

# ***THE SMACK***

ALSO BY RICHARD LANGE

Sweet Nothing

Angel Baby

This Wicked World

Dead Boys

# *THE SMACK*

RICHARD  
**LANGE**



MULHOLLAND  
BOOKS

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HODDER

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Mulholland Books  
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 79004 7  
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 79005 4

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

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*For Kim Turner:*

*I've so many things to tell you,  
or, rather, only one,  
but that one huge as the ocean,  
as deep and infinite as the sea.*

—*La Bohème*, Act IV

*Here's a dollar, mama  
Made it in the rain  
Here's a dollar, mama  
Made it in the rain  
It's a hard old dollar  
Made it just the same*

—Mance Lipscomb, “Rocks and Gravel  
Makes a Solid Road”

# ***THE SMACK***

# 1

ROWAN PETTY CONSIDERED HIS OPTIONS. HE COULD WATCH the Packer game in his room or downstairs in one of the hotel's bars. The casino even had a small, somnolent sports book where they'd be showing it on five TVs. Today was Thanksgiving, though, so he felt like a change of scenery. He was going a little stir-crazy after spending the past week holed up in a mini suite, working a phone while staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at what was left of the Reno strip and the snow-dusted hills beyond. It'd be nice to take a walk and eat somewhere besides the hotel's coffee shop.

"Mrs. Carson? How are you today? Good, good. Great to hear. My name's Bill Miller, and I'm vice president of the growth and income division of Golden Triangle Mining Company. I believe you spoke with my associate Mr. Bludsoe yesterday. You did? Wonderful. Now, Mr. Bludsoe indicated that you were interested in more information about the excit-



ing full-partnership shares we're currently offering, and if you have two minutes, I can tell you all about them. Great! Here's the deal: our engineers recently discovered a massive deposit of high-grade ore in one of our mines in Peru, and, as a result, we're giving a select group of investors a limited-time opportunity to join one of the fastest-growing and most successful mining ventures in the world. How's that sound?"

It was all bullshit, of course. There was no mother lode, no mine, nothing but a slick website and some expensive stationery. The bottom rung of the scam was a crew of homeless meth heads and albies in Miami who cold-called hundreds of numbers a day in search of rubes gullible enough or lonely enough to sit through the initial pitch. The names of these suckers were passed on to Petty, whose job it was to reel them in, touting a 25 percent tax-free return on any investment while at the same time trying to extract as much personal information as possible: bank accounts, credit cards, Social Security numbers. Anyone still on the hook after this he kicked up to Avi, who closed the deals and sent Petty 10 percent of whatever he took off the marks.

Petty wasn't happy about being so low on the totem pole. In fact it was downright humiliating, especially since it was he who'd shown Avi the ropes on a setup exactly like this one, back when the dude was still peddling steaks door-to-door and worrying about his next pimple. Petty was twenty-five then, living in New Jersey. He'd been getting by on his wits since he was fifteen and was bringing in enough from various schemes to give his wife and little girl everything they needed along with some of the extravagances that separated man from beast.

A friend of a friend brought Avi in one day and asked Petty to help the kid out. Petty talked to Avi, and he seemed to be with it, so he took him under his wing, taught him what was

what, and let him wet his beak on a silver scam he was running at the time. Good karma, he figured.

Flash-forward to now, fifteen years later. Petty gets hung up in Sacramento, working a real estate hustle that busts. He heads to Reno to try to recoup his losses at the poker tables, but his car breaks down as he hits the city limits—a thousand bucks, the mechanic says, to get it running again. So a rough patch. He scrolls through his contacts, sees Avi's name, and decides to give him a call to see what sort of action he's got going and to check if there might be room for him. And what does the punk say? "You can man a phone, tell the tale, but that's the best I can do."

Telling the tale? The same goddamn job Petty had given him when he took him on way back when? A slap in the face, but at the same time, Petty understood. The law of the jungle was the law of the jungle: nobody gives a fuck about a loser. He punched another number into the phone, cleared his throat, and launched into his spiel again.

"Mrs. Fedor? Happy Thanksgiving. How are you this afternoon?"

He barely made it through his introduction before Mr. Fedor got on the line and told him he must be a real asshole, trying to pull something like this on a holiday. Petty cut the guy off mid-rant and moved on to the next number on his list. Before he could enter it, his personal phone—not the burner he was using to do business with—rang.

The call was from Don O'Keefe, Dandy Don, who'd been a friend of Petty's father. The last Petty heard, Don had dropped way down in class after doing some time. Petty thought about letting the call go to voice mail, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"Hello?" he said.

“Rowan?”

“Don.”

“I hear you’re in Reno.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And guess what? I am, too. I live here now.”

“Huh.”

Don picked up on Petty’s caginess. “Okay, okay,” he said. “You want to know who’s been talking. It’s like this: I called Avi about a line I have on something, and he said he had all he could handle right now, but you might be interested.”

Petty got up off the bed and went to the window. A heavy, gray afternoon was growing grayer, and down below, on the wet sidewalk, a solitary figure, hunched against the cold, marched to his fate with grim purposefulness. Petty touched a finger to the glass and stared at the print it left behind. Avi didn’t do favors, so siccing Don on him had to be a joke. Petty couldn’t hang up on the old man, however. After his dad ran off, Don kept an eye on Rowan and his mom, slipping them a hundred bucks now and then, dropping off groceries, and making sure the gas and electricity got paid. Petty owed him a modicum of respect for that, so he played along.

“My plate’s full, too,” he said. “But I can spare a minute.”

“Let’s meet somewhere.”

“Can’t you tell me about it over the phone?”

“It’ll be better in person. I’ll buy you a drink and lay it all out.”

The barely concealed desperation in Don’s voice both saddened and repulsed Petty.

“Today?” he said.

“Why not?” Don said. “I’m staying with my daughter, and I could use a break from her kids. They scream everything they say. Is that some new thing off TV?”

“I don’t know,” Petty said.

“Anyway, we’re eating at seven, so how about four thirty?”

Petty was staying at the Sands Regency Casino Hotel. It sat two blocks west of Virginia Street, where Reno’s other downtown casinos were clustered. With rates half that of the places on Virginia, the Sands appealed to retirees, traveling salesmen, penny-slot addicts, and other low rollers who appreciated its clean if slightly worn rooms and the homey, unfussy disposition of its staff. The casino catered to a local crowd, beckoning them with cheap drinks and five-dollar blackjack dealt on faded felts. Dining options included a 1950s-themed coffee shop serving twenty-four-hour breakfast specials, a piss-elegant “Italian steakhouse,” and a \$10.99 “Carolina Seafood Buffet” on Fridays.

Petty had flopped at worse places—he’d been jumping from cheap hotel to cheap hotel ever since the bank had foreclosed on his Phoenix condo six months ago—but something about being stranded at the Sands at this particular moment in time weighed heavily on him, and he found himself slinking around the place with the humiliated air of deposed royalty. He’d recently turned forty, and this fact caromed inside his head when he stared at the cigarette burn on his room’s garish polyester bedspread, ate a dollar hot dog for dinner, washed his underwear in the sink, and got hung up on by widows from Des Moines.

If the slump was temporary, fine. He’d been down before. What haunted him was the possibility that there was more to this lull than there’d been to the others, that he’d finally used up all his luck. Because in the end, you were only given so many chances. And while everybody took an occasional tumble, the cracks healed more slowly as you got older, allowing what little charm you had left to seep right out of you.

Don O’Keefe, for example. Ten years ago, an operator par excellence. At the top of his game, money rolling in from half a dozen different hustles. And now? What the fuck? Things started going downhill for him after his wife died. He’d loved her with all his heart, and the loss made him sloppy. He filled the hole she left with booze, filled the lonely hours with gambling, and eventually got popped in Seattle for a stupid rock-in-a-box scam and served eight months in the King County jail. Dandy Don, who’d never drawn even an overnighter before. He hadn’t bounced back after that, had been out six months now and couldn’t get anything going. Seventy years old and living on scraps, whatever the hotshots let fall. Former associates whispered behind their hands about him. If they saw him on the street, they crossed to the other side. None of them wanted to look into his eyes. None of them wanted to catch what he had.

Petty raised his first drink of the afternoon to the poor bastard. Because he himself was down to his last five grand, and if this was it, the end of all good things, he wanted someone somewhere to toast *him* someday, remembering him at his best.

He was sitting in the Jackpot Saloon, his favorite of the Sands’s three bars, tended to by a skinny old cowgirl with an ugly smile. She wore her hair in a bright red bouffant to compensate and sported the kind of makeup job department store cosmetics clerks gave women in order to sell them a ton of shit they didn’t need. She and Petty had become friendly during his stay. She called him Rowan, he called her darlin’, and he hoped she had something at home that made her happy, a cat or a favorite TV show.

He’d showered and shaved after getting off the phone with Don, dried his hair, and slapped on some Armani cologne, ninety bucks a bottle. A pair of nice jeans, a dress shirt, his

leather coat. He didn't go for pinkie rings and gold rope like the guidos did, preferring to let his watch and shoes do the talking. The Submariner he wore these days was a knockoff, and his Bruno Maglis were showing their age, but both were plenty good enough for Reno. He'd been watching his drinking since going to work for Avi, trying to take the gig seriously, so his first sip of Black Label was a treat. He swished it in his mouth before letting it slide down his throat. Happy fucking Thanksgiving!

"You gonna get some turkey this evening?" the cowgirl asked him.

"Honestly, I never liked turkey much," he replied. "It's tradition and all, I understand that, but I'd rather have a steak."

"You're like my daddy," the cowgirl said. "He used to tell us, 'You know why the pilgrims ate turkey? Because they didn't have KFC.'"

"Sounds like a funny guy."

"For a mean drunk. You ever hear of turducken?"

"That's what—a turkey stuffed inside a duck stuffed inside a chicken?"

The cowgirl laughed and smiled her jagged smile. "Other way around. A chicken inside a duck inside a turkey."

"Oh, right," Petty said. "That'd work a lot better."

He turned in his seat to survey the casino. Because of the holiday it was more crowded than it would normally be at 3:00 p.m. The players at the blackjack table directly in front of him hooted and hollered over the dealer busting, but they were a bunch of suckers. It was a five-dollar single-deck game, which sounded good, because your odds against the house were always better with a single deck than with a shoe, right? Wrong. Not when the payout for a blackjack at the single-deck table was 6:5 instead of the standard 3:2. That changed everything.

A basic-strategy player at a twenty-five-dollar 3:2 table being dealt out of an eight-deck shoe could expect to lose \$11.20 over the course of eighty hands. At a 6:5 single-deck table, he'd lose twenty-nine dollars.

Over the past few years casinos everywhere had quietly been switching their single-deck tables to this version of the game, and even though the changed payout was printed right there on the felt, Joe Schmoie, in town for a weekend blowout, still sat down and handed over his hard-earned cash, subscribing to the old dictum that single-deck was where it was at.

Petty had nothing against a sharper taking off a mark, but this swindle was so blatant it depressed him. There was nothing slick about it, nothing skillful. It took no balls. The gaming-industry bean counters were simply exploiting the casual gambler's tendency to cling to the common wisdom rather than run the numbers himself. Petty couldn't decide who pissed him off more, the corporate nickel-and-dimers or the cinches at the tables who allowed themselves to be fleeced this way.

His head ached thinking about it. He'd been breathing nothing but the recycled air of the hotel for the past week, and the smutty funk of cigarette smoke, desperation, and disappointment had settled into his bones like a cancer. Hoping to preserve the tiny spark of holiday cheer he'd managed to muster, he downed his Scotch and hurried for the exit.

## 2

THE COLD GOOSED PETTY AS SOON AS HE STEPPED OUTSIDE. HE winced and fumbled for the zipper of his coat. Even with his collar turned up and his hands fisted deep in his pockets, he shivered. He didn't have clothes for this weather, had planned to be somewhere warmer by now.

The feathery snow that had begun to fall brightened the dirty slush left over from the day before. Delicate flakes mounded on the dented cars and muddy trucks in the Sands parking lot and clung to Petty's eyelashes. He hated snow, hated ice. The antipathy stemmed from a fear of slipping, almost a phobia. The mere possibility of losing his footing made him feel like his skin was too tight. He wasn't so much worried about getting hurt if he fell as he was afraid of looking ridiculous on the way down. He couldn't bear to be laughed at. He set off up 4th toward Virginia, carefully placing each step.

A car crawled past with its headlights already on. Night was



still two hours away, but it seemed later. Clouds obscured the sun, the snow damped the sound, and the steel-gray ponderousness of a premature winter dusk intensified the melancholy carnival come-on of the casino neon up ahead.

The street was lined with run-down motels, most of which were boarded up. Those that continued to limp along rented rooms by both the month and the hour, casting a wide net. A tall, thin black chick in a pink down trench coat and crazy high heels stood in the driveway of the Rancho Sierra Motor Hotel. She pretended to be engrossed in her phone but raised her eyes and smiled whenever a car whooshed by. She was twenty-one, twenty-two, with great lips and great teeth and a long blond wig that made her look famous. Petty smiled back at her when she stepped out to block his way.

“How are you, baby?” she cooed.

“Doing great,” he said. “How are you?”

“Cold,” she said. “Want to warm me up?” She opened her coat to flash him the stars-and-stripes halter top and denim short shorts she was wearing underneath. In this weather. You had to admire that kind of fortitude.

“It’s tempting,” Petty said.

“So go on and give in. Treat yourself for Turkey Day.”

“How about I treat you instead? Let me buy you a drink.”

“Why you want to waste all that time? I got a room here. We can cozy up right this minute.”

“I’m old-school,” Petty said. “I like to flirt first.”

“Flirt?” the whore repeated, making a “What the fuck you talkin’ about?” face. “You do understand I’m workin’, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Petty said. “But I also know Nevada law says you get a coffee break.”

“Ha!” the whore said. “Listen at you. I like you, Old

School.” She punched a number into her phone and turned away to speak quietly to whoever answered.

Petty waited, shifting back and forth from foot to foot. He had a soft spot for hookers. Not the dope fiends or the spooky man haters but the ones who had their shit together and treated hooking as a business. He’d met some smart whores over the years, some truly sharp ladies.

“I’ll call you,” the whore said into the phone. The person on the other end kept talking, and the whore shouted, “When you gonna figure out I ain’t listenin’?” and ended the call.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” Petty said.

“Please,” the whore said. “Don’t nobody own this bad bitch.” She slipped her arm through Petty’s and pulled him close. “You got sexy eyes, you know that?”

“Not as sexy as yours,” Petty said. “Now, mind the ice here.”

As much as he disliked snow, he had to admit that the feathery tumble of the flakes coming down was a pretty sight. He watched them fall through the dregs of daylight as he and the whore walked toward the casinos and wondered if it was true that every one was unique or if that was just more of the stupid shit they sold you when you were a kid.

The whore went by Tinafey. “Like that white lady on TV, but all one word,” she said. Petty didn’t ask her real name, had no reason to. They sat at a table in a lounge at the Silver Legacy, where a guy at a piano sang a Beatles song, then something by Neil Diamond. Tinafey ordered Kahlua and coffee.

“I’ll have the same,” Petty told the waitress.

“Where you from?” Tinafey asked him.

“You mean originally?”

“Sure.”

“I was born in Detroit, but we moved around,” Petty said.

He always told whores the truth. They could spot a lie a mile off. "My dad was a gambler, and my mom was a gambler's wife."

"Poor thing," Tinafeiy said.

"We followed my dad's luck. A couple years here, a couple years there. Chicago, Vegas, Atlantic City. He ran a back-room casino in Philly for a while."

"Did you like movin' around or hate it?"

"Would it have mattered? I was a kid. Nobody cared what I thought. Dad eventually dumped us in Florida and took off with a Mary Kay saleswoman. Must have been the pink Cadillac."

"And how'd you turn out?"

"Growing up like that?" Petty said. He shrugged and swept a bit of cigarette ash off the table.

"So you're a Rambler and a gambler, too, huh?" Tinafeiy said.

"I had a place in Phoenix, but I'm between cities now."

"That's okay. The world needs rambles and gamblers."

"What about you?" Petty said. "Where are you from?"

"I'm from Memphis," Tinafeiy said.

"I hear it in your voice."

"Yeah, but I been all over. I even went to Mexico, to Cabo San Lucas."

"How was that?"

"Baby, it was like a dream, the ocean and the desert come together like that. I laid in the sun, drank margaritas, and fell asleep every night listenin' to the waves, happy just smellin' the air. I told my friend I was with, I said, 'Girl, I could be poor here, I swear to God.' You wouldn't need nothin' but a hammock, some rice and beans, and all that beauty."

She smiled, thinking of it, and Petty saw her real face for the first time, the one you fall in love with. He smiled, too.

“You gonna take me to Cabo San Lucas?” Tinafey asked him, spoofing her wistfulness.

“Grab your purse and let’s go,” he said.

“A boy down there asked me if I was a model, and he wasn’t jokin’.”

The waitress delivered their drinks. They had whipped cream on them, like hot chocolate. Tinafey scooped hers up and ate it separately, then played around with Petty, licking the spoon. He got her talking about her customers. Whores always had good stories about their johns and all the kinds of freaky they were. Tinafey leaned in close and spoke quietly. She had class, didn’t want the whole lounge to hear about the Zucchini Man, who liked her to use a squash on him at the same time he was doing her, or the old guy who paid her twenty-five bucks for used condoms. Petty’s favorite was the dude who got on all fours underneath a special blanket he brought with him. He told Tinafey he turned into a kitten when he was like that, and he’d crawl around and mew for a while before she stuck her feet under the blanket so he could lick them with his little kitten tongue.

“It tickled,” Tinafey said, “but he got mad if you laughed.”

Petty checked his watch and saw he had fifteen minutes to get to his meeting with Don. He took a hundred out of his wallet and slid it across the table.

“I’ve got to run,” he said.

Tinafey feigned surprise. “I thought this was foreplay.”

“This was two friends having a drink,” Petty said. “If we ever get to foreplay, you’ll know it.”

Tinafey picked up the money and tucked it into her sequined clutch. “When you decide you want somethin’ more, you know where I’ll be,” she said.

Petty stood and slipped on his coat.

“You have a happy Thanksgiving,” he said to Tinafey.

“You, too,” she replied, already on her phone.

The piano player, a skeleton in an ill-fitting tux, tinkled out a sweet rendition of James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain.” He probably hated having to sing it night after night, did it on autopilot while wondering how many smokes were left in his pack, but it was one of Petty’s mom’s favorites, something he remembered her humming while she washed dishes, so he dropped a five in the guy’s jar on his way out.

The cavernous second-floor sports book at Club Cal Neva resembled a homeless shelter, filled as it was this afternoon with bums on the lam from the cold outside. Shaggy, bedraggled men wrapped in greasy parkas slouched on the chairs and couches that faced the wall of big-screen TVs, the plastic grocery bags and filthy backpacks containing their possessions stowed at their feet. Most pretended to watch television, but a few dozed, slack-jawed and snoring, in violation of the casino’s no-sleeping rule. The security guards let them be, giving everyone a break for once, the holiday and all.

A must of unwashed bodies and mildewed clothing wrinkled Petty’s nose when he stepped off the escalator that brought him up from the casino. He surveyed the human flotsam left high and dry in the room and wished Don had picked somewhere else to meet. Being so close to so much ruinous luck and so many bad choices made him nervous, especially with his own ship racing toward the rocks.

Don waved from his seat at the big square bar at the center of everything and gestured to an empty chair beside him as if to say, “Look what I got you.” It had been fifteen years since Petty had last seen him. He’d let his hair go gray—he used to dye it black—and wattles of loose skin dangled under his chin.

“If I’d known you were dressing up, I’d have put on a suit,” he said, fingering the collar of his Tommy Bahama Hawaiian shirt. He was wearing baggy khakis with it, and grandpa tennis shoes that had Velcro straps instead of laces. Not so dandy anymore. “I keep it casual these days,” he said by way of apology.

“Whatever works,” Petty said.

Don chuckled through their handshake, saying, “That’s right, that’s right.” He’d missed a spot shaving, too, left a patch of white stubble on his chin, but Petty cut him some slack. Old folks slow down, he reminded himself. It was natural.

“Scotch, right? Rocks?” Don said.

“You remember,” Petty said.

“Everything,” Don said. He waved the bartender over and put in the order.

“How’s Reno?” Petty said. “You like it here?”

Don shrugged. “It’s where I am, where I ended up,” he said. “My options were limited.”

“I heard about Myra.”

“I’m sure you did. There’s nothing people love more than passing on a sad story about somebody else and acting like they give a shit. But the bottom line is, it wrecked me. I’m still a wreck, and I’m not ashamed to say it. We were married forty-two years. We raised three kids. She was the only thing I gave a damn about. The kids, but that’s different. I struck oil when I found her. I hit pay dirt.”

His eyes shone, and his voice went hoarse. The bartender delivered the drinks and melted away.

“To Myra,” Petty said, raising his glass.

“Give me a break,” Don said. “You barely knew her.”

“Yeah, but cheers to *anybody* who put up with *you* for that fucking long,” Petty said.

Don clinked Petty’s glass and said, “And to your old man, too.”

“Nah, fuck him,” Petty said.

“He did his best.”

“That’s everybody’s excuse.”

The two men sat in silence, pretending to watch the pregame show on one of the TVs, until Don finally said, “Anyfuckingway, what about you? You and Carrie split up, right? And you kept Samantha?”

Petty hid his frown behind his glass. So people were talking about him, too.

“That’s pretty much it,” he said. “Carrie took off with Hug McCarthy twelve years ago, and I haven’t seen her since.”

“Hug McCarthy?” Don said. “He’s a bad penny. What was she thinking?”

“You’d have to ask her,” Petty said. “I dragged Sam around with me for a while but ended up sending her to live with my mom. It was better for school and everything. She’s going to college in L.A. now.”

Don moaned. “I remember her in diapers,” he said.

Petty was irritated at the old man for making him think about the past. Enough small talk; time to get to it.

“What did you want to discuss?” he said.

Don glanced at the bartender, at a passing waitress, at a derelict ordering a dollar Bud Light. “Let’s move somewhere more private,” he said, as if everybody in the place were eavesdropping on them.

They relocated to a booth at the edge of the room, as far from the crowd gathered around the bar as they could get. Petty waited with gritted teeth while Don spent five minutes trying to shim the wobbly table with a cardboard coaster. When the old man finally had it to his liking, he straightened his stupid shirt, took a sip of his drink, and leaned in to speak quietly.

“This is the big one,” he said.

“All right,” Petty replied.

“Avi’ll be sorry he didn’t listen when I brought it to him.”

“He’s a busy man.”

Don snorted. “Don’t give me that,” he said. “I don’t know how you swallow it from that prick.”

“I’m not swallowing anything,” Petty said. “I’m helping him out temporarily.”

“That’s not what he says. He says you came crawling to him, begging for some action. He says you’re desperate.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“‘I’ve got all I can handle right now,’ he said, ‘but Rowan’s desperate for a score. Why don’t you take it to him?’”

Petty kept his face blank, acted like it wasn’t anything, but inside he was knotted up. Fuck Avi. And fuck Don. A year ago he’d have been on his way out the door by now, and even in a slump there was a limit to how much shit he was willing to stand for.

His voice sounded angrier than he wanted it to when he said, “I’m not desperate, Don. Things are slow right now, but I’m not fucking desperate. So don’t think you can pull some rinky-dink something on me because I’ll grasp at straws.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Don said. “This is legit, I swear.”

“All I’m saying is, I’ve been grifting long enough to know that guys like you—like me, okay?—are cannibals who wouldn’t think twice about gnawing one of their own down to the bone if they got hungry enough, and for all I know you might be that hungry.”

“I’ll sketch it out for you,” Don said. “If it sounds like something you can do something with, we’ll talk further. If not, hey—we shake hands and part friends.”

Petty picked up his drink and swirled the ice in the glass. “You’ve got three minutes,” he said.



Don leaned in even closer. “You know I did a little time recently, right? I’m sure word went around about that, too. Well, while I was inside, I met this kid, your typical fuckup, your typical junkie, in again as soon as he got out, one of those, but we became friendly. Okay, not *friendly*, but you’re in there, you’re bored, so we used to shoot the breeze sometimes, swap stories.

“Now, this kid didn’t have the brains God gave a fucking billy goat. I mean, he was constitutionally incapable of keeping his mouth shut about shit he should’ve been keeping his mouth shut about. Ninety-nine percent of it was jibber-jabber, useless, him bragging about all the badasses he knew on the outside and all the jobs he’d supposedly pulled. But one day one of his stories caught my attention. No. More than that. It got my heart going. It made my palms itch. So I set about reeling him in. I gave him stamps, made deposits to his canteen, and gradually I dragged the details out of him. And what I got—well, let’s just say that if you took what he told me and were willing to do a little legwork, you might be looking at the score of your life.”

Petty sat back with a sad smile. “Seriously, Don?” he said. “Off a junkie’s jailhouse ramble?”

“The kid was useless. I stated that right off,” Don said. “But if he was even halfway on the level regarding this thing, it’d definitely be worth looking into.”

“What thing?” Petty said. “What’s the deal?”

“Just like that?” Don said.

“Why’d you bring me here if you’re not gonna tell me?”

“I...well, I...” The old man was flustered. Dandy Don, the smoothest talker Petty had ever met, tripped up in the middle of a pitch. Unmasked. *Man*, Petty thought. *We’re all going down.*

“Okay, all right, sure,” Don said, regaining his composure. “I’ll tell you. Why not? The whole thing starts in Afghanistan, with a soldier stationed at Bagram Airfield, the main base over there. This soldier is in charge of paying Afghan trucking companies for deliveries they make to other bases, supplies and shit, and the payments are all made in cash, dollars, because cash is all the towelheads trust. What eventually happens—and I don’t know what sort of idiots we’ve got running things there, because a blind man could see this coming from a mile off—what eventually happens is, this soldier cuts a deal with the trucking companies where he pays them for deliveries that never happen, and the companies kick back a percentage of these payments to him.

“He then passes the money along to another soldier at the base, a guy whose job is packing containers with gear for shipment back to the U.S. This second guy hides the cash in the containers, slaps a special military seal on the boxes so they won’t be inspected by customs, and sends them to an army base in North Carolina. A soldier there retrieves the money from the containers and sends it to another guy, and this guy—get this—stows the money in a safe in his apartment, the plan being they’ll divvy the take when everybody gets back from overseas.”

His story finished, Don sat back and grinned.

“So what’s your play?” Petty said.

“Well, obviously, someone needs to get into that safe,” Don said.

“Someone.”

“You!”

Petty shook his head. He sipped his drink and said, “Not that I believe a word of this, but how much money are we talking about?”

“If you don’t believe what I’ve told you so far, you’re definitely not gonna believe this.”

“Try me.”

“Two million.”

“Two million dollars?”

“So my buddy said.”

“Your buddy the junkie. And where did you say he got his information?”

“His brother was the soldier in North Carolina, the one in charge of getting the money off the base. He got lit one night and laid the whole thing out for my pal. Diarrhea of the mouth runs in the family, apparently.”

A commotion erupted near the betting windows, two bums going at it over a D cell battery. “Gimme that, motherfucker,” the big bum screamed, then punched the little bum in the face. The little bum dropped to the floor, and the big bum raised his boot to stomp him, but a security guard stepped in to wrestle him away. A second guard yanked the little bum to his feet and walked him to the escalator while a smart-ass at the bar applauded.

Petty watched the ruckus while thinking about two million dollars sitting in a safe in some stooge’s apartment somewhere, thinking how insane that sounded. And he couldn’t help it; he started thinking of ways to get hold of it.

“The safe complicates things,” he said to Don. “It means you can’t just break in while the guy’s out and make off with the cash.”

“Right,” Don said. “So?”

“So you’d have to do it while the guy’s there,” Petty said. “You’d have to get him to let you in, then you’d have to persuade him to give you the combination. And that means a gun.”

“That’d work.”

Two million dollars. The kind of score Petty had always dreamed about. Abracadabra, and all his problems solved in an instant and forever. But the reality of the situation was something else.

“The thing is,” he said to Don, “I’m pretty sure this junkie was yanking your crank.”

“But what if he wasn’t?” Don said.

“Then we come to number two: that’s not my line. Robbery, rough stuff. I *talk* chumps out of their money.”

“You’re a smart guy,” Don said. “You’ll figure something out. Hell, you wouldn’t even have to grab all of it for it to be a great score. Getting your hands on just some would make you a happy man.”

True enough, but Petty still couldn’t see himself drawing a gun on some dude and putting on enough of a badass act to convince him he’d pull the trigger if he didn’t get what he wanted. He wasn’t that desperate.

“You know what?” he said. “I’m gonna pass.”

“Take some time to think about it,” Don said.

“I already know. It’s not for me.”

“Don’t tell me that, Rowan. Tell me yes.”

“I can’t, Don. I’m sorry.”

“Come on.”

“No.”

Don slumped in his chair. He looked tired, tired of everything, and Petty could tell he’d been the man’s last hope. After a few seconds of awkward silence, Don sighed deeply, struggled to his feet, and pulled on an ugly purple down jacket. “I’ve got to go,” he said.

“Have another drink,” Petty said.

“My daughter’s holding dinner. Holidays are a big deal to her.”

The two men shook hands.

“Be careful driving in the snow,” Petty said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Don said and shuffled off.

Petty returned to the bar and ordered a beer this time. The Packer game was kicking off. He stared at the screen, but his mind kept picking over the past and worrying about the future. Someone came up at one point and asked him the score, and he had no idea. Across the bar one of the homeless men clutched his head and rocked in his chair. “No, no, no,” he muttered. It was more than Petty could bear this evening. He went downstairs and took a seat at an empty 6:5 single-deck blackjack table and proceeded to lose two hundred bucks in twenty minutes.