



Lorenzo takes the call when Sandy buzzes him on the intercom, even though he's with new clients. Their estate plan is a simple matter—matching wills, a trust—and the elderly couple can wait. They might even be impressed that the law school Dean is on the line. It's a small town, after all, dominated by the university, and the old lady is a talker. Word will get around that the new guy from Chicago is connected. More fees down the road, if he plays his cards right. His dad will be pleased. The law firm of Rossi & Rossi is soaring.

The Dean—Frankie—has been a buddy of his ever since their first-year Contracts class in law school, in which they competed for the attention of the petite brunette professor, each trying to outdo the other with his analysis of *Taylor v. Caldwell*, or *Hadley v. Baxendale*. They were drawn to one another, two out-of-place Italian kids in the Midwest ('Like wings on a pig,' Frankie used to say) and looked enough alike—dark, gangly, slicked-back hair—that they were sometimes mistaken for brothers, an error they didn't always correct. They competed, too, in cutthroat games of handball, punishing matches that left them both bloody and breathless. Through summer internships, bar exam prep classes and stints as tireless robots in Chicago mega-firms, they hung out, overindulged, commiserated, and celebrated triumphs, both professional and venereal. Frankie was best man in Lorenzo's first wedding, Lorenzo a groomsman in Frankie's only. They were tight.

Tight, that is, until Frankie's first book (he somehow became an expert in the esoteric but suddenly hot field of eminent domain for private purposes) followed by his departure from Chicago and subsequent academic stardom at their alma mater. It's natural that friends, even brothers, would drift apart, come back together. The same thing happened for a time in law school, when Frankie was selected for the prestigious law review and Lorenzo was not. He wasn't happy about being left behind, but he didn't hold it against Frankie. Still doesn't. He understands. They just aren't as much alike as either of them once believed. That's all. Even now that he has returned to Bloomington to join his father's law practice, which he did in part because his buddy Frankie is here, they rarely see each other. They're in different worlds. They're both older, busier. No big deal.

'Frankie, you old son-of-a-gun,' Lorenzo practically shouts into the phone, winking at the couple parked in ox-blood wing chairs opposite his cluttered desk. It occurs to him that the call wouldn't need to be legit to have the desired effect; it's working already. He can see the sparkle in the woman's eyes, her ears cocked for any tidbit she might later repeat in her sewing circle or book club. He'd have to talk to Sandy about this, work out a signal for her to patch through some made-up dignitary when there's a trophy catch in the office, a hook that needs to be set. 'What can I do you for?' He straightens his tie and winks at the old folks again.

Frankie apologizes for not calling more often since Lorenzo's come back to town. A busy time at the law school, he says, and Lorenzo is inclined to believe him. The truth is it's been a disappointment to Lorenzo, although he's confessed that to no one. Who would he tell? To make it up to him, Frankie invites him to sit in on a class and consider showing up each week as 'Practitioner-In-Residence,' a program Frankie initiated after taking over as Dean. It will give them a chance to catch up.

Lorenzo watches the old couple pretending to study the diplomas on the wall, his bar admission certificates, his tickets, he once believed, to fame and fortune. Or fortune, at least. But not academics. Whatever he may once have shared with Frankie, in this way they were never much alike. Frankie loves the law, its intricacies and history, thrives in its back alleys and secret passageways. Lorenzo is honest enough with himself to admit he merely loves what the law can do for him. That's what those pieces of paper on the wall mean. He likes trolling for business, arguing with opposing counsel and billing time and expenses on clients' accounts. He thrives in an Armani suit, feels powerful behind the wheel of his Z-4. That's the law for him, that's what matters. Not research and teaching, not fusty books. Besides, he's a busy man. He has his cases, prospective clients to schmooze, his father looking over his shoulder at the office, his kids every other weekend. Not to mention two ex-wives and, lately, high-maintenance Maya, who takes up most of his time and all of his energy.

'I don't know, Frankie,' says Lorenzo, forgetting for a moment the presence of his clients.

'You could share your expertise with the students,' Frankie insists. 'You'd have way more credibility than a mere teacher. Even me. I've been away from the trenches too long. You're the real deal. They'll love you.'

His father bellows on the phone in the next office, a sour divorce case, his dad's bread and butter. The old couple fidgets; Lorenzo flashes a mollifying grin. How did these two stay together so long? He wonders, not for the first time, how his own parents managed it, or Frankie and his wife. How can anyone these days still take 'Till death do you part' seriously when there are so many distractions?

'Plus,' Frankie goes on, 'think how great it'll sound when you're pitching new clients: Lorenzo Rossi - Adjunct Professor of Law.' He knows Frankie has played his trump card, that this is the argument he won't be able to resist. And Frankie's not wrong. Like no one else, Frankie knows how to push his buttons.

Despite the new stationery his father has ordered and the fresh gold lettering on the office door, Rossi & Rossi, Lorenzo views the arrangement with his father as temporary, a base camp for a renewed assault on the mountain. After the incident at his last firm—he had bounced around to six or seven outfits, more than most lawyers, looking for his niche, he said whenever anyone remarked on the frequent moves—getting out of the city seemed like a good idea. It wasn't the first time he'd slept with an intern, even when he was still married, but it *was* the first time one had claimed sexual harassment. She did it to guarantee herself a job offer after graduation, he knew, a shrewd ploy he had to respect. But the damage was severe. Even if he'd landed a spot in another decent firm, doubtful given his employment history and the viral news of his indiscretion, he couldn't bear to run into his former colleagues, a certainty in the surprisingly small Chicago legal community.

No one here knows the whole, humiliating story, and he's not inclined to open up. Not to his father. Not to Frankie. Certainly not to Maya, who couldn't possibly understand. It was a blow, sure, an episode he'd like to forget. But it would pass, the wounds would heal, and in a couple of years it would be erased from the collective memory like a bad dream. He'd be back, in fighting trim. In the meantime, this was as good a place as any to wait.

On top of which, his father, a long-time solo-practitioner who pushed him toward law school in the first place, said he needed the help, that there was more than enough work to go around, and that life in the sticks wasn't so bad, that it would grow on him. And with his mother not long gone, the battle with a rare cancer taking a toll on them both, his dad was lonely. So, he came and here he is. He's making the best of it. But the gig at the law school could be just what he needed: the first step back to the big time.

It's an early class, and his eyes barely focus when Frankie introduces him to Hal, the young professor he'll be assisting. A clueless nerd, he assesses: never spent a day in the real world, wouldn't know a billable hour if it bit him in the ass. No wonder Frankie begged. These kids really do need him. As the students settle into their seats—it's a typical law school classroom, desks tiered theater-style so everyone is visible to the teacher, no place to hide—Frankie lingers, watching. It brings back memories for Lorenzo, seeing these students and being here with Frankie. There was a girl in one of their classes, he remembers, Criminal Procedure he thinks, who wasn't interested in either one of them. They turned it into a contest, a beer bet, to see who could get Lesley to go out with him. It took all semester, but he wishes he had a picture of Frankie's face when he and Lesley

strolled into Nick's one night, the wager won. They laughed about it for weeks. Whatever happened to those days?

Hal begins class and Frankie leaves, glancing over his shoulder as he goes. Lorenzo takes a front row seat, sips his no-foam latte, plots what to say when called upon, just like the bad old Socratic days of law school, calculates the income he's losing by being there. No way he can do this every week. Not even for Frankie.

He hears his name, looks up from his coffee, and Hal beckons. At the podium, he leans forward, studies faces. The bitter coffee aroma clashes with his own lemony aftershave. He looks at his watch. He bumped his nine o'clock meeting to ten, a possible medical malpractice case, outside his professional comfort zone, but a potential goldmine. Frankie owes him.

'I took this class when I was here,' he begins, addressing a wide-eyed geek in the first row: destined for law review, needs to get laid. His eyes link with a sleepy jock, slouched in his chair near the back, wrinkled t-shirt and chin stubble: hung-over and horny, man after my own heart. The thought makes him smile with the memory of early classes missed, notes borrowed from Frankie. 'Best decision I ever made,' he says. Older woman on the aisle, heavy, floral dress: isn't she the librarian? 'Provides me a very comfortable living.' God, why did I agree to do this? Tough guy on the aisle, Marine hair, a high-and-tight: is his sleeve pinned to his shoulder?

There are questions. He finds more faces while the front-row geek asks about the desirability of generation-skipping trusts: man, what a loser. A black woman in dreadlocks: headed for legal aid. A fat girl who looks like Sandy, his dad's tireless secretary. A skinny kid—buttoned down, rep tie: a shoo-in at some snooty law firm. Lorenzo ventures an answer to the geek's question, but stops mid-bullshit. There, in the middle of the classroom, is a breathtaking blond, tall, fresh, busty. She doesn't even look real to him. She's perfect, provocative. Centerfold material. The kind of girl he never gets to see anymore, what with work, his dad, the kids. Maya.

The girl smiles. Her teeth gleam. Is it his imagination or can he actually smell her sweet, cinnamon breath from where he stands? He studies Hal's seating chart on the podium. Even her name is perfect: Ingrid.

He straightens his tie, stands tall. Adjunct Professor has a nice ring to it. Maybe Frankie was right, maybe this is going to be good for him. He loves the law.

He drops into Frankie's office to give him the news.

'If you really need me,' Lorenzo says, 'I guess I can squeeze this in.'

'Great,' Frankie says. He gets up and closes the door. 'There's just one thing, buddy. This isn't Chicago, if you know what I mean.'

'I can't say that I do. Buddy.'

'This may be the sticks, Enzo, but word gets around.'

Filled floor-to-ceiling bookcases line Frankie's office. Lorenzo recognizes his old friend's own treatise, sees how comfortably it sits among all the rest. 'What's your point?' he asks.

Frankie's arms are folded across his chest. 'Nothing,' he says. 'No point.'

The next week, Lorenzo arrives early and lingers outside the classroom as the students filter in. The geek. The frat boy. The librarian. When there's no sign of Ingrid, he realizes he's made a colossal mistake, that he's committed to a semester of early morning pain, not to mention lost income, all for nothing, for a glimpse of a beauty who isn't even in the class. She was only an auditor. Or she dropped the class. Or . . . and then she turns the corner, a notebook and the thick text pressed against her chest as she strolls alongside the one-armed Marine, whose cane-aided gait is painful to watch.

From where he sits in the classroom he can observe the girl: note-taking; whispering to the Marine; leaning toward nerdy Hal; concentrating on whatever it is that he's lecturing about, the formalities of instrument execution. Excruciating stuff. It's what paralegals are for, not something these kids really have to master, but Hal is too cloistered to know that. Twice Ingrid looks his way and then, when their eyes meet, stares down at her notebook. Is she blushing? When Hal dismisses the class, Ingrid is the first out the door.

That's the pattern. She arrives late, just before Hal begins the lecture, and is the first to leave. He hopes for a chance to talk, to invite her for coffee. He has it all worked out. He'll tell her there's an opening for a clerkship in his firm—he'll flash one of the new cards, Lorenzo Rossi, Partner, Rossi & Rossi—and that she should apply. She'll be impressed, flattered, and will come to the office for an interview, another chance to be alone with her, the only candidate. And, even if his father doesn't agree that they need a student around the office, at least he'll have made a connection. Hell, he could hire her out of his own pocket, a few bucks an

hour, chump change, regardless of what the old man thinks. But if he can't even talk to the girl, if she's forever elusive, his plan won't get off the ground, much less fly.

He has lunch one day with Frankie and it feels great to be back together. They've spoken a few times at school and Frankie hasn't mentioned Chicago again. Things are going great. It's Friday and they're both loose, they have a couple of beers with their burgers at Nick's just like old times. Lorenzo asks about Frankie's wife, Melinda, a middle-school teacher. Lorenzo went out with her for a few months up in Chicago, between marriages and shortly before Frankie met her, although he's never confessed that to Frankie.

'She's fine,' Frankie says.

He waits for more but Frankie doesn't expand. He remembers Melinda as pale and soft, breasts pendulous. Adventurous in the sack. He can't quite picture her face.

'What about you?' Frankie asks. 'How're all your ex-wives? How's that new babe?' He's grinning, and Lorenzo has never felt so good about being back in town. For once, it feels right. The trouble in Chicago is ancient history. It's great to be with his old friend, his almost-brother. Frankie's beating him out for law review is old news. Being snubbed when Frankie made it big—it's in the past. They're reunited now; life is good. And now it's time to get to the point of the lunch.

'What's the story with that Marine in my class?' Sometimes the best approach to what you want is through the back door. A little misdirection. Don't want to give away too much. An old lawyer's trick.

'Army, actually. As I understand it, he got hit by a roadside bomb patrolling Baghdad. A good man.'

'And the blond girl who hangs out with him, Ingrid?'

Frankie looks up from his burger, finishes chewing, sips his beer. 'A blond? I think I know who you mean. What about her?'

'What's her story? Is she sleeping with the Marine?' He knows now the student's not a Marine, but the nickname he's assigned is too firmly engrained. It helps to keep the man in a box, out of his thoughts. 'Are they a couple?'

Frankie laughs. 'Hate to disappoint you, but, contrary to popular belief, the Dean does *not* keep track of all sexual activity in the school.' He finishes his beer and glances over his shoulder, turns back and lowers his head and his voice as if he's about to reveal a deep, dark secret. 'Didn't Chicago teach you anything?'

Two months into the semester, he has a dinner date with Maya. Usually they go to Malibu Grill on the Courthouse Square—Maya sometimes works there as a cocktail waitress, that's how they met—or to the chophouse out by the Mall. But for this outing he's reserved a table, the one up front, right by the window, at La Cucina, the Italian café across the street from the law school.

'Why here?' Maya asks. 'We never come here.' She tosses her slate-black bangs out of her eyes. As she slides into her chair she holds out her arm and admires the silver bracelet he's just given her, the one she gazed at in the window of Zales the week before, wide and heavy and inset with gaudy turquoise. He's never been one to give expensive gifts, not even when panged by guilt, and, besides, he hasn't done anything yet. But lately when they're together, especially during sex, his mind has been elsewhere, and the actual cheating—always inevitable—is now only a formality. The bracelet isn't an apology, exactly; it's more like a message from his future unfaithful self, one she'll only later be able to interpret.

'Bingo,' he says. 'A change.' That, and the fact it's a law school favorite and he hopes Ingrid might come in or, at least, stroll by.

Their salads are limp, the breadsticks stale. Maya's pasta is overdone and -she insists he try it, shoving a forkful into his mouth—the marinara is tasteless. His scaloppini is dry and tough. They sip espressos and share a bland tiramisu. All through dinner he's kept an eye on the restaurant door, and also on the entrance to the law school, waiting to catch sight of Ingrid. He feels sorry for Maya, in a way. It isn't her fault. It can't be helped.

He's paying the check when he looks up and sees her. He stops, pen poised above the credit card slip. She comes down the steps slowly, waiting for the Marine to follow. And Maya is waiting for *him*, alternately studying her reflection in the café window and the blue bauble on her wrist.

With a little help from Frankie's secretary, who seems to buy his story of the internship, it isn't hard to find Ingrid's address in the law school's records, and the day he gets it he springs into action. It's an apartment on Henderson, just south of the school, not far from where he lived back in the day. His plan is to drop by unannounced, an I-was-in-the-neighborhood thing. He considers calling, but it's too easy to say No on the phone, too hard to work his charms. He's changed his tactics slightly. She's one of the bright lights in the class,

he'll tell her, and he's got a proposition. No, 'Opportunity' is the better word: he's got an *opportunity* for her. Frankie wouldn't approve, he's sure. But Frankie doesn't need to know.

He parks under a streetlight, sees the door to her unit. The light is on and he hesitates. He knows nothing about this girl other than that she's a knockout. If she's not living with the Marine, which she could be for all he knows, then there's probably a roommate. Roommates can be persuaded to make themselves scarce, though. Not a problem. He gazes at the soft glow through Ingrid's curtains. He sees shadowy movement and he's certain now of what he'll find. It's got to be the Marine.

The Marine gives him pause, an unfamiliar feeling of reluctance. The poor schmuck is a hero. A pawn, a sacrifice in a bloody mistake, but still a hero. He's given a piece of himself he'll never get back, and for what? That life was never something Lorenzo considered for himself. The service was for other guys, blockheads with a death wish, he used to think. And then there's this guy.

A hero, sure, but not Ingrid's type. That's clear. She deserves better. He can see that, the way she needs to be challenged, to be with her equal, not a charity case. She reminds him of his mother, in a way, a singer who could have made it big but, once she married his plodding father, never left town to pursue her dream. That was fine for her, she never complained, but this girl, Ingrid, surely she wants more. He pictures the two of them, back in Chicago, living the good life. He'll put the past in the past, everything forgotten. This bucolic interlude will be a fond memory for them both. They might bring his kids down to visit gramps, but otherwise, no, this place isn't for them. What was the name of that soldier boy you used to see? he'll ask, and she'll have to think hard before she pulls it back from some dim recess.

He steps to the door. Getting ahead of himself, he's already told Maya he can't see her again. She glanced at her new bracelet when he broke the news, as if he might want it back, but then relaxed when its significance sank in. He knows it could all be a mistake. He and Maya had a good run, they'd settled into a comfortable rhythm and Ingrid is a huge gamble. But then everything in life is a gamble. Time to move on. Looking for his niche, as he used to say.

He knocks. He should have brought flowers, he thinks. No. It's not a date. To make it seem real he should have brought *files*, a hint of the work she could expect on the job. He's surprised he's so unsure of himself, an unaccustomed state, he's surprised he broke it off with Maya prematurely, he's surprised he's standing in the dark outside this gorgeous stranger's apartment.

There is movement inside; he hears footsteps and a male voice. The Marine is with her after all. That's all right. The way it should be. Side by side. She can make a choice. There's no comparison. Hero or not, her future isn't with the Marine.

Light flashes in the peep-hole and he knows he's been seen. No turning back. The door edges open.

Ingrid stands in the shadowy entry, radiant. Her blond hair is pulled away from her flushed face. She's in a t-shirt, the school logo stretched full and punctuated by her nipples. Her feet are bare. She smiles with recognition.

'Mr. Rossi? What are you doing here?' She doesn't welcome him with open arms. She doesn't invite him in. She keeps the door open only a sliver. This isn't what he planned.

'Something I wanted to . . . discuss.' His hand rises to the door, as if he might push his way in, although of course that's not what he intends. Still, he does want to see inside this girl's apartment more than he's wanted anything lately. He wants to be face to face with the Marine.

'No. I mean, now isn't . . . I'm . . . there's—'

'Let him in, Ingrid,' comes a deep voice from inside the apartment.

The prospect of competing, of being demonstrably superior—defeating a rival at handball, on the battlefield, in the courtroom—arouses him. He breathes deeply, prepares for the challenge.

Ingrid pulls the door wide and he nearly tumbles in, steadies himself with the doorknob and follows her into the shadow, toward the voice.

The voice belongs to Frankie. He's sitting on the couch, a bottle of wine on the coffee table before him, two half-empty glasses. Frankie's feet are also bare, his shirt tieless and disheveled.

Frankie nods, eyes narrowed, his mouth twisted in a half-grin. 'I told you this isn't Chicago, old buddy.'

But Lorenzo is already backing toward the door as the truth explodes in him. He and Frankie, they're alike after all, too much alike. They always wanted the same things, just found different paths. And this is Frankie's backyard, his playground. Frankie can't let him win here. He should have seen that, should have understood that this isn't for him, this town, this life. Like wings on a pig, Frankie would say.

'Lorenzo,' Frankie whispers, not unkindly, hoisting a glass.

He backs further away, leaving Frankie and Ingrid in shadow. He doesn't want to hear what Frankie has to say. He knows now what he should have known long ago. He's dead weight. His father doesn't need

him. Frankie doesn't. And he's been on the wrong road for far too long. He should be anywhere but here. He doesn't belong here. He doesn't belong.