

I was in good shape after my last work. The money was not what I had hoped for, but it was within the range I had expected. As they say: plans are worthless, but planning is everything. In this case, once the sale went through and I lost ten percent here, ten percent there, ten percent to another person who didn't know anything, the bank account of a fictional person grew by enough to start reaching into the theoretical ranges of retirement: not quite there yet, but close enough that it would be an option if I were willing to accept it. I could live on it, for the rest of my days, but it wouldn't be comfortable. It was still a good foundation to build on, and in those days, I still thought in terms of building.

I was in good shape in other ways, as well: Nico at the bar knew my name, or the name I'd given him, and he had a mojito ready for me when I came in as the sun set. My contacts in the police were asking me if I knew anything about a Franz Talber—the name I'd used in the job—which meant they weren't any closer to the truth than I wanted. So some rich art patron bought a painting he couldn't buy on the market; it hadn't been for sale, and now it was his, for what that was worth. He got what he wanted, I got what I wanted, and if anyone ever did manage to track me down, no other names would come out. I knew enough to know my business.

When I came down into the club that first evening Nico had a mojito ready for me, and I gave him the tip he had come to expect—enough to remember, not enough to be memorable—and I took my place a table near the beach front. My normal table had been taken up by a couple who seemed to want nothing other than to stare into each other's eyes, and I let them be; it is a good thing to be young and in love.

I had barely sipped my drink when a man—Angelo, as he later called himself—sat in the seat next to me.

"You are not easy to find," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm in the phone book. I am under 'Rare Book Importers,' and you can find me by name. Are you looking for a rare book?"

Angelo stared at me for a moment, and then broke into a toothy laugh. "As it is, I am in fact attempting to import a rare book, which the seller may not wish to part with. Salvatore recommended you to me. He said you were the best he knows of in your trade."

"I don't know anyone named Salvatore. If you'd like to discuss importing fees, I can be reached at my office." I handed him a business card with the name of my current cover.

"Here's mine," he said, handing me a scrap of newspaper with an email address written on it. I looked at it, committed it to memory, and then put it in my pocket for later burning while willing my irritation away. The man wasn't even trying. Of course, the business types never really know much about tradecraft. I pretended ignorance until he finally got the hint and bought a drink at the bar before walking away.

Once Angelo left, I sipped my drink again and looked at the young couple. The pretty young thing had placed her purse on the edge of her table with a cell phone visible, and an even younger man two tables away was eyeing it, obviously working up the never to grab it. I sighed internally. *Amateurs.*

I put my mojito down, no longer having a taste for it, stood, and made my way out the door, passing by the young hoodlum in training. I paused next to him, as if suddenly remembering something, and then said in a low voice to him: "If you touch that young woman's purse, I'll cut your balls off and feed them to the sharks."

He jumped as if shocked by an electric current. "I don't know what the fuck you're—"

"You're a goddamned fool who doesn't know what the fuck he's doing. Get the fuck out of here before you get hurt. And if you really want to find out, you can try pulling that knife you have in your pocket and see what the inside of an ambulance looks like."

I am a small man, but I can be menacing when I choose. The young hood wilted. "Easy, man, easy," he said, "I'm not doing nothin'. I'm leaving."

“You’re right,” I said, still softly enough that my voice didn’t carry. “You don’t do a fucking thing without planning. Now get the fuck out of here and think about what you did wrong.”

“Is there a problem?” Nico asked, at my elbow.

“No, Nico, no problems at all. This young man is ready to leave, and I am going to cover his bill.”

The kid stood up and edged away from us before turning and walking away. He looked a strange combination of sullen, confused, and frightened, but it got him out of the beer garden. I placed a bill on his table, enough to cover the single beer I’d seen him buy, with a tip for Nico as well.

“You’re very generous,” Nico said, perhaps not intending it in the way I chose to understand it. The kid was going to make a mistake: a snatch-and-run in public with watchers all around. You can’t make mistakes. Maybe now, he’d think about what he was doing, and learn to do things the right way.

“No, Nico,” I said, with a sigh. It was a shame; I’d brought enough notice to myself that I’d have to find a new bar, but maybe it was time to move on, anyway. “I’m just an observer.”