know."

"I gave him that customer."

"Might a lost 'em both if ya didn't."

"What's with all the hiring anyway? Stores busy but not that busy."

"Ya know. City's changing. Gotta match the customers."

Murphy downed the coffee and headed for the sales floor. He'd have to grind it at the racks and hope for a few breaks. Checked the board; his number was second from the bottom. Irene was first, then Crosby, Margot, and Donovan. Elliot's wasn't on the board, but the kid rang another sale at the register. Not a big one but a sale nonetheless.

Irene snagged a regular, which enabled Crosby to take the front. Margot worked the racks and got a two-pair right under Murphy's nose. Every time he zigged, the customer zagged. Murphy moved between the sale racks asking if anyone needed help, but all he got were headshakes or requests for a different size.

"Everything's out," he barked.

Then he saw her. The elderly lady from this morning. She was seated in the same chair. Murphy debated whether to approach her or not. Might as well. But first, he'd bring the shoe he'd already stretched. When he went to the wall, it was gone.

*Son-of-a-bitch!*

He returned to the floor and saw Elliot on a knee with the black pump in his hand. The kid was stealing another sale! *What the ...* Murphy moved toward them.

"Feels better, doesn't it," Murphy called.

Elliot looked at Murphy with a quizzical expression. He motioned for the kid to join him while she walked around in the shoes.

"That's my customer," Murphy muttered.

"How's she yours?" Elliot asked without looking at him.

"I stretched that shoe for her this morning," he grumbled. "That's why it fits now."

Murphy knew how to make a shoe fit. Sometimes he'd stretch the vamp, and other times he'd pad the insole to push the foot against the heel counter. Bunions were more of a challenge because not all leathers could be manipulated around a bulge. But he knew how to do it. He'd mastered all the trade tricks and even invented a few of his own. Elliot knew none of this.

“I’ll give you the sale,” Elliot replied.

Murphy’s eyes widened. He didn’t expect the kid to acquiesce so easily. Together, they approached the woman sitting in the chair. She looked up and said, “The left feels better, but it still presses on my toe.”

Elliot thanked her, but Murphy wasn’t about to let her walk. He insisted she let them try again and took the shoes before she could refuse. He gestured for Elliot to follow him and paused at the stockroom entrance to check that she was still in the chair.

Murphy found a plier-like device at the workbench with a round metal ball on one side and a proportional ring on the other. He squeezed the handles to show Elliot how the ball and ring worked together like yin and yang. Murphy slipped the ball portion inside the shoe and pressed the plier to force the circular part onto the leather near the big toe. He crimped the handle several times until the leather bulged enough to accommodate a bunion.

“Is that really gonna work?” Elliot asked.

“Watch me,” Murphy muttered.

The elderly woman was still seated in the chair when they returned with the shoe. Murphy slipped it onto her foot and instructed her to test it out. She stood, took several steps, turned, and walked several more.

“Oh, my. This feels wonderful.”

Murphy could see Elliot was impressed by the smile of incredulity on his face. The woman wanted to wear the shoes, so Murphy slapped her old ones into the box and led her to the

register. Not a big sale, but at least now he hadn't been skunked. It would take many more to catch the kid, but Murphy was determined not to be low-book today.

Crosby and Donovan had customers, and Elliot was back grinding at the racks. At the front of the store, Margot was talking to a trio of women. Each of them had shopping bags from Neiman, Bally, and Macys which meant they were serious shoppers. Murphy noticed Irene creeping along the shadowbox displays, looking to steal a call, but she saw Murphy watching her and stopped. His number was next on the board, and he wasn't about to get jumped.

Shaver announced he was going to lunch and put Irene in charge. Every day he'd leave around one o'clock for a burger, steak fries with ranch, and a stout. Murphy knew this because they used to eat lunch together until Shaver became a manager and Murphy was just a salesperson.

Murphy entered the stockroom to fetch a couple of Bruno Maglis for a brunette he snagged before Irene could reach her. Nine AAA. He didn't have the color she wanted, but that size foot can't be picky. He grabbed a turquoise one and a couple others in mauve and red, and she bought all three pairs. The kid wouldn't have known to do it; he would've just said, "Sorry, we don't have it in your size." That's the difference between a clerk and a salesperson. Everyone starts as a clerk, but only the pros become shoe dogs.

In the breakroom, Murphy poured himself another coffee as Irene ate warmed Chile Relleno, and Donovan chomped a tuna sandwich. Murphy disliked eating lunch; he preferred a heavy breakfast and a late-night steak with scotch for dinner. Mostly the scotch.

"The new guy's doing well," Irene said.

"Sure is," Donovan agreed. "Told me he quit college to do this for a living."

“Then we should welcome him,” Murphy said.

“Whatcha thinkin’?” Donovan asked.

“Shelf-stretcher.”

“Shelf-stretcher,” Donovan chuckled. “That old trick.”

“That’s kind of mean,” Irene said.

“Get him off the floor for a while,” Murphy teased.

“Better do it before Shaver gets back,” Irene grinned.

Elliot was hanging around the racks, but no one wanted help. Murphy edged beside the kid and asked Elliot to join him in the stockroom. Crosby and Margot were standing near the front, unaware of the joke about to be played.

“We have a new shipment of sale shoes coming this afternoon,” Murphy said to Elliot.

“But the sales wall is full, and we need to make room for them.”

“There’s open space around the corner by the boots,” Elliot replied.

“Can’t do that. Shaver wants all of them in one long wall. We’ll need to get our shelf-stretcher back from the Kushins store down the street.”

“What’s a shelf-stretcher?” Elliot asked skeptically.

“Kind of like the bunion tool,” Murphy answered. “We got gadgets for every trick in the book. You should go now while the store’s not busy.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re responsible for the sales wall,” Murphy said.

“Is this for real, a shelf-stretcher?”

“Go ask Irene or Donovan. But hurry before the afternoon rush. You got a good book for your first day and a chance to win the extra hundred.”

Elliot squeezed his lips together, but Murphy could tell he was starting to believe it. They walked out together, but Murphy stayed by the racks as Elliot headed toward the front. He stopped to chat with Irene and Donovan, looked back at Murphy, and exited the store.

“Where’s the new guy going,” Crosby asked Murphy.

“Getting our shelf-stretcher back.”

“You dirty bastard,” Crosby snickered.

Murphy shrugged, then hurried to the register to make a phone call. He dialed the Kushions store, spoke to his buddy Harry, and got him to send the kid to another store after he arrived. This was the ruse. Elliot would chase the phantom device from store to store until he either figured it out or someone told him it was a hoax.

When Shaver returned, he learned from Irene that Elliot was not in the store. Shaver pretended to be upset, but Murphy could tell by the grin Shaver wasn’t furious. Perhaps he remembered when Murphy did it to him twenty years ago. And how he did it to other newbies over the years.

The afternoon surge of customers came and went. Murphy booked several full-price sales, even called one of his out-of-state regulars, a ten-quad-A from Kansas City, and convinced her to let him ship her two shoes. But Irene was on fire, and no one would catch her after she

rang a triple boot sale. But Murphy didn't care about Irene, only about beating Elliot and avoiding embarrassment.

Murphy was first-call when the store owner, Mr. Baron, walked through the door with Klohe, the buyer. Mr. Baron was a tall, silver-haired man who always wore Cole Haan loafers and spectacles to match his shirt and tie. Klohe was also impeccably dressed in high-heeled Jordans, tight designer jeans, and a diaphanous button-down blouse with a white camisole underneath.

The two execs usually visited the chain's five stores once a quarter, but since this location was new and the showcase, they'd come every month since it opened a year ago. Murphy could tell by the grimaced look Mr. Baron gave that he was displeased that Murphy was the first salesperson to greet him. Irene and Donovan followed and were joined by Crosby and Margot until Shaver intervened and led Mr. Baron and Klohe to the front window display.

A middle-aged woman entered the store carrying a Givenchy shoulder bag with a Yorkie's head nosing above the rim. Then another Yorkie's head popped with yellow ribboned pigtails. Murphy wanted to escape to the stockroom, but Mr. Baron was watching him with the customer.

"I want to try some shoes," she said. "My husband's next door meeting with a business partner, so I have time to kill."

*Jesus Christ. Another crock!*

He sat her in a chair, pretended to measure her feet, and then asked her size when Mr. Baron wasn't paying attention. He learned long ago that women knew their size and refused to be

told what the scale measured. Arguing with a woman about her size was akin to asking a question she'd already answered or thought she answered.

The woman pointed at two Nina sandals, and Murphy shuffled away. He was scanning the wall behind the register when he overheard Mr. Baron and Shaver talking.

"When are you pulling the trigger?" Mr. Baron asked.

"He's been with you twenty years," Shaver said.

"That's a long time," Mr. Baron said. "Longer than my first wife."

*Holy crap!*

Murphy had worked for Mr. Baron since the first store opened in Walnut Creek, then moved to Embarcadero, which he managed for ten years. Spent a few years at Northridge before transferring to the Union Square store after Martha passed. There was no reason to keep the house. The kids were gone, and the yard was more than he could handle. An apartment in the city seemed reasonable until he retired to Florida in a few years.

He exited the stockroom, set the boxes on the floor, and fastened the brown open-toe sandal onto her manicured feet. She stood, petted the Yorkies, and walked to a long mirror. Murphy attempted to show her a handbag, but the dogs yelped, and she lost interest. When Murphy turned around, he saw Elliot storm into the store. The kid's face was red, but not from embarrassment. He was pissed. He blew past Klohe and went straight for Murphy.

"Do you know how many stores I went to?" Elliot growled.

"Take it easy," Murphy said. "It was just a joke. Nothing personal."



Elliot's eyes were ablaze with contempt; his fists clenched. Murphy was worried the kid might take a swing at him, which wouldn't be good for either of them with Mr. Baron present. But he didn't know how to de-escalate the situation and didn't want to lose the customer.

"Elliot," Shaver called, waving him to the register.

Elliot glanced at Shaver, glared back at Murphy, and proceeded to the register. The kid was hyped from adrenaline and too on edge to make a good impression, Murphy hoped. Mr. Baron doesn't like rough; he prefers smooth. The difference between a good scotch and one that burns the throat.

The dog purse lady asked to try the second pair, and Murphy obliged. It was mid-afternoon and only three more hours until the store closed. He followed her to the mirror and complimented how the shoe made her legs look longer; he needed to make every call count, and appealing to vanity was the best strategy. The word *longer* was better than *skinny* because the latter might make her think Murphy thinks she's fat. A blunder he'd made numerous times in his career, along with greeting women as *girls* or *gals*.

Selling women's shoes was more challenging than men's because women were more complicated. Some required finesse or flattery, while others dominance or submission. There were as many types and styles of women as there were shoes. Stilletos. Slingbacks, Peep Toes. Platforms. Ankle Straps, T Straps, Mary Janes; or Kitten Heels, D'Orsays, Wedges. And then there were the colors. Men's shoes were limited to simple dyes: blacks, browns, burgundies, tans, and grays. But women were rainbows from fuchsia to gold, silver, mauve, taupe, and countless shades of whites, grays, reds, greens, and blues.

Laughter from the register distracted Murphy as the lady pranced around the store with her purse dogs. Mr. Baron seemed to be enjoying the moment with Elliot, which annoyed Murphy because Mr. Baron only liked new. New shoes, new suits, new stores, new employees. There was a time he enjoyed Murphy's company when he only had one store. They'd share a drink and talk about sports. But that changed when business took off, and he added more stores.

"Thank you," the lady called to Murphy. "My husband's done. Time for a glass of wine."

The slight didn't surprise Murphy—complete narcissism. Absolutely, no regard for his time. He hoped the dogs would annoy the bar patrons, and they'd be asked to leave. Cosmic justice, even if there wasn't such a thing.

He snatched the boxes and trudged into the stockroom. Instead of the breakroom, he crept along a narrow aisle devoid of shelves to where an old furnace used to sit. Now it was just an empty space with disconnected pipes and ducting stuffed with insulation. He pulled a metal flask from his coat and took a swig. It tasted better without the coffee. Thought about smoking a cigar, but the smell would be too strong, and with Mr. Baron in the store, well, not a good idea considering.

After a few more mouthfuls, Murphy made his way toward the breakroom. He expected to find Donovan there because the last few hours were usually slow as shoppers headed for the restaurants, parking garages, or transit stations. But Donovan wasn't in the breakroom to share a sip. Then Murphy heard heavy footsteps pounding down the aisle and put the flask away just as Shaver rounded the corner.

"What are you doing back here?" he shouted. "Get out on the floor. We're slammed!"

A rush of customers could happen at any time, with no rhyme or reason, like a sudden storm or a surprise diagnosis, and this was indeed a rush. Donovan was busy with a full-price Bruno Magli customer near the front, and Irene worked a double boot sale across from him. Crosby had another boot customer, while Margot and Elliot were tripled and quadrupled at the racks. Even Mr. Baron and Klohe were helping to ring and bag sales at the register.

Murphy attempted to get to the front of the store but was intercepted by two women wanting the mates to the shoes in their impatient hands. He hesitated, but this was no time to be picky; he needed sales and hurried into the stockroom. It was customer after customer for almost two hours. Murphy lost count of how much he booked during the rush but knew he'd had a good run, a mix of full-price, sales shoes and a couple of purses. But so had everyone else, including the kid.

It was only a few minutes before the store would close. Mr. Baron and Klohe departed for dinner, and Shaver was at the register tallying the day's receipts. Murphy didn't care about the contest; his only concern was beating the kid. He wished the store had been busier when Elliot was chasing the phony shelf-stretcher and that he'd landed more sales, but that was how it sometimes goes. Same with the horses; same with life.

Donovan waited at the door for Shaver's signal to lock it. Crosby, Margot, and Irene moved between the displays, repositioning shoes and replacing missing ones that had been sold. Murphy approached Elliot, who was at the back of the store, picking shoes off the floor and chairs and tidying the racks.

"Sorry about the prank," Murphy said. "Let me buy you a drink."

Shaver shouted for Donovan to lock the doors and called Irene to the register. He announced she'd won the contest and handed her a hundred-dollar bill; everyone applauded out of respect, including Murphy. Then Shaver called Murphy over, which caught him by surprise.

"The customer called about the shoes," Shaver said.

"What shoes?" Murphy asked.

"The Filipino lady."

Murphy smiled, took out his handkerchief, and blew his nose.

"Problem is she won't be in until Monday."

"Good way to start the new week," Murphy said. But he could see from Shaver's sorrowful eyes that it wasn't.

"I hate for it to end this way, but you know how it is."

Murphy stuffed the handkerchief into his pocket, took out the flask, and took a long drink. He offered it to Shaver, who shook his head and returned to organizing the bank deposit. Murphy turned to leave, then stopped.

"How did the kid do?" Murphy asked.

"You really want to know?"

Murphy nodded, then shook his head. Donovan waited for him at the door; he put his arm on his back, and they walked out together. The sky was darkening, and the city lights were glowing. He heard Elliot's voice behind them as they walked toward Flannagan's.

"Wait up. You owe me a drink."