

## Unlicensed

He had paused the video after the scene with the severed hand. Perhaps Koreans had a greater appetite for extreme and nonstop violence than he did. Now the DVD had traveled with him in its red envelope to Dallas, Seattle and finally L.A. Tonight he'd be home and Sarah wouldn't allow it in the house, so he'd drop it in a mailbox at the airport.

Except it was gone. There was no sign of the envelope, which he remembered leaving under his wallet on the hotel nightstand, as he hastily packed and went through his pre-departure routine. Once he had zipped up the roller bag and snapped shut his briefcase and placed them by the door, he allowed himself two minutes to grope in the couch cushions and inspect beneath the bed. No luck.

In the cab, he wondered what Netflix does if you lose a disc. Surely they go missing in the mail from time to time. That's what he'd tell them. He mailed it, and the post office lost it. But to say that, he'd need to know it didn't arrive. He could just not report it, but then they wouldn't send the next disc in his queue. No, he would have to come clean. Or, maybe the hotel staff would find the envelope and mail it and he would have nothing to worry about. Yes. That would be the working assumption.

As usual, he'd tried to do too much before leaving and cut it too close. Now Century Boulevard was backed up to the 405. The TSA gods would have to be in a good mood for him to make his flight. But when he reached his terminal, the security area was a disaster zone. Two of the full-body scanners were out of service and even the Pre line extended to the bottom of the escalator.

He got in line and craned his neck to see what lay ahead. The female agent checking ID had the face and posture of a porpoise balancing on a stool. She studied each document as if she'd never seen a passport or driver's license or boarding pass in her life. No doubt she was doing this to keep the crowd from congregating around the machines, but his chances were diminishing by the minute.

The plastic window in his wallet was too tight and he always had to struggle to get his license out without dumping his credit cards on the floor. But this time, when he opened his wallet, the license was missing. Instead of him staring back at himself, he saw the insurance card he kept behind it. He checked the many interior slots and pockets. The license was nowhere to be found.

He extracted his phone and punched the numbers superimposed on seven-month-old Darby's adorable face. "I've managed to lose my driver's license," he began when his wife answered. "I'm going to miss the plane."

"Think about where you might have left it," Sarah offered in that even, practical tone that always exasperated him. "Rental car counter? The gym? And surely there are other ways you can prove who you are who you say you are."

"I'm out of time. I'll rebook for the same flight tomorrow. Can you overnight my passport to my hotel?" Already he was stepping out of line.

"All right," she sighed. "Darby, Daddy's not going to be able to take you to the park this afternoon," she added in a muffled tone since she was talking to the kid. "Roger, put us on FaceTime."

The fuzzy head of his son appeared. The boy's chin was shiny with goo. "Hi Darby, it's Daddy. Hello from the City of the Angels." The boy looked confused. "Looks like you've been eating. What's for breakfast?"

"Holy woly. Wa doo."

He hadn't turned in the hotel card key and checkout wasn't until noon, so he let himself back into his room. Everything was as he had left it. He thought about doing another search for the Netflix envelope. If he found it that would mean he was simply having a run of bad luck. If not.... What were the chances, and what could be the motivation, for someone to break into his room while he was sleeping and take only those two things, the DVD and the driver's license, leaving his money and his credit cards intact? It was too weird to think about.

He called the desk to let them know he'd be keeping the room another night. Not a problem. Then he unpacked his bag, arranging everything as it had been the night before, and opened the curtains. The room was suffused with a grainy mid-morning light. How often do you get the gift of an extra day in your life? Because that's what this was. Absolutely nothing would be changed by coming home a day later. He'd miss a debriefing meeting that was always a total time sink. He'd take the kid to the park tomorrow; Darby wouldn't know the difference.

Now, Southern California lay before him, flat and mysterious and beckoning. There was a car rental counter in the lobby. He could visit the La Brea Tar Pits and see the replicas of mastodons and saber tooth tigers, slowly sinking into the muck. He could stroll the County Museum and surprise his wife and kid with gifts from the museum store. Or he could just stay in the room and watch a porno. As a first step, he decided to go downstairs and eat lunch at the bar.

The hotel was adjacent to a high-end shopping mall, and the restaurant straddled the two spaces. It was barbell shaped with a sort of food court opening on the mall, a much nicer dining area (with the same menu at higher prices) inside the hotel, and a long counter making up the bar that connected them. The food was quite good for hotel fare, and he usually ate at the bar because it was quicker.

He ordered a burger and a beer, then revised it to an ice tea. Too early in the day, and he didn't want to close off any options. He munched the burger and watched the business news on the television behind the bar.

“So what are we celebrating?”

He swiveled his stool and saw that a woman two places down had turned to face him. She was a redhead with even features, clear skin and a firm, gym-toned body. What was wrong with him that he didn't notice her when he first sat down?

He raised his glass of ice tea. “I missed my flight. Cheers.”

She moved to the seat next to him and clicked his glass with her Bloody Mary. “Here's to me crushing my sales quota in a single call. The poor guy didn't have a chance.” She had a gurgly, enthusiastic voice. “I grabbed the good father by the rosary beads, so to speak, and didn't let go till he signed.”

“What is it you sell?”

“Church supplies. You'd be amazed at the quantity of hymnals, collection envelopes and communion crackers the average diocese goes through. The long-term contract is the Holy Grail. For the next five years, if my padre needs a new Catechism he's getting it from me. How about you? What do you do?”

“I’m a sales engineer for Citron.”

“I didn’t realize that sales needed... engineering.” She said the last word with a lilt and a sexy flip of her thick healthy hair.

“I’m the guy who knows how the product operates, as opposed to the sales team. They bring me in to talk with the techs while they’re taking the boss out to lunch. Then after the sale I come back for an install check. A few functions are factory-set below capacity. I flip some levers and, just like that, performance improves. The customer is very happy.”

“You walk on water, in other words.”

“I guess you could say I do.” It had been a long time since Sarah showed this much interest in his work. He observed his companion was wearing a wedding ring, as was he. This could be a victimless fling, on a day that didn’t exist. He had never seen his fortunes line up so perfectly, and if he didn’t jump at the opportunity he would likely never get another. “Are you staying in the hotel?” he asked, his heart in his throat.

“No, my meeting was in one of the conference rooms. You?”

“Right upstairs.”

She leaned forward and put a single finger on the back of his hand. Her touch was electric. “My flight is not until late afternoon. I was wondering how I could find a place for a little nap. Any ideas?”

Oh, god, this was really happening. He realized he needed to pee. “Can you give me a minute?”

Due to security concerns about traffic from the mall, you couldn’t just go to the restroom. You had to ask for a token from the bartender and insert it to open the door. But the previous

occupant left the door ajar and he was in a major hurry, so he went right in. The door shut behind him with an efficient, electronically assisted click.

He unzipped his pants, tamed his mild erection and leaned forward so he would hit the bowl instead spraying all over the rim. When he was done he wiped off his penis with a paper towel, then squirted soap on a second towel, wetted it and gave his privates a mini-bath for good measure. Because of the early flight, he hadn't showered this morning. Perhaps they would take a shower together. Before? After? Or both?

He looked at himself in the mirror. He wished he had more hair. But he did the best with what he had. And she had chosen him, hadn't she? He kissed his finger then touched it to his image in the mirror, for luck, and turned the handle to open the door.

The handle wouldn't budge. The door was locked tight. Maybe the special token had to be in the slot for you to get out, as well as in. What if he was stuck in here until somebody else needed to use the bathroom? He pounded on the door. It was thick and the bar was noisy and he doubted anyone would hear him. He knew you could somehow open a door with a credit card and he took one out of his wallet, but he couldn't even fit it into the crack between the door and the jamb. This was one ridiculously overbuilt restroom door.

What were the seven stages of grieving, or was it ten? There was certainly denial, and anger, and bargaining, and resignation at the end and he went through all of them in the next fifteen minutes. At last the door swung open, revealing a surprised guy with facial tattoos.

"Sorry," the guy growled, "I didn't know anyone was in there."

She was gone, of course. He scanned the restaurant, pacing back and forth, and saw no sign of her. The women's restroom door opened and someone else came out, eliminating that possibility. The perfect illicit fuck, and he'd blown it.

Only now did he realize the atmosphere in the bar had changed completely. Everybody was watching the row of television screens, including diners from the tables who'd come to stand behind the seated patrons in the stools. The televisions were all tuned to the same station, which displayed the logo of the airline he'd been booked on next to a talking head. Then his flight number came up with a scrolling title: "147 passengers. 8 crew members. All presumed dead."

He staggered into his room, pulled shut the curtains, turned on the television and sat on the end of the bed. The story unfolded rapidly and horribly. Terrorists had taken over the plane. One of them used his cell phone to call a television station with a message of jihad. The plane went down in the Mojave Desert. Drivers on the nearby Interstate saw the fireball as it hit the ground. Emergency teams were at the wreckage in minutes and it was quickly determined there were no survivors.

After the key information had cycled repeatedly, the newscaster announced the station would now play the full message from the terrorist. Roger muted the television and called his home. Sarah answered on the first ring.

"Sarah? I'm all right. I wasn't on the plane."

"Oh god. Thank god, Roger, thank god."

"I wanted you to know I didn't get lucky and make the flight."

"Get lucky? Oh god, oh god." She began to sob and he joined her. They cried together, over the phone, for ten minutes. Finally she caught her breath. "I should go. Darby will be getting up from his nap."

“Okay. I’ll call you later. I love you.” He waited for her to respond, and realized she’d already hung up the phone. He crawled under the covers and resumed sobbing, and after a while he fell asleep.

He awoke to the sound of someone breaking into his room. He heard the metallic shush-shush of a card key, followed by a hiss as the latch retracted. A bellman entered the room, pushing an empty luggage cart.

“Excuse me,” Roger called, “what the fuck are you doing in my room?”

The bellman was startled. He turned on the light and backed against the wall next to the door. “Mister Wilcox. I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“It’s my fucking room. Who else would you expect to find in it?”

“I’m terribly sorry, sir. I’ll leave at once.” His hand was already on the door.

“No you don’t. Not until you tell me what is going on here.”

The bellman took a deep breath and continued. “We received a call from the Century Division of the L.A.P.D. that Mr. Roger Wilcox, staying at this hotel, had been arrested and jailed for brawling. I was instructed to put your things into storage, as a courtesy.”

A cracked architect’s plaque was affixed to the glass bricks next to the police station entrance. Someone had once been proud of this building, but the current inhabitants couldn’t care less. Inside, the stainless steel columns were plastered with law enforcement posters and the floor smelled of disinfectant.

A thick glass security wall spanned the lobby. Behind it, men and women in uniform worked at desks or wandered the room, like animals in a zoo uninterested in the fact they were



being watched. Roger stepped up to a microphone mounted at shoulder height in the wall. He waited several minutes until an officer approached him. “Yes?”

“I want to see a prisoner. Roger Wilcox.”

Rather than acknowledge him, the officer picked through piles of papers and found the arrest record. “Your name?”

“Roger Wilcox. And I realize that sounds ridiculous.”

The police officer stared at him with hostility. “Well, what a coincidence. My name is Roger Wilcox too.”

“This guy stole my driver’s license. He is pretending to be me. If you look at his license, you will see my face on it.”

“Can you show me some ID?”

“I just told you, he stole my license. Here. Credit cards, library card, Rapid Transit pass, all say Roger Wilcox.”

The cop took a long time to inspect his wallet, and finally handed it back along with a large Ziploc bag. “I am going to grant you a provisional. Empty the contents of your pockets into this bag, and your belt as well. You will also have to consent to a pat down before entering the cell block.”

Roger started filling the bag, on which JOHN DOE was written in marker. Somewhere behind the glass wall, a dog barked.

The visiting room had more of the thick security glass, punctuated at regular intervals by microphones. Here the microphones were at belly level, fronting a low counter and kindergarten-

scale chairs. Maybe the arrangement was supposed to demean and intimidate the visitors, or maybe it was a contractor's mistake that wasn't worth fixing.

A lone guard stood in the corner. He indicated a particular chair where Roger stooped to sit. After a minute, the prisoner entered through a hidden door on the other side of the glass. He wore an orange jail jumpsuit but otherwise there was no indication he was freedom-impaired. He was not shackled and had a casual gait, like an employee in an auto parts store coming forward to assist a customer.

The guy sat down in a chair opposite him, on the other side of the glass. There was a rough resemblance except that the prisoner had more hair and a leaner face, and Roger realized with a shock that he looked like himself at the time his driver's license picture was taken.

The other man gazed at him in a familiar way. "How goes it, Roger?" His voice was muffled and distorted by the two-way microphone.

"Why did you take my driver's license?"

"Because I am your guardian angel. Woo-WOO-woo." He made a supernatural sound like in a low budget movie about outer space. "No, that kind of angel. The real kind. We are here on earth. You could touch me if weren't for the glass."

"You are going to have to do better than that."

"I saved you from getting on the plane, didn't I?"

"That's not proof. You saw my boarding pass when you took the license. I know you're scamming me but I can't figure out how. Why did you take my Netflix DVD?"

"I didn't approve of you watching *Oldboy*. Too bloody. What about that skank you almost went to bed with? She has genital herpes, you know. Riddled with it. Trust me, I am your guardian angel and I am going to watch out for you from now on."

The door to the police station lobby opened behind him. “John Doe,” called an authoritative voice.

“He means you,” the prisoner explained as a heavy hand came down on Roger’s shoulder.

“Our drug dog found illegal substances in the materials you checked in,” said the police officer behind him. “You are under arrest for cannabis possession.”

Of course, he was placed in the same cell as the imposter Roger Wilcox, guardian angel, or whoever or whatever he was. The other man sat on the bed and wrapped his arms around his knees, as if enjoying a conversation at a sleepover. “That was an unfortunate turn of events.”

“I went to a cannabis shop in Seattle out of curiosity. Completely forgot I had the stuff. If you were really my guardian angel, seems like you could make it disappear.”

“That would be magic. I don’t do magic.” The other man rubbed a red spot on the side of his jaw. “This is starting to hurt. A lot.”

“I don’t appreciate your pretending to be me and getting in a fight and getting arrested.”

“You know the story of Dorian Grey? That’s me. I’m like his portrait, taking all the hard knocks so you don’t have to. The pressure got to me and I punched a couple of guys. To make matters worse, it was inside a church.”

“So now I’m going to have a criminal record.”

“No you won’t. They’ll drop the charges. I guarantee it. I have friends in high places. You’ll be out of here before you know it. Now lie down and relax. I’ve arranged for you to get some sleep.”

He woke to find himself the sole occupant of the cell. Even though there was nothing but artificial light, he sensed it was morning. A guard stood outside the cell door. “Roger Wilcox,” he announced. “You’re free to go.”

Sarah waited for him in the anteroom of the police station, where he joined her after his possessions (sans marijuana) were returned. She looked like she had been crying ever since they hung up the phone the previous afternoon. Her face was red and puffy, yet she was as beautiful as he had ever seen her, as lovely as the day they conceived Darby when she had rosy pink skin like a ripe peach.

“Here’s your passport.” She handed it to him. “I also paid your bail.”

“Jesus Christ, you didn’t have to deliver it in person. Especially now with the terrorists.” He moved toward her, but she stepped back. “Where’s Darby?”

“Staying with his Ooma till I get home. Roger, I want a divorce.”

“You want what?”

“It took this terrible thing for me to realize I don’t love you and don’t want to be with you any more. I came here because I wanted to tell you face to face. I filed the papers before I got on the red-eye. You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.”

“Sarah, what the fuck!”

“Goodbye, Roger.” She turned and headed for the door, outside which the sun was about to peek over the horizon. She was wearing his favorite jeans in which her ass drooped every so slightly since motherhood. He watched his favorite part of her recede thinking it was the last time he would ever see it. When she had left the building and turned a corner, he went out the door himself.

The guardian angel stepped out from behind a century plant. “How’d I do?”

“Jesus Christ. If you’re a guardian angel I’d rather take my chances with the devil.”

The angel winced. “Low blow. Your pediatrician is boning her, by the way. Now that you’re divorcing, you’ll never have to talk about it. Isn’t that a blessing? Here’s your driver’s license.”

“If you’re waiting for me to thank you, don’t hold your breath.”

“You’ll be getting a survey. There are no wrong answers, so feel free to be totally honest.”

The sun broke over the skyline, shining directly into his face, and Roger was momentarily blinded. When his eyes adjusted, he was alone.