

CHASING CLAY

THE DEWITT AGENCY FILES #3

**a novel by
LANCE CHARNES**

EXCERPT



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No animals were harmed in the writing of this novel.

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Chapter 1

25 APRIL

My phone rings. This doesn't happen a lot these days; not many people call me other than Chloe, my roommate. The number's blocked. "Hello?"

"Where are you right now?" A voice like coarse sandpaper on steel. Gotta be Len, my federal probation officer.

It's nine-ish on a cloudy, cool Monday morning. I sigh. "At work." I opened the store at five, and since then I've been dealing vente Caramel Macchiatos and other caffeinated candy drinks to the usual going-to-work and post-gym crowds.

"You sure?"

I'm sitting at my usual place on the sidewalk along Hill, two tables up from Santa Monica's version of Main Street, with a cup of two-percent milk and a marked-out onion bagel from yesterday's baked goods. Breakfast.

When I got out of prison in 2014, I was ordered into three years' supervised release—kind of like probation, but different—with a few special conditions of supervision, including community service and paying restitution. I'm a few weeks away from finishing my second year. Len had been slacking off on me until a couple months ago when some of the Central District of California's probationers violated out spectacularly. Now he's doing these random spot-checks to see if I'm secretly cooking meth on the side.

Because he's my PO and he's been okay until this mess started, I don't say the first four or five things that come to me. "Let's see. I'm wearing a green apron. I'm sitting here in Ocean Park where I have no other reason to be. I had to get up at *four in the fucking morning* to help open." *Bring it down...* "Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

"I don't see you."

"You're *here*?" I look around in a near-panic, but all I see is some woman in a crop top and yoga pants walking away with a trenta something that's mostly whipped cream. Len must be in the

store. Grilling my boss comes next. "Is this the start of my audit?"

"It is if you don't sell me some coffee in the next five minutes..."

"I'm on break."

"You going with that, Friedrich?"

The new employment audit's got me crapping cinder blocks. Some of those violators were slaving away in jobs that apparently didn't exist. Len tells me he has to look at work product, time cards, and the other bread crumbs you leave behind when you have a real job. I really work for Starbucks, but the money I use to pay my fiscal debt to society supposedly comes from a New York City architectural/engineering firm I supposedly do freelance design work for. The firm exists, but I've never seen it and I've never drawn a single plan for them.

Len's waiting next to the cashier station, arms folded, doing his bulldog imitation. He's only five-nine and looks like a bald Sam Waterston, but I know he's made of old steel cable and iron filings. He growls, "Finally."

This is getting old. "I'll ask again—is this my audit?"

"Not yet. Like I told you, I'm doing the real shitbags first. Your time'll come. You're a felon—shit happens to you. But while I'm here, I'll watch you pull my drink."

"Like you haven't seen that before." He ordered a grande Americano with an extra shot of espresso. Not hard to do unless you're being graded. I think about slipping him an extra extra shot so he'll have a heart attack. With my luck, I'd end up with a real asshole for a PO.

He sips and nods. "Good enough."

"You gonna interrogate my boss next? She loves that shit, you know." *Not*. I always get crappy shifts afterwards.

"Not this time." He leans over the serving counter toward me. "Color inside the lines. They're looking for reasons to twist our shorts. You got a year left—don't fuck it up."

Another year of this. It was just about tolerable until recently. I'm back to reporting by phone three times a week (I'd been down to once a week) and (a new wrinkle) monthly in-office interviews. I still have to file monthly written reports, get permission to leave Southern California, and I can't leave the country... legally, at least.

And now this employment audit's heading my way. This is bad... *real* bad. Like, going back to prison bad. I have no idea how I'm getting past that.

I fill a few more orders, then get the boss to let me take the last ten minutes of my break. I stew about Len's visit and the short leash he's put on me again. At least in prison you know where you are and what the rules are. Outside, it's almost like being free until they remind you you're not.

I get into such a dark place that when my phone rings again, I bark into it, "What do you want now?"

Silence. Then, "One-Seven-Nine?"

This is so out-of-context that it takes me a moment to figure it out. "Olivia? How'd you get my number?"

"Do you truly need to ask?" Olivia has this creamy Oxbridge accent on a smooth mezzo voice that usually makes me feel all warm and safe. It's not working right now because she's calling me out of the blue on my personal phone. "You didn't answer your agency mobile."

"That's because I'm not working for you right now."

"Nonetheless. When can you be at the airport in Santa Monica? Allyson wants to see you immediately."

Oh, shit. "What'd I do?"

"Nothing... yet."

Chapter 2

I cover a lot of ground over the next three hours.

I don't leave work until 12:30—I have a full shift, and Allyson won't pay me for leaving early—then go home, change into my new slate-gray Canali Siena suit, and pick up my agency phone and laptop. Olivia's arranged a town car for me so I don't have to take the bus everywhere. Allyson's Cessna Citation XLS is waiting at the Santa Monica airport when the limo drops me outside the executive terminal. I've never been on a business jet before—it's a pretty sweet ride, with a bar and snacks and everything. Not having to deal with TSA is a bonus.

A limo collects me at the Eagle County (Colorado) Regional Airport and hauls me to the Sonnenalp, a huge *faux*-Bavarian hotel/resort in the eastern half of Vail's ski village. I have an impression of stone facias, heavy-timbered balconies, and tiled hip roofs on my way from the limo into the lobby. Allyson left me a present at the fake-half-timbered front desk: a key card to a room.

The room's on the third floor. An entry hall lined with paneled, stained doors; an arch into the white-plaster bedroom; a king bed facing a large pine armoire and matching cubbyhole desk. It's nice, quiet, and comfortable. Am I staying here tonight? It's past six and getting dark out.

Then I notice a royal-blue Vail Executive Forum registration folder on the desk with most of its guts taken out, and a black roller bag stowed between the desk and armoire. I catch a whiff of jasmine and sandalwood when I open the closet. Allyson's perfume. The closet's full of women's clothes—*nice* women's clothes. The kind she'd wear.

This is Allyson's room?

Allyson DeWitt owns the DeWitt Agency. She's my other boss. We "fill needs" for people or organizations rich enough to hire us to fill them. The things I do for her aren't always legal, but that's where I really get the money I use to pay off the banks and the feds. I've worked for the agency off and on for a year and I'm

not in prison again. I must be doing something right.

The white-painted washstand in the bathroom is crowded with all the magic potions Allyson uses to keep herself from looking like the portrait she hides in her attic. The armoire holds the TV, safe, and minibar. The desk's also a three-drawer dresser. Allyson still wears very nice lingerie. The other two drawers aren't as interesting.

While I wait, I look up the Vail Executive Forum on my work phone, a big quad-band Samsung. It's an annual by-invitation "gathering of corporate and public opinion leaders" put on by the Vail Global Coalition toward the end of April, when the resort's between winter and summer seasons. A pit stop between Davos and the Milken Global Forum, I guess, so CEOs can avoid going back to work.

I startle when the front door lock clicks and the door swings open.

It's Allyson. Her eyebrows jump. "Mr. Friedrich. You're here... finally." A little irritated, not fatally.

Allyson's in her late-ish forties. She's everything I love in a woman: almost black hair, dark eyes, olive skin, great cheekbones, better legs, and a smooth alto voice that's stuck in my dreams for years. Not beautiful, but striking, with the kind of presence that makes you look when she comes into the room. Like now.

"They had us flying in circles around the airport for, like, forty-five minutes. Some dude had to have his jet towed off the runway. That's gotta be embarrassing, you know? You're out there trying to impress last year's Miss Universe and your airplane dies." *Stop babbling.* Allyson does this to me.

She plops her purse—a black D+G Sicily top-handle satchel that costs only 170 hours of me pushing coffee—on the green-and-white plaid bedspread. "I'd planned for you to arrive *before* cocktail hour, not after." Her tone says miffed, not mad. Mad's not a good look on her.

"Sorry."

Another thing I like about Allyson is that she wears clothes well. I had to learn a *lot* about fashion at the art gallery where I used to work so I could tell how much money our clients had. Allyson's outfit is a long-sleeved, above-the-knee sheath with red, white, and black geometric print blocks by Prabal Gurung, one of

Mrs. Obama's designers, and black Prada ankle boots with cone heels. She's wearing a few months of my Starbucks pay.

She hauls in a deep breath, then lets it out slow. She waves away my sorryness. "Can't be helped. My apologies. This conference always brings out the worst in me. Did you have a pleasant trip?"

"Yeah, it was good. Thanks. Why am I here?"

"Yes, of course." Allyson steps to the armoire, opens the safe, and pulls out a slim manila folder that she hands to me. "Please read the top document. I'll change while you're at it. They never schedule enough time for the women to change for dinner." She tosses her conference badge and lanyard onto the bed as she quick-steps to the closet.

"Why change? You look great." A little flattery never hurts.

The corner of her mouth turns up. "Thank you. It's formal." She braces a hand against the closet doorjamb and unzips her left boot.

"Would you like me to step out?" Not that I object to watching Allyson undress; it's just good form to ask.

She drops the left boot and goes to work on the right. "That won't be necessary. You won't see anything you haven't already, and I'm confident you can control yourself."

Wow. That's the first time since my job interview that she's referred to... that night.

I've lusted after Allyson for the almost six years since our one-nighter. My little brain still wants a replay. It's arm-wrestling my big brain, which knows a black widow when it sees one.

The other boot clunks to the floor. She starts fiddling with her zipper, which is apparently in an especially awkward place.

The little brain wins a round. "Here, let me get that."

She gives me a look. Not *The Look*, which is lethal, but *a* look. "Read."

It's on Department of Justice letterhead from the United States Attorney, Northern District of California. Nothing good ever comes from DOJ. Addressed to a federal judge at the courthouse in downtown San Francisco. Re: United States v. Matthew Benjamin Friedrich.

I stop breathing. I've seen too many of these. They were never good news.

It's the typical legalese written by somebody who's never been exposed to standard American English. The first paragraph's the usual throat-clearing and recitations. The second paragraph...

Seriously?

I read it three times. Some of it is *blah blah blah*, but one line explodes in my brain: "...recommend to the court a modification to the terms of the sentencing agreement under Rule 32.1(c)(2) to effect early termination of the supervised release judgment order..."

Early termination.

Freedom.

With this letter, I wouldn't have to care about that employment audit anymore. I'd be free. I'd get my passport back. Len wouldn't come randomly to where I live or work to ambush me, my landlord, my boss, or my roommate.

I know: it could be worse. But seriously? I want to be a grownup again.

I skim to the end to see if there's a part where they say "just kidding." There isn't, but there's no date and no signature. "Ally—um, Ms. DeWitt?"

"Yes?" Her voice echoes out of the bathroom.

"What's with this letter? And how come you have it and not my lawyer?"

"Does it please you?"

"So far. I need to read it carefully. They forgot to sign it."

"That wasn't an oversight."

I read the rest of the page-and-a-half letter carefully and finally spot what I'd missed the first time: Mr. Friedrich is supposed to render valuable service to the Department of Homeland Security. "If this' a quid, what's the quo?"

"What you read is the reward for successfully completing the project I intend to assign to you."

She doesn't explain. I lean against the wall next to the bathroom door. "Can I read the project description?"

"Not yet. Our client has become interesting to one of your federal law enforcement agencies. He—"

"Arrested?"

"Not yet, but possibly soon. He's been negotiating with the two lead agencies and has come to an understanding with them. He's agreed to fund a discreet private adjunct to their investigation and

supply information to them. In return, they'll grant him immunity. He's been a steady client of ours, which is why he hired us to manage the investigation."

Alarm bells started ringing somewhere around *private adjunct*. "Hold on. We're gonna run an off-books operation for some three-letter agency? That's nuts."

"We've done just that before, though not recently." The calm in her voice makes it sound like she thinks this is just business as usual. "I want you to be project lead."

Another explosion in my head. "Don't I have to be an associate to do that?" I'm a junior associate now, the lowest of three pay grades in the agency.

"Yes. That's why in addition to the gift from your government, I intend to give you a provisional promotion to associate, with this project as your probationary period." That's a €500-a-day pay bump. She *really* wants me on this thing. "You did excellent work on the Portsmouth project, though a bit... unconventional. Understandably, the client is less than pleased by the outcome. The client's representative, though, is extremely pleased with how you worked with her and saw to her needs."

I wonder if she told Allyson about the... *personal* services I provided that weren't about burgling museums and forging paintings. "Thanks for the feedback. I'll assume this project has something to do with art." What I learned at the gallery gets me Allyson's art-related projects.

Right then, I realize something's missing from the offer letter. I comb through it word-by-word while I try to listen to Allyson.

"In a manner of speaking, it does. The client may have done something... *irregular* with antiquities from Southeast Asia. Pottery, in this case."

I don't know anything about pottery, and most of what I know about Southeast Asia came from watching *Apocalypse Now*. I'm about to mention it when a little voice whispers "early termination" in my ear. I'll lay off on the honesty for now. "He's in trouble with ICE?" That's Immigration and Customs Enforcement, part of DHS. If this guy's smuggling, they're the ones who care.

"Among others, yes. I believe your IRS is also interested. Our investigation is to identify the people trafficking this pottery and relay the information to the client."

It's not here, it's not here... "Why doesn't ICE do it? They've got investigators."

Allyson doesn't answer right away. Was that a trick question? Then she says, "Excuse me. Lipstick. I'm told that host-nation cooperation has been almost nonexistent. Your government would get better cooperation if it wasn't so squeamish about paying commissions to foreign officials."

Commissions = bribes. "Allyson... is there another letter?" Shit. I called her *Allyson*.

"What do you mean?" Apparently she didn't notice, or care.

"Another letter, offering immunity."

The door opens and Allyson finally emerges. Amazing. Her emerald-green, sleeveless floor-length column gown skims her bust and hips, just enough to let you know what's there but not so tight that she looks like she's wearing a sausage casing. Sequins cover the upper bodice's back and sides, flashing like little green stars in the hallway light. Her outfit doesn't show much skin, but it's sexy as hell.

She hangs up her day dress, bends (*obbbbbbb*) to scoop up a pair of black patent pumps, then turns to face me. The dress isn't as modest as I thought; the skirt's slit about two-thirds of the way up her right thigh. "No, there are no other letters for you."

My heart stumbles. *No other letters* for you. "For the agency?"

"Why do you ask?"

She must've thought of this. She's nothing even close to dumb. "Look, the only reason the feds would want an off-books, deniable investigation is because they expect us to do illegal stuff they can't. Information from informants is admissible even if they get it illegally. If we get caught, the feds don't know us. If we don't have immunity, we're targets." One of those sneaking suspicions sneaks up on me. "Did *you* get immunity?"

She finishes slipping on her shoes and sweeps off toward the safe. "That's not your concern. Your concern is—"

"That's *exactly* my concern." Her non-answer tells me the real answer is *yes*. "If there's gonna be line-crossing, *I'm* the one who'll be doing it, not you. They know about me now. You'll be reporting to the client, right?"

"Of course." She's at the desk, rooting through little figured silk pouches for jewelry. Her freshly lipsticked lips are getting

thinner.

She doesn't see it... or, worse, she doesn't care. That scares me even more than the situation itself. "And he'll hand it to the feds. They'll have a paper trail with *my name* on it. If anything goes sideways and they need a scapegoat, all the fingers'll be pointing at the ex-con."

Allyson straightens and plants a fist on her hip. "Be reasonable. Why would they prosecute an operation they created? They'd only embarrass themselves."

"They won't be there forever." Somehow I got to only a couple paces from her. "Look at the crazies running for president right now. What if one of them wins in November? What if they do something incredibly stupid, like fire all the USAs and put in a bunch of zealots? They'll be looking for dirt to throw around."

Her lips are gone now. She folds her arms. "You weren't worried about this in Portsmouth." The ice is back in her voice.

"We weren't telling the feds about Portsmouth." I turn tight circles on the carpet to try to vent a little steam somewhere other than in Allyson's face. "We weren't inviting them to *watch* in Portsmouth. Can't you see it?"

"I can see that you've let your paranoia get the better of you."

That stops me. I stare at her for a few moments. Her face is tight and closed. "Paranoia? I'm an ex-convict. A felon. Have—"

"Interstate transportation of stolen property." She almost sneers.

"A felony. I still served time." I wrestle my voice down. "Have *you*? Ever been to prison?"

"Not in this country."

"I have. I've seen the system from the inside. You can't trust these people." I rush her, my hands up, pleading. "Please. For all our protection. Go back to them. Get immunity for you, for me, for the agency. Or walk away from it. It's not worth the risk."

Allyson's arms are folded tight enough to leave bruises. Her neck and ears are turning scarlet. "Do you think I would walk away from this after everything I went through to secure this project? To get *that*"—she stabs a finger toward the file in my hand—"for *you*? How many thousands of dollars it cost to bring you here so I could tell you about this personally, thinking you might be *grateful*? There's no renegotiation, Mr. Friedrich. No going back for more.

The deal is what it is.” She closes the gap between us, radiating heat, and glares through my skull. “You can let me pay you a lot of money and regain your freedom. All you have to do is complete the project.” Her fingertip bores a hole through my breastbone. “Don’t you dare tell me it’s not enough.”

She’s not listening. I give it one more shot. “If the feds decide to take me down, I’m going back in the hole. This time, it won’t be a nice, safe prison like Pensacola. They’ll put me in with the animals. I won’t survive that. Fourteen months in stir with crooked execs almost drove me nuts. Drug dealers and mobsters? I can’t do it. I won’t.”

Allyson sniffs and shakes her head. “You’re scared?”

“I’m terrified. This setup terrifies me. Yeah, great upside... but the downside’s a bitch.”

Her eyes slash my face. Her knuckles are white. I’ve never seen her so angry. “You refuse to do this?” Her voice is low, like the growl a panther makes before it bites through the neck of a deer.

Think hard. Think fast. “Unless there’s immunity—”

“There is no immunity.”

“No. I won’t.” God help me. “I like breathing. I like being outside. I can’t risk that.”

The points of her jaw glow white. I expect to hear teeth breaking.

Shit. I can smell the freedom that letter can give me, but I can also smell prison disinfectant. What’d I just do?

“Coward.” She thrusts a loaded finger toward the door. “Get. Out. Of my room.”

Chapter 3

It gets real dark after the limo passes the west edge of Vail. Scattered window lights here and there, mostly on the south side of I-70, like square yellow stars. The moon's not even out yet, or it's behind a mountain.

It's dark inside me, too.

Did I totally fuck up, or dodge a bullet? Or both? My brain's been going back-and-forth on that since I walked out of the Sonnenalp. I can't even tell anymore if I was right. Was all that me being paranoid? Was it me being smart for a change?

Smuggled pots. How bad could it be? I don't know how that trade works in Vietnam, Cambodia, wherever. In southern Europe, a lot of the trafficking goes through one mafia or another. If it's that way in Southeast Asia, I could end up doing deals with some seriously bad dudes while one of our endless number of police agencies looks over my shoulder. Thailand's got a military dictator now. Myanmar's full of ethnic militias that double as drug gangs. There's been a guerrilla war going on in the southern Philippines for about a century. Some descriptions of the corruption in the area include "endemic," "all-pervasive," "spectacular," and "inescapable." Is there a line for bribes on my expense report? Do I have to report kickbacks? I should check that out.

The short answer: it can get pretty bad. At best, I'll be papering the place with bribes; at worst, I'll be playing games with mobsters and drug runners. And if I pay off the wrong person (or don't pay off the right one), I end up in a hellhole Third World prison where I'll be the protein supplement for dinner.

Maybe I dodged a bullet.

But... early termination. Freedom.

I've been in the system one way or another for five years. They've controlled my life even when I wasn't in prison. If you've never experienced it yourself, you have no idea how demeaning and infantilizing it is. It's like having World's Strictest Parents, except they can ground you for real.

What would I do differently if they cut the cord? I don't know. Maybe nothing. Just knowing that Big Brother isn't watching anymore might be enough. I won't have to get Len's permission if I decide to change jobs, or if I manage to develop a girlfriend and want to spend time at her place. I could travel more for the agency and not be scared out of my wits that TSA's going to throw a flag on the play. Skip the crazy spy-vs.-spy shit I do on projects to keep from violating out.

The agency. Allyson.

I've pissed her off before, but never this bad. The look on her face when she threw me out won't stop looping in my head. Do I even still work for her?

Why's she so hot to have me do this? She's gotta know we didn't do ceramics at the gallery. The closest we ever got to Asian art was a few Russian Impressionist canvases we sold. The antiquities market was too dirty even for us.

I think back to something she said at the hotel: *after everything I went through to secure this project*. What was that exactly? Why did she work so hard to get this? Or... was this done *to* her? Did some spooky agency put the screws to her? The Mob?

I shake my head hard to derail that train of thought.

Freedom. Yeah. *Think about that*.

Freedom.

There's nothing outside. No lights, only the dark shapes of hills or mountains blocking the stars. I close my eyes and let my head fall against the headrest. My brain throbs from the fight and the tension and all the questions.

Do I play, or do I sit it out?

Even if I want to play, will Allyson let me, or did I slam that door?

Those questions have a cage fight in my head for I don't know how long. Along with my headache, my stomach starts to tie itself in knots. *Make a decision, idiot*.

My work phone rings. Allyson calling to say *sorry*? Yeah, right. "Hello?"

"Matt? Carson."

Carson was my partner on two of my three projects. She's a tough, smart Canadian ex-cop who's built like a Bengal tiger and has roughly the same disposition. We're past the I-hate-you stage

and we get along okay... but not okay enough for this to be normal. I open my eyes and sit up. "Carson? Why are you calling?"

"What. The *fuck*. Did you do?" This buzzsaws through my ear. "Allyson called. Almost fucking melted my cell. What'd you say to her? She wants to kill you."

Seriously? I mean, I know it's usually a figure of speech, but with Allyson... does she do that? "Why'd she call you?"

"She thinks you listen to me. What happened?" Her voice is flat Midwestern vowels with a little Canuck twist.

The thing is, Allyson's sort-of right. I do usually listen to Carson. When I don't, I often regret it. "What did she tell you?"

"You turned down a project. An important one. Says she busted her ass to make it good for you. You said no. What the *fuck*?"

There's lights ahead to the left. A green highway sign zooms past: "Eagle 1 Mile." We're almost at the airport. I lean forward to ask the driver, "Can you stop?"

"On the highway? No. There's an exit up there. That okay?"

"Yeah." I pull the phone away from my chest. "Hold on a sec. I need to get rid of the audience."

"Where are you?"

"In a limo in the middle of the Rockies. Hold on."

A minute later, we pull off the freeway and turn right into a gas station and convenience store called (I kid you not) Kum & Go. I bail out of the limo as soon as it stops. It's freaking cold out. I button my coat while I un-mute my phone. "Still there?"

Carson growls, "Still waiting."

I tell her the story. The whole thing start to end. Just having to put it into words brings it into focus, though I still don't have a solution.

Carson listens without interrupting until I'm done. She mutters something I'm sure I don't want to hear clearly. Then, "Doesn't matter."

"What?"

"Doesn't. Matter. That letter real?"

"I'm pretty sure. I've seen enough of them."

"Know what that is? A fucking *gift*. You get one of those a *lifetime*." Her voice sings the hair around my right ear. "You blew it off? You fucking *idiot*!"

“Whoa! Wait. Did you listen to the rest? ICE? No immunity? Paper trails? Did—”

“Shut up and listen.” She takes a very audible deep breath. “Never heard of Allyson doing so much to make a project look good to one of us. For us? She forks over the shit sandwich, tells us to eat. *You?* She covers it with *candy*. Lights a *candle*. Don’t know what you got on her, but...” Carson breathes hard a couple times. “Know what I’d do to get one of those? What I’d give to get kicked loose from Rodievsky? Anything. I’d do *anything*, doesn’t matter.”

Rodievsky’s her other boss: a Russian mafia don or whatever they’re called. Carson owes him a scary lot of money. When she’s not working for Allyson, she works for him. “Would you really? If you got thrown back to him, he’d kill you.”

“Think I don’t know that? Still worth a try. What’s your excuse? Your feds get you, they put you in jail. Boo-hoo. You’ve been there.”

“They’ll put me in with the freaks this time. I won’t come out.”

“Don’t fuck up, then.”

“What’s so hard about immunity? The feds give that out like parking validations.”

“She say she doesn’t have it?”

“She said *I* don’t.”

“Bet she does. That’s how she rolls. Get over it. Another thing. You spit in Allyson’s face. You don’t make it good; you never get another project. Good luck paying off your tab.”

I haven’t even thought about that. My past sins left me with over \$500,000 in mostly non-dischargeable debt: restitution, student loans, interest, and my ex’s credit card and medical debts. At \$10 an hour at Starbucks, I’ll be dead before I dig out. It goes faster at €1500 a day.

My driver’s smoking by the limo’s nose. I watch a trickle of cars fill up under the flat canopy over the pumps. I’m getting seriously cold out here, but I can’t move. “I don’t know what to do.”

Carson sighs. “Sort it out. Told you what not to do. You throw this away; I’ll never talk to you again. I don’t talk to fucking idiots.”

Great. “You’ll come visit me in prison?”

She snorts. “Go inside for something you do for Allyson? You got a job when you come out. She’ll square it with you. Seen her do it. Look. You’re smart—*use it*.”

Then she's gone.

I drift between the store and the mini-carwash out to the sidewalk at the edge of the slope above the freeway. Headlights and taillights streak by below me, though I don't really see them.

Listen to Carson, or listen to myself? She knows how Allyson's system works, but I know how the criminal justice system works (or doesn't). Which do I trust less?

As an ex-con, my job with the agency is my only way to earn enough money even semi-legally to get out of debt. But if enough of Allyson's people get convicted for her to have a policy for what to do with them when they get out? No. Not going there.

I wake up my phone to tell Olivia I'm out. There's a missed call and a voicemail waiting for me. Len's number. The timing doesn't give me a good feeling. I reluctantly tap the "play" triangle.

"Friedrich? Len. Where the hell are you? Some woman called, said you left the state. Your roomie doesn't know where you are. Call me ASAP or the flag goes up."

Allyson called my PO. I didn't see that coming. That's like calling SWAT on my house for a fake hostage situation.

It's a warning.

Chapter 4

It's a long wait. Over two hours. I'd go to dinner, but the thought of eating makes me sick. So I sit and watch the numbers change on the digital clock in Allyson's room. Call my boss at the store, tell her I won't be in tomorrow. Try to rehearse my lines.

The door clicks open at ten. Allyson stands there, silent, her right hand holding the door open, her left gripping a beaded clutch that matches her gown. She stares at me for a long time. As usual, I can't read her, and I'm pretty good at that with other people. Normal people.

She finally paces slowly through the hall, sits decisively in the armchair against the wall opposite me, throws her right leg over her left. The dress falls open at the slit. She lets me look for a few moments, then flips the skirt over her knee.

There's a long, *long* silence.

I swallow. "I'm sorry."

Allyson's left eyebrow ticks up a notch. "That bought you ten minutes." How a voice like hers can be arctic, I don't know, but it is. "Use it well."



Another great thing about the Citation is that it has real tables, not those useless folding things in airliners. That means I have room for my Burger King dinner while I go over the project description on my laptop.

It's all about pottery.

Your mom's china vase is a tchotchke. Your great-grandma's favorite stoneware urn's an antique. Your great-great-etcetera-grandma's best earthenware amphora is an antiquity. The same general arrangement of baked mud goes from garage-sale reject to priceless cultural heritage object after a couple millennia. And while you might not be able to give away mom's vase, you're not supposed to sell great-great-etcetera-grandma's amphora—it's

illegal.

In general, I approve of this. Some of the poorest places on Earth are the richest in cultural heritage goods. But think about how the world works: if a poor country has something a rich country wants—oil, timber, minerals, labor, women, art—the rich country just swoops in and takes it. Sometimes richer people in the poor country organize this—the government, a warlord, a mafia (often all the same thing). Maybe a few locals get paid a couple bucks to dig up or cut down their own savings account; otherwise, they get nothing. All the upside goes to well-off people selling the loot to richer people in rich countries.

It's a global industry. One expert I read said that 90% of the antiquities in private hands in the U.S. are looted. The client's in good company.

According to the project description, somebody discovered what's left of an eight-hundred-year-old culture on the northwestern Thai/Myanmar border. It's called Nam Ton, after the local river. They made pots—lots of them—and they're gorgeous. They're coming into the U.S., probably illegally, and getting bought by people who can afford to lay out high four or low five figures for pots with missing pieces.

Our client's arrangement with ICE—the customs cops—is that he'll turn over the entire supply chain from start to end. That means whoever takes it out of the ground, whoever gets it to port, whoever ships it to California, and how it gets into the hands of the gallery the client bought it from.

Three big problems jump out from the beginning.

Problem #1: the client wants the project done in sixty days from the time it starts. I don't know if this is his idea or the feds'; either way, it's too short.

This project's basically a long con. I learned during my fourteen-month, government-paid vacation at its all-inclusive facility in Pensacola that the thing that kills long cons most often is speed. I can't just grab people by the throat and say, "Tell me where the pots come from." I have to work my way in. That takes time. If ICE has been on this for two years (like it says in here) and hasn't found out this stuff yet, why does anybody think we can do it in two months?

Unless they don't think we can and they're setting us up to fail.

By “us,” I mean “me.” Then ICE gets to bust the client and perp-walk him to show everybody that even a rich white dude can get arrested every once in a while.

Problem #2: the client bought his pots in San Francisco. That’s in the same state I live in. I was in the news four-to-five years ago... a *lot*. My name, my picture. If I walk into any gallery in the state, it’s better than even odds somebody’ll recognize me, no matter what name I’m using. I have to be very careful, but not too careful, because I have only sixty days.

Problem #3: the client’s lending us his art advisor to introduce me to the two people the client thinks are running the smuggling scheme on this end. That’s a person I can’t control getting a front-row seat to whatever I do. Also, it’s somebody who gets a lot of time to figure out I’m maybe not my cover identity. Unless she’s involved and she’s a future defendant, she sounds like a perfect witness for the prosecution.

Given what the client’s paying, I guess he gets to call the shots.

These problems are why I asked to read the project description right there in Allyson’s room after she handed it to me on a little blue thumb drive. She threw me out instead.

I probably shouldn’t turn the plane around and go back to Vail. Talking to Allyson is out for now. But when we land, I can go to the next best thing.



There’s no town car waiting for me when I get to Santa Monica. The nice people at Atlantic Aviation, the bunch who takes care of the business jets, let me sit in their remarkably generic conference room while I wait. I dig out my agency phone and hit the contact labeled “Mom.”

Two rings later, Olivia says, “Good evening. How may I help you?”

Allyson owns the DeWitt Agency—it’s her last name, after all—but Olivia runs it. She keeps track of us associates, helps us get things we need, processes our expenses, and makes sure our pay gets to our offshore accounts. She’s our psychologist, mother-confessor, and concierge. I’m told none of us have ever met her.

“Hi. One-Seven-Nine.” My employee number. “I got my

assignment.”

“So I hear. Are you still in Vail?”

“No. Santa Monica. Will there be a car, or do I take a taxi and expense it?”

“I’ll arrange for something. In future, when your plans change, please inform me—I can serve you better.” I think that was a scolding. “How else may I help you?”

“I need to talk to Allyson. How do I reach her?”

She pauses. “You’ve not had your fill of that for the year?”

“Guess you heard. She’s putting me in a bad position.”

“I know. Knowing her as I do, I’m certain she was less than sympathetic. That must have been frustrating for you. Nonetheless, one mustn’t bait the bear.”

Tell me about it. “I apologized. A lot.” *Groveled* wouldn’t be totally inaccurate. “I still need to talk to her. I read the project description on the flight home. There’s a few things I need to know before I start.”

Olivia pauses again. “May I offer you a spot of advice?”

“Okay.”

“Avoid Allyson for a spell. Several days would be a good start. She’s quick to anger and slow to cool. You ought not remind her of your existence until she’s recovered. If you insist, though...”

“No, that’s okay. Can you relay some questions to her and let me know what she says?”

“I can try. I’ll not guarantee anything. What do you need to know?”

“The client’s lending his art advisor to us. To Rick Hoskins. Does she know who I am really, or does she think Hoskins is a real person?”

“Right. Go on.”

“Does the client know my name? I want to know if Allyson negotiated with DHS directly or if she did it through the client. If it’s the first one, that’s one less opportunity for my name to get out.”

“Right. What else?”

“Is the sixty-day limit from the client or the feds? It’s too damn short. If it’s the client’s thing, it would be great if she could get him to stretch it. Ninety or 120 days would be better.”

“Right. Anything else?”

I saved the best—or worst—for last. “I need to know the client’s name.”

Olivia lets out a little cough. “You know that’s—”

“Against the rules, yeah, I know. Except it wasn’t last project. And this time around, he supposedly referred Hoskins to the art advisor. If somebody asks me where I found her or how I got into this game, I need to give them a name. If somebody asks me about this guy, I need to recognize his name so I can answer. I can’t wave my hands around this. I’ll find out who he is when the indictment’s filed, but it’s too late then. Get my drift?”

“Clearly. Allyson will not be pleased.”

“She’s already not pleased. I doubt she can get any less pleased. We might as well take advantage of that.”

“More easily said than done. I’ll do my best. You haven’t any more questions, have you?”

I’ll take the hint. “That’ll do it for now. I’ve got a couple for you, though. Requests. I need to buy a bunch of books in the next day or two. Probably a few hundred dollars’ worth. Can I expense them even though the project hasn’t officially started yet?”

“They’re related to the project, yes?”

“Yes. Call it homework.”

“I see no problems with that. I’ll not look too closely at the dates.”

Phew. “Thanks. Also... it’d be real useful if I didn’t have to work this coming week. It’s an extra eight or ten hours a day I’ll have available for studying. Is there any way I can get a stipend or something? I can’t not have money coming in.”

I can hear her breathing and a keyboard clicking. “For a week? Is that necessary?”

I was hoping to not tell anybody else about this, but it’s a reasonable question. “If I tell you something in confidence, can you keep it from Allyson?”

“Well... it depends, of course. If you’re plotting to kill her, I’ve an obligation to warn her. Anything less dramatic is situational.”

“It’s nothing that dramatic.” Deep breath. “This project’s all about pottery and Southeast Asia. I don’t know a Krishna from a Ganesh, and I don’t know shit about pottery.” Actually, I *do* know Krishna from Ganesh—Ganesh is an elephant—but that’s as far as it goes. “I need to do some serious homework so I don’t sound like

an idiot. That means a lot of reading and visiting museums. I really need to do this right." The downside looks worse the longer I stare at it.

"I understand. I assume you'd rather Allyson not know. How much are you asking for? What *are* you paid for a day of work?"

"On a full shift—which doesn't happen all the time—I get eighty bucks minus taxes."

"Good God. That's pathetic."

"It's good for counter service. Welcome to America."

Olivia sighs. "Let me see what I can do. I may be able to juggle some accounts to beat out a few dollars. I'll let you know."

"That'd be great. Thanks. Um... can I get a partner?"

"Only as needs must. If this is a veiled way to ask if One-Two-Six will be joining you, she will not. She's unavailable." One-Two-Six is Carson's employee number.

"Okay." Not okay. I'd hoped she could help. It'll feel weird without her. This will be my first time working a project alone. "That lawyer of Allyson's—does he do criminal?"

"There is no one solicitor. She has several. As for criminal law, I understand a number of her solicitors have a great deal of experience with it." One thing that makes it hard to get irritated at Olivia is that she's always so calm, no matter what's falling from the sky. Shit, in this case. "Please keep in mind that Allyson will review your performance at the end of this project and decide whether you may keep your temporary promotion."

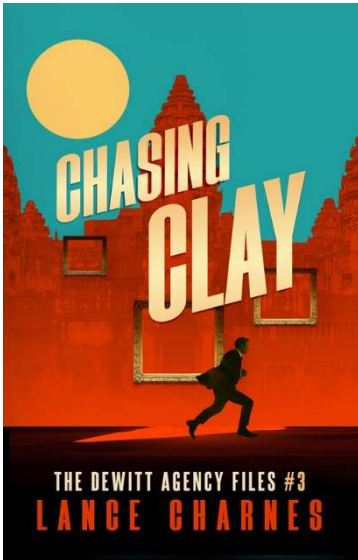
As if I didn't have enough to worry about. "Is there a test?"

"The project is the test. Good luck."

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