



THE PROFESSOR

Courage is fear that has said its prayers.

DOROTHY BERNARD

PRAISE FOR *FALSE WITNESS* AND
OTHER NOVELS BY RANDY SINGER

“In this gripping, obsessively readable legal thriller,
Singer proves himself to be the Christian John Grisham.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Great suspense; gritty, believable action . . .
make this entry Singer’s best yet.”

BOOKLIST

STARRED REVIEW

“*False Witness* is an engrossing and challenging read. . . .
Part detective story, part legal thriller—I couldn’t put it down!”

SHAUNTI FELDHAHN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND NATIONALLY SYNDICATED COLUMNIST

“Get ready to wrestle with larger themes of truth, justice, and courage.”

CROSSWALK.COM

ON *FATAL CONVICTIONS*

“A solid, well-crafted legal thriller.”

BOOKLIST

ON *FATAL CONVICTIONS*

“A book that will entertain readers and make them
think—what more can one ask?”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ON *THE JUSTICE GAME*

“Singer artfully crafts a novel that is the perfect mix of
faith and suspense. . . . [*The Justice Game* is] fast-paced
from the start to the surprising conclusion.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“At the center of the heart-pounding action are the moral dilemmas that have become Singer’s stock-in-trade. . . . An exciting thriller.”

BOOKLIST

ON BY REASON OF INSANITY

“Readers will be left on the edge of their seats by Singer’s latest suspense-filled thriller.”

CHRISTIAN RETAILING

ON BY REASON OF INSANITY

“Singer hooks readers from the opening courtroom scene of this tasty thriller, then spurs them through a fast trot across a story line that just keeps delivering.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ON BY REASON OF INSANITY

“[A] legal thriller that matches up easily with the best of Grisham.”

CHRISTIAN FICTION REVIEW

ON IRREPARABLE HARM

“Singer hits pay dirt again with this taut, intelligent thriller. . . . [*Dying Declaration*] is a groundbreaking book for the Christian market, with well-drawn characters . . . and ingenious plotting.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“*Directed Verdict* is a well-crafted courtroom drama with strong characters, surprising twists, and a compelling theme.”

RANDY ALCORN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SAFELY HOME*



FALSE WITNESS

TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

RANDY SINGER

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False Witness

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK ME, “Where do you get the ideas for your books?”

This one came at a funeral.

The deceased was David O'Malley, a good friend and former client. His wife had asked me to give the eulogy. I talked about David's generosity, his big heart. He was always inviting someone to live at his house until they could get back on their feet. He ran a used-car lot and hired people down on their luck. David believed in second chances.

And he was a character. He had this larger-than-life personality that made people laugh. He sang in a gospel quartet. Everybody had a David O'Malley story. Heads nodded as I shared mine.

David's pastor followed me in the pulpit. He spoke about a man named Thomas Kelly. The man was a scoundrel. Involved in organized crime. He turned on everyone he knew.

Jaws dropped and the mourners stared in disbelief at this pastor. The man had clearly lost his mind!

“You don't think you know Thomas Kelly, but you do,” the pastor insisted. “David O'Malley *was* Thomas Kelly before he went into the witness protection program. Before he came to the Lord.”

Prior to that moment, the only people who knew about David's past were the government, his family, myself, and his pastor. The men he had testified against had died in prison. His wife had obtained the government's permission to reveal his past.

There was utter silence as the pastor concluded with a line I will never forget.

“The government can give you a new identity,” he said. “But only Christ can change your life.”

That would make a good book, I thought.

I hope I was right.

*A false witness will not go unpunished,
and one who utters lies perishes.*

PROVERBS 19:9

PROLOGUE

THURSDAY, AUGUST 5
LAS VEGAS

IF ANYTHING HAPPENED TO THIS KID, the professor would never forgive himself. The young man was more than just a brilliant protégé; he was like a son. He reminded Professor Kumari so much of himself at that age. Too much, sometimes. Except that Rajat was brasher, bolder than Kumari had ever been.

Rajat Singh possessed his mentor's gift for complex mathematical theories, but he had something more. At heart, Rajat was a businessman. A risk taker. A part of India's new generation of entrepreneurs. He had grown restless as a teaching assistant at the university; Kumari could see that. Rajat stayed out of respect for the professor.

When Professor Kumari told his protégé about the Abacus Algorithm, the young man's eyes burned with entrepreneurial fire. To Rajat, it was more than a math formula. It became an opportunity to piece together a historic agreement that might help millions of other Dalits, India's caste of untouchables, achieve the same kind of success Rajat had obtained. Though discrimination against the Dalits had been outlawed, the vestiges of the caste system were everywhere. Professor Kumari preached patience, but Rajat would have none of it. He proposed a plan with such zeal and attention to detail that the professor couldn't say no.

This meeting was the culmination of Rajat's plan.

Kumari said a prayer, his head bowed as he sat in the driver's seat of the Ford Escape he had rented. He had a bad feeling about this

meeting, something he just couldn't shake. He had insisted on elaborate security precautions to protect the algorithm.

"You worry too much, grasshopper," Rajat said from the passenger seat, trying hard to inject a worry-free tone into his voice. Kumari had once asked Rajat about the grasshopper reference; it was an allusion, as best Kumari could remember, to some old American movie or television show, the type of thing that didn't interest the professor in the least.

"That the birds of worry fly above your head, this you cannot change," the young man continued with mock solemnity. "But that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent."

Kumari did not smile. He was known for being jovial and outgoing, having a type of mad-professor personality, which, he had to admit, was a reputation he did little to dispel. But this was not a time for smiles.

"Be careful, my son," Kumari said.

Rajat took the cue, nodded solemnly, and instantly became the earnest young businessman. He looked professional in his dark blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. Professional—and almost American. Still, he was so inexperienced to be handling such a sensitive transaction.

Kumari wanted to give Rajat a lecture, one of Kumari's patented professorial pep talks, more about life than about academics. But Kumari sensed that the young man had already surpassed his teacher in so many matters of life and faith. The time for lectures had passed.

"God be with you," Rajat said.

"And with you."

The young man climbed out of the van, grabbed his briefcase, and strode confidently toward the MGM Grand. He did not look back to see the lines of worry etched into his mentor's face, the birds beginning to nest in the professor's hair.

"Protect him," Kumari prayed. He pulled away from the front of the casino, cutting off other drivers and ignoring their horns.



Twelve minutes later, Kumari entered his apartment, breathless from his climb up the outdoor steps. He disabled the alarm system, locked the dead bolt, and pulled the chain lock into place.

The living room and dining area, one long, L-shaped open space, was littered with twenty-four interconnected desktop computers and enough wiring to make the rooms look like a den of snakes. There were no pictures on the walls and no couch or recliner or television set. Just twenty-four desktop units, a small card table set up in the dining area, two folding chairs, and a beanbag.

In the single bedroom were two air mattresses.

Kumari had chosen this unit twenty days ago because it met all three criteria on his list: high-speed Internet access, a monthly lease, and anonymity. He paid cash in advance and signed the application using a phony name.

He hustled across the room, accidentally kicking one of the computers. He checked the lock on the sliding-glass door that led to a small patio, then pulled the blinds on the glass door and placed his laptop on the card table so he could hook it up to his improvised network.

Each computer had been maxed out with memory upgrades, according to Rajat, and then linked in such a way that the total network capacity exceeded 256GB of RAM. The network was protected by three separate firewalls.

Kumari's screen flickered to life, and he entered his password. He connected immediately to the Internet and opened the program that gave him remote access to Rajat's computer screen. Kumari typed the words *I'm on* so that they showed up on a document opened on Rajat's desktop. Then Kumari opened a second window on his computer that pulled up the video and audio feed from Rajat's computer. When the MGM Grand conference room came into focus with the same grainy resolution that Kumari had witnessed during the trial runs, he began to relax a little.

Rajat, the more electronically savvy of the two, had wired his laptop with a hidden video camera on the back, inside a port that looked like an Internet connection. He squeezed a corresponding microphone into what appeared to be an expansion port on the side. His computer now fed Kumari a live, blow-by-blow broadcast of the meeting.

Though the resolution was not the best, Kumari could make out three business executives within range of the wide-angle lens. They sat

across from Rajat, separated from him by a large, polished-wood conference table. The man in the middle had dressed casually; the others wore suits. All three appeared younger than Kumari had anticipated.

The Chinese American man on the right looked more like a thug than a businessman. He had a low brow and thick neck, with veins bulging from a too-tight collar on his shirt, as if he couldn't afford a custom fit. On the right side of his face, a scar started at his sideburn and ended at his jaw. His right ear was smaller than the left, as if he had lost part of it in a knife fight and a plastic surgeon had just sewn up what was left. A tattooed cobra was coiled on the left side of his neck, poised to strike at any moment.

Kumari pegged him as security.

The man on the left, pale-skinned and tall, seemed infinitely more sophisticated. Eastern European perhaps, with ice blue eyes and short, Nordic-blond hair. He slouched in his seat, a cool, disinterested look on his face.

In the middle, the position of influence, sat a young man approximately Rajat's age, probably the CEO, dressed in a black linen shirt, with long dark hair, a trim goatee, and dark, brooding eyes that seemed to pierce Kumari's screen.

Kumari had missed the introductions and casual conversation, if any had taken place. Rajat was sketching out the logistics of the transaction, a complicated matter since Rajat had insisted on having the fifty million dollars in the bank before the algorithm was transferred. The men opposite Rajat were employed by a deal-brokerage agency that represented the three largest Internet security companies in the world. Understandably, they wanted to test the algorithm before any money changed hands.

"You will forgive my skepticism," the middle man said, his expression difficult to read, "but the implications of your claims are enormous. Not to mention the fact that our top consultants believe rapid factorization into prime numbers is a mathematical impossibility."

"Did you bring the numbers?" Rajat asked calmly. His voice came across louder than the others, based on his proximity to the mike. Kumari could discern no wavering in it, no hint of the frayed nerves that surely had to be racking his young partner.

“Of course.”

“Then we can talk theory or we can talk application,” Rajat said. “I mean, why bother finding out the true facts if we can just sit around and speculate based on the opinions of your experts?”

“We can do without the sarcasm,” the Nordic man said.

The CEO betrayed no emotion as he consulted a folder. He dictated a long number that Rajat typed into the open document on his screen. Next, Rajat read back the digits to the CEO, all 197 of them, double-checking them slowly. It took nearly two minutes just to verify the number.

Kumari smiled. Child’s play. Using his algorithm, he should have the answer in less than five minutes. His laptop could process this one by itself. He copied and pasted the number into his formula.

As Kumari’s computer crunched the algorithm and Rajat plunked away on his own keyboard, plugging in phony numbers and functions, the conference room grew remarkably quiet, tension filling the air, as if the executives didn’t dare jinx this moment by making a sound. From miles away, Kumari could almost tell what they were thinking: *If this works—if this really works—it would destroy the foundation of Internet encryption.* The RSA protocol, used extensively to secure transactions on the web, would be a sieve. It was, as Rajat had exclaimed when Kumari first told him about the breakthrough, “The key to every lock!”

Kumari had started working on his formula nearly twenty years ago as the result of a challenge from a fellow professor. Kumari called it a serious academic pursuit, a scholar’s desire to break new ground. Others called it an obsession. Whatever the label, he dedicated his best and most productive years to accomplishing something unprecedented: discovering an order in the sequence of prime numbers. Most theorists believed that the numbers sprang up like weeds among the natural numbers, obeying no law other than the law of chance. It was impossible to predict where the next prime number would sprout, they said.

But where others saw chaos, Kumari saw the faintest outline of order. Over time, the outline became more discernible, the order more predictable, his convictions more resolute. He ultimately developed

a complex mathematical algorithm, stunning in its reliability, which could quickly and accurately generate the prime factors of any number, no matter how large.

Delighted, Kumari wanted to publish the formula in a respected, international mathematics journal. But his protégé immediately saw the tragic consequences of such an approach. The Internet would be thrown into chaos until encryption technology evolved in a different direction. When it did, the algorithm would be useless in a matter of months.

Instead, Rajat talked Kumari into selling the formula to a conglomeration of the top global encryption companies. “It could help them see the Achilles’ heel in their encryption techniques,” he argued. “They could take steps to make Internet transactions more secure, to provide better protection for privacy.” Then the clincher: “We could use the proceeds to help the Indian church provide Christian schools for the Dalits. An education in English for thousands of children. A way out of caste-based shackles.”

It seemed like a good idea at the time. There were already hundreds of such schools in existence, but they needed thousands more. Otherwise, the children would be relegated to the plight of their parents—degrading work on the fringes of society. Going through life with their heads down, cleaning the bathrooms of the upper castes. This money could be a good start.

Kumari jolted back to the present when the answer popped up on his screen after only three minutes of computation. He typed in the results for Rajat.

Not surprisingly, Rajat decided to add a little drama. He had not been pleased to learn that the brokerage company was owned by the Chinese. The least he could do was have a little fun with them. “If I remember correctly,” he said, his voice gaining confidence, “a recent attempt to find the prime factors of a 193-digit number took more than three months, with eighty different computers working simultaneously. Altogether, about thirty years of computer time was utilized. Is that what you gentlemen recall?”

The three men all looked at Rajat stone-faced; they did not like being mocked. “And this number,” Rajat continued, “roughly the same

length, has just been factored in the amount of time it might have taken you to go to the bathroom.”

“And the answer?” the CEO said. His voice had an aggressive, no-nonsense edge to it.

Rajat read the prime numbers while the CEO checked his folder. He shot a glance to his Nordic friend, received a barely perceptible nod, and flipped the page to another enormous number. “This time,” the CEO said, “we’ll use a number the size our clients would typically use in their protocol. According to the deputy director of the National Security Agency, it should take all the personal computers in the world on average about twelve times the age of the universe to solve it by a traditional sieve method. We’ll see if your formula can do it in a few minutes.”

For ten minutes, they read and checked the digits of the new number. When everybody was satisfied, Kumari plugged it into his formula. This time, Kumari put his entire little network on the task.

Twelve minutes later, Rajat read the answer to the astonished men—two prime factors, each over two hundred digits long.

The business executives no longer tried to act unimpressed. The CEO called an impromptu meeting, stepping behind the chairs, where the men formed a little huddle, holding their folders in front of their mouths so Rajat couldn’t read their lips. When they slid back into their seats, the Nordic man eyed Rajat the way a spectator might eye an illusionist at a magic show—scrutinizing, confident there was some sleight of hand that eluded the normal eye.

“We’d like to try one more thing,” the CEO said, “just to prove our own firm’s security hasn’t been breached by someone on the inside providing the answers in advance. We’re going to call a consultant for another test number, different from the ones we brought to this meeting. It could take a few minutes to get this one last beta.”

Twenty minutes later, after Rajat had factored the third number even more quickly than the second, Kumari noticed a final change in demeanor on the other side of the table. Even through the grainy resolution, he could tell Rajat was now dealing with converts—men who had seen something that the foremost experts in the world had assured them was impossible.

“Who else has access to this formula?” the man on the right asked.

“Why is that relevant?” Rajat responded.

“Our price is based on exclusivity. If we’re the only ones with this formula, it’s worth fifty million dollars. If others have it, the value diminishes substantially.”

“Only one man has seen this formula,” Rajat replied. That part was true, Kumari knew. But the person wasn’t Rajat.

The men across from Rajat nodded at each other, and Kumari breathed a sigh of relief. It looked like they might actually have a deal. “Praise God,” he murmured. Rajat had been right. *No worries.*

“I think we’ve proven the concept,” Rajat said. Kumari could hear Rajat rustling papers, probably the draft contract he had negotiated by phone prior to this meeting. “Let’s get this signed so you can wire the money.”

The CEO nodded but was no longer looking at Rajat. Instead, he seemed to be focused on a spot directly above and behind Rajat. Kumari heard another noise—a door opening perhaps, or someone entering the room?

The CEO gestured toward the apparent newcomer. “This is another one of our colleagues, Dr. Johnny Chin,” the CEO said, not bothering to stand. “He’s one of our firm’s best troubleshooters.”

Alarm bells went off in Kumari’s head as he watched the Nordic man smirk and heard Rajat say a casual “Nice to meet you.” Kumari was fairly certain that Rajat had remained seated, and Kumari wanted to write a warning on Rajat’s screen. But he couldn’t risk it if the man was behind Rajat, possibly watching the screen that very second.

A troubleshooter? For what?

Without warning, Kumari heard a frantic “Hey, what’s going—?” followed by a sickening sound like a snake’s tongue darting through the air, the deadly hiss of a gun silencer. Red liquid and white fragments splattered the far wall and sprayed the shirt of the young CEO. Kumari heard a thud, the sound of bone hitting something.

The CEO sprang from his seat, shouting, leaning forward, his slacks taking up the full screen of the video feed now.

“Get his head off the keyboard,” he shouted. “Blood will fry that thing.”



PART I

THE BOUNTY HUNTER

Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter if you're a lion or a gazelle: when the sun comes up, you'd better be running.

HERB CAEN,
FORMER *SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE* COLUMNIST

1

MONDAY, AUGUST 9

THE LONGEST THREE DAYS of Clark Shealy's life began with an expired registration sticker.

That was Clark's first clue, the reason he followed the jet-black Cadillac Escalade ESV yesterday. The reason he phoned his wife, his partner in both marriage and crime . . . well, not really crime but certainly the dark edge of legality. They were the Bonnie and Clyde of bounty hunters, of repo artists, of anything requiring sham credentials and bold-faced lies. Jessica's quick search of DMV records, which led to a phone call to the title holder, a Los Angeles credit union, confirmed what Clark had already guessed. The owner wasn't making payments. The credit union wanted to repo the vehicle but couldn't find it. They were willing to pay.

"How much?" Clark asked Jessica.

"It's not worth it," she replied. "That's not why you're there."

"Sure, honey. But just for grins, how much are we passing up?"

Jessica murmured something.

"You're breaking up," Clark said.

"They'd pay a third of Blue Book."

"Which is?"

"About forty-eight four," Jessica said softly.

"Love you, babe," Clark replied, doing the math. *Sixteen thousand dollars!*

"Clark—"

He ended the call. She called back. He hit Ignore.

Sixteen thousand dollars! Sure, it wasn't the main reason he had come to Vegas. But a little bonus couldn't hurt.

Unfortunately, the vehicle came equipped with the latest in theft protection devices, an electronically coded key supplied to the owner. The engine transmitted an electronic message that had to match the code programmed into the key, or the car wouldn't turn over.

Clark learned this the hard way during the dead hours of the desert night, at about two thirty. He had broken into the Cadillac, disabled the standard alarm system, removed the cover of the steering column, and hot-wired the vehicle. But without the right key, the car wouldn't start. Clark knew immediately that he had triggered a remote alarm. Using his hacksaw, he quickly sawed deep into the steering column, disabling the vehicle, and then sprinted down the drive and across the road.

He heard a stream of cursing from the front steps of a nearby condo followed by the blast of a gun. To Clark's trained ears, it sounded like a .350 Magnum, though he didn't stay around long enough to confirm the make, model, and ATF serial number.



Six hours later, Clark came back.

He bluffed his way past the security guard at the entrance of the gated community and drove his borrowed tow truck into the elegant brick parking lot rimmed by manicured hedges. He parked sideways, immediately behind the Cadillac. These condos, some of Vegas's finest, probably went for more than a million bucks each.

The Caddy fit right in, screaming elegance and privilege—custom twenty-inch rims, beautiful leather interior, enough leg room for the Lakers' starting five, digital readouts on the dash, and an onboard computer that allowed its owner to customize all power functions in the vehicle. The surround-sound system, of course, could rattle the windows on a car three blocks away. Cadillac had pimped this ride out fresh from the factory, making it the vehicle of choice for men like Mortavius Johnson, men who lived on the west side of Vegas and supplied "escorts" for the city's biggest gamblers.

Clark speed-dialed 1 before he stepped out of the tow truck.

“This is stupid, Clark.”

“Good morning to you, too. Are you ready?”

“No.”

“All right. Let’s do it.” He slid the still-connected phone into a pocket of his coveralls. They were noticeably short, pulling at the crotch. He had bought the outfit on the spot from a mechanic at North Vegas Auto, the same garage where he borrowed the tow truck from the owner, a friend who had helped Clark in some prior repo schemes. A hundred and fifty bucks for the coveralls, complete with oil and grease stains. Clark had ripped off the name tag and rolled up the sleeves. It felt like junior high all over again, growing so fast the clothes couldn’t keep up with the boy.

He popped open the hood of the wrecker, smeared his fingers on some blackened oil grime, and rubbed a little grease on his forearms, with a dab to his face. He closed the hood and walked confidently to the front door of the condo, checking the paper in his hand as if looking for an address. He rang the bell.

Silence. . . . He rang it again.

Eventually, he heard heavy footsteps inside and then the clicking of a lock before the door slowly opened. Mortavius Johnson, looking like he had barely survived a rough night, filled the doorway. Clark was tall and slender—six-three, about one-ninety. But Mortavius was tall and bulky—a brooding presence who dwarfed Clark. He wore jeans and no shirt, exposing rock-solid pecs but also a good-size gut. He didn’t have a gun.

Clark glanced down at his paper while Mortavius surveyed him with bloodshot eyes.

“Are you Mortavius Johnson?”

“Yeah.”

“You call for a tow?”

Mortavius’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. The big man glanced at the pocket of Clark’s coveralls—no insignia—then around him at the tow truck. Clark had quickly spray-painted over the logo and wondered if Mortavius could tell.

Clark held his breath and considered his options. If the big man caught on, Clark would have to surprise Mortavius, Pearl Harbor-style, with a knee to the groin or a fist to the solar plexus. Even those blows would probably just stun the big man momentarily. Clark would sprint like a bandit to the tow truck, hoping Mortavius's gun was more than arm's length away. Clark might be able to outrun Mortavius, but not the man's bullet.

"I left a message last night with the Cadillac dealer," Mortavius said.

The Cadillac dealer. Clark was hoping for something a little more specific. "And the Cadillac dealer called me," Clark said, loudly enough to be heard on the cell phone in his pocket. "You think they've got their own tow trucks at that place? It's not like Caddies break down very often. If everybody could afford a Caddie, I'd go out of business."

Clark smiled. Mortavius did not.

"What company you with?" he asked.

"Highway Auto Service," Clark responded, louder still. He pulled out the cell phone, surreptitiously hit the End button with a thumb, then held it out to Mortavius. "You want to call my office? Speed dial 1."

Mortavius frowned. He still looked groggy. "I'll get the keys," he said.

He disappeared from the doorway, and Clark let out a breath. He speed-dialed Jessica again and put the phone back in his pocket. He glanced over his shoulder, then did a double take.

Give me a break!

Another tow truck was pulling past the security guard and heading toward Mortavius's condo. Things were getting a little dicey.

"I left some papers in the truck you'll need to sign," Clark called into the condo. But as soon as the words left Clark's mouth, Mortavius reappeared in the doorway, keys in hand.

Unfortunately, he glanced past Clark, and his eyes locked on the other tow truck. A glint of understanding sparked, followed by a flash of anger. "Who sent you?" Mortavius demanded.

"I told you . . . the Cadillac place."

"The Cadillac place," Mortavius repeated sarcastically. "What Cadillac place?"

“Don’t remember. The name’s on the papers in my truck.”

Mortavius took a menacing step forward, and Clark felt the fear crawl up his neck. His fake sheriff’s ID was in the tow truck along with his gun. He was running out of options.

“*Who sent you?*” Mortavius demanded.

Clark stiffened, ready to dodge the big man’s blows. In that instant, Clark thought about the dental work the last incident like this had required. Jessica would shoot him—it wasn’t in the budget.

A hand shot out, and Clark ducked. He lunged forward and brought his knee up with all his might. But the other man was quick, and the knee hit rock-solid thigh, not groin. Clark felt himself being jerked by his collar into the foyer, the way a dog might be yanked inside by an angry owner. Before he could land a blow, Clark was up against the wall, Mortavius in his face, a knife poised against Clark’s stomach.

Where did that come from?

Mortavius kicked the door shut. “Talk fast, con man,” he hissed. “Intruders break into my home, I slice ’em up in self-defense.”

“I’m a deputy sheriff for Orange County, California,” Clark gasped. He tried to sound official, hoping that even Mortavius might think twice before killing a law enforcement officer. “In off hours, I repo vehicles.” He felt the point of the knife pressing against his gut, just below his navel, the perfect spot to start a vivisection.

“But you can keep yours,” Clark continued, talking fast. “I’m only authorized to repo if there’s no breach of the peace. Looks like this situation might not qualify.”

Mortavius inched closer. He shifted his grip from Clark’s collar to his neck, pinning Clark against the wall. “You try to gank my ride at night, then show up the next morning to tow it?”

“Something like that,” Clark admitted. The words came out whispered for lack of air.

“That takes guts,” Mortavius responded. A look that might have passed for admiration flashed across the dark eyes. “But no brains.”

“I’ve got a deal,” Clark whispered, frantic now for breath. His world was starting to cave in, stars and pyrotechnics clouding his vision.

The doorbell rang.

“Let’s hear it,” Mortavius said quietly, relaxing his stranglehold just enough so Clark could breathe.

“They’re paying me six Gs for the car,” Clark explained rapidly. He was thinking just clearly enough to fudge the numbers. “They know where you are now because I called them yesterday. Even if you kill me—” saying the words made Clark shudder a little, especially since Mortavius didn’t flinch—“they’re going to find the car. You let me tow it today and get it fixed. I’ll wire four thousand bucks into your bank account before I leave the Cadillac place. I make two thousand, and you’ve got four thousand for a down payment on your next set of wheels.”

The doorbell rang again, and Mortavius furrowed his brow. “Five Gs,” he said, scowling.

“Forty-five hundred,” Clark countered, “I’ve got a wife and—”

Ughh . . . Clark felt the wind flee his lungs as Mortavius slammed him against the wall. Pain shot from the back of his skull where it bounced off the drywall, probably leaving a dent.

“Five,” Mortavius snarled.

Clark nodded quickly.

The big man released Clark, answered the door, and chased away the other tow truck driver, explaining that there had been a mistake. As Mortavius and Clark finished negotiating deal points, Clark had another brilliant idea.

“Have you got any friends who aren’t making their payments?” he asked. “I could cut them in on the same type of deal. Say . . . fifty-fifty on the repo reward—they could use their cuts as down payments to trade up.”

“Get out of here before I hurt you,” Mortavius said.



Clark glanced at his watch as he left the parking lot. He had less than two hours to return the tow truck and make it to the plastic surgeon’s office. He speed-dialed Jessica.

“Highway Auto Service,” she responded.

“It didn’t work,” Clark said. “I got busted.”

“You okay?”

He loved hearing the concern in her voice. He hesitated a second, then, “Not a scratch on me.”

“I told you it was a dumb idea,” Jessica said, though she sounded more relieved than upset. “You never listen. Clark Shealy knows it all.”

And he wasn’t listening now. Instead, he was doing the math again in his head. Sixteen thousand, minus Mortavius’s cut and the repair bill, would leave about ten. He thought about the logistics of making the wire transfers into accounts that Jessica wouldn’t know about.

Pulling a con on pimps like Mortavius was one thing. Getting one by Jessica was quite another.