

# Coco Stiletto

By J.P. Voss

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## 1

I was a refuge from the L.A. *Rock Scene* living behind the *Orange Curtain* in a studio apartment over by Disneyland. Anaheim had a bad case of *June Gloom*, and I had a hangover to match. There was no reason for me to get out of bed until some asshole started thumping on my front door.

I checked the alarm clock. “Eight o’clock on a Saturday. This better be good.”

I stashed my bong, pulled on a pair of boxer shorts, and stumbled to the window. Pulling back the curtain, I squinted into the silver haze of another overcast morning and focused on my impending doom standing at the door. I opened up to a couple of fresh-faced Newport Beach storm troopers dressed in casual riot gear.

I thought I was seeing double. They looked like twins. Mid twenties, clean shaven, flat tops, starched uniforms stretched tight against muscle bound bodies, they were a couple of squeaky clean All American boys, prototypical Orange County cops.

They told me their names, but it didn’t register. My attention was fixed on the holsters strapped to their duty belts. One carried a Beretta—the other a Glock.

Beretta asked, “Are you John Struggles?”

I nodded. “I was in Harbor Court on Wednesday. I paid those traffic warrants. I’ve got the receipt in my Corolla.”

“This isn’t about a delinquent traffic violation Mr. Struggles. My partner and me are assigned to a taskforce conducting a murder investigation.”

I tried to shake out the cobwebs. “A what?”

“You seem nervous. Is there a problem?”

“I’ve got a lot of problems. But it hasn’t gotten so bad that I’ve started killing people. What’s this about a murder investigation?”

“Do you mind if we come in?”

“Kind of. The place is a mess. I just moved in.”

Glock puffed up and shoved his badge in my face. I leaned back, and the cop stuck his forearm in my chest. He swept me out of the way and stepped inside. Beretta followed. The two cops stood at Parade Rest while I sat on the edge of the bed. Beretta came forward and handed me a glamour photo of a demonic beauty posing in a black leatherette jumpsuit.

“What do you know about this woman?”

My stomach did a backflip, and I felt that uncontrollable longing in my groin. Then my nut-sack shriveled up, and my hand got clammy. I laid the photo on the bed.

“She was Coco Stiletto when I met her six months ago at the Rainbow Club in West Hollywood. I was working security, and she was the lead singer in the performance-art punk band—Annihilation of Innocence.”

“Did you have a relationship with this woman?”

“I guess you could call it that.”

“Tell us about it.”

“Like I said, I met her at the Rainbow. Her band had a two-week gig, and it was my job to guard her dressing room before and after the band’s set. She always wore fantasy clothing, and it definitely had an effect on men.”

“What effect did she have on you?”

“The first time I saw Coco, I almost swallowed my tongue.”

Beretta smiled. “What else? Were the two of you intimate?”

“Nothing like that, although she twisted me around her little finger, and I made the mistake of lending her a thousand bucks just after Christmas last year. She dropped out of sight New Years Eve at midnight, and I kissed the money goodbye.”

“Is that the last time you saw her?”

“No...I ran into her a few months later.”

Beretta handed me a crime scene photo. It was a naked dude lying on a bed. There was blood everywhere.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

“Don’t you recognize him?”

“I can barely see him; he’s covered in blood. This is some freaky shit. What’s this got to do with me? I don’t know this guy.”

“Take another look,” he said.

I ignored the gore and concentrated on the guys face. He was young, early twenties, with gaunt features and sandy blonde hair. He looked happy to be dead. I said, “It’s the drummer from Annihilation of Innocence? You think Coco did this?” I flipped the picture over and handed it back to Beretta. “I heard his boyfriend did it.”

“The file is still open,” Beretta said. “Because the murder took place on Valentines Day, the Hollywood Sheriff’s working the case chocked it up to a jealous lover. They called it gay rage. We have some doubts.”

“It could have been a woman,” I said. “Chicks are way more dangerous than men.”

“That’s possible—but not likely. The puncture wound in that boy’s neck is eight inches deep, and judging by the extreme trauma, the perpetrator used an object with a dull blade. We’re looking for a suspect with a great deal of upper body strength—most likely a man. I’d say someone your size would be a good fit for the job.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He ignored my question while his narrowing eyes gave me the third degree. “When did you see Coco again?”

“Last March. I got a gig working the door over at the Seventh Veil Strip Club. That’s where I ran into her, only she had a whole new look, and she was calling herself Betty Starlight.”

He handed me another glamour shot, a 1950’s Jane Mansfield platinum blonde type.

“That’s her,” I said, “I hadn’t seen her in three months. It was like she went into a cocoon and the raven-haired dominatrix came out a voluptuous blonde. It was a completely different look, but it had the same effect on men. When she went on stage and started stripping, I forgot all about the thousand bucks she owed me.”

“Why were you fired from the Rainbow Club?”

“It was just a misunderstanding,” I said.

“That’s what you call it,” Beretta replied. “A cocktail waitress told us you went insane and hit a customer for no reason. The manager told us you had unresolved aggression issues, and she was forced to let you go? She thought you might be dangerous.”

“I’m not dangerous. The whole thing was a set up. That chump had it coming.”

“Why were you fired from the Seventh Veil?”

I didn’t respond.

“Another misunderstanding?”

“Sort of.”

“A couple of the dancers up there told us that you blew your top and threatened the manager.”

“That whole thing was complete bullshit. The manager at the Seventh Veil had a thing for Coco, I mean Betty. The guy actually ordered me to stop talking to her. He claimed I was obsessed. I thought he was way out of line, and I guess I got pissed. The whole deal got a little loud, and I told him to fuck off. That was it. He fired me.”

“The dancers we spoke to told us you came back a few days later, and the threatening behavior started all over again.”

“He wouldn’t give me my last check. You’re damn right I threatened him.”

Glock reared up like Godzilla and started breathing fire in my face. “You just implicated yourself in a murder asshole. The West Hollywood Sheriffs reported that the manager from the Seventh Veil Strip Club was found dead in his apartment two nights ago. Someone snapped the head off a drumstick and rammed the shaft through his neck. You play the drums—don’t you?”

“A lot of dudes play the drums.”

“Why’d you get fired from your old band—Slammerkin?” Glock asked.

“That’s personal.”

Glock smirked. “We talked to the new drummer in Slammerkin. The guy said you couldn’t play the drums for shit.”

“That’s bullshit. I fuckin’ rock. I’m one of the best Heavy Metal drummers around. The guys in my old band are a bunch of posers. And that guy they got to replace me is a pussy. It’s his fault I got fired from the Rainbow.”

“You think it was his fault you got fired?”

“It was totally his fault,” I said. “The new drummer and the rest of the punk-ass bitches from Slammerkin came into the Rainbow one night. They were getting blitzed, and the new dude kept giving me shit. Finally I smacked the guy. It was all his fault I got fired.”

“Typical sociopath,” Beretta said.

“What?”

“It’s never you—is it Mr. Struggles. In the last eight months...you’ve been kicked out of a rock band and fired from two jobs, but none of it’s your fault.”

“You’re twisting things around.”

“You’re the one who’s twisting,” Glock said. “Twisting in the wind. You don’t know whether you’re coming or going. When was the last time you saw the woman known as Betty Starlight?”

“It was April 1st, April Fools Day. I doubled down and lent her another grand. That’s the last time I saw her. That man-eating bitch owes me two-G’s, and I’m broke. If I don’t find a new gig soon, I’m on the street.”

“Were not concerned about your personal problems,” Glock said.

Beretta handed me another picture, a classy looking brunette oozing out of a timeless black dress and dripping in bling.

“Who’s this?”

“Take a closer look,” Beretta said. “Her name is Margaret Letters. She’s married, or she was married, to a prominent land developer in Newport Beach by the name of Huntington T. Letters. He’s dead, and Mrs. Letters is missing.”

I stared at the picture. It was some society bitch holding a glass of champagne and hobnobbing at some gala event. “This isn’t the same woman, and I don’t know anything about any murder in Newport Beach.”

“I think you know more than you’re telling us,” Beretta said. “If we find any connection between you and Mrs. Letters, we’ll be back with an arrest warrant.”

Glock flexed his pecks, and the exaggerated veins on his muscle-bound neck popped out. Then he got frisky, grabbed a handful of my hair, and jerked my head sideways. Leaning over, he poked his nose in my face. “Once we connect the dots—we’ll be back to bust your sorry ass.” He let go of my hair and backed off. “You look like shit. Who you trying to look like—Curt Cobain? He’s dead.”

Beretta looked at me like I was some kind of serial killer. The guy gave me a bad case of the heebie-jeebies, and the hair on my arms stood up. I thought he was going to take a nightstick to me. After the visual beat down, he walked away without saying a word. Glock followed.

## 2

I went in the bathroom, stuck my head in the toilet and puked. I thought about loading a bowl and drifting away on a transcendental magic carpet, but I knew that wouldn’t get it done, so I fell in the shower and turned on the cold water. I flopped around like a mackerel until I was sure I couldn’t be any more miserable. Then I shaved and got out.

Pulling an Official Anthrax T-shirt over my head, I stepped into a pair of tattered Levis, laced up my Converse high-tops, and bounced out the front door. The morning haze burned off as I walked, and the sun baked the back of my neck. I squeezed behind the wheel of my Toyota and took my phone off the charger. I started to make a call when I realized I didn’t know where to begin. I wasn’t even sure who I was looking for.

“I guess I should start at the beginning. What do I know about Coco that the cops don’t?”

I closed the phone and started the car. I took Chapman Ave. over to Harbor Blvd. and turned south. A mile later I turned into the driveway of the Humdinger, a lingerie bar in the City of Garden Grove. I’d stopped in two days earlier to apply for a job as a

bouncer, and I ran into a chick I knew up in L.A. She'd been a dancer at the Seventh Veil strip club, and she dated the bass player in Coco's old band, Annihilation of Innocence. I thought she might give me a lead.

I parked in the back next to a construction truck and passed a couple of Harley's on my way through the front door. The smell of beer almost made me heave. I shook it off and focused on the scantily clad young lady standing behind the bar. She had perky tits and a smile to match. I kept my eyes on her headlights and grabbed a stool. I ordered a Coke.

"I'm looking for a girl who works here by the name of Cherry Hemingway."

Before the bartender could speak, a wave of Salsa Rock came blasting out of the sound system, and the Latin lovely did the Cha-cha-cha down to the end of the bar and disappeared around the corner. Cherry returned in her place.

Wearing a scorching hot babydoll nightie and a pair of fire engine red five-inch heels, she came strutting around the corner just as the music ended. Using her fingernails like a comb, she brushed back her candy-apple hair and struck a pose. "You still looking for a job, or just getting an early start?"

I lifted my glass. "Coca Cola, straight, no chaser. I've sworn off drugs and alcohol for the next twenty-four hours. I'm on a mission. You remember Coco Stiletto?"

"Bitch."

"You don't by any chance know how to get in touch with her?"

"As if."

"Didn't you date the bass player in her old band?"

"Yeah—we went out a few times."

"You know where he's at. Do you have the dude's phone number?"

Cherry poured herself a Club Soda, squeezed a lime over it, and dropped in a straw. She said, "I haven't heard from him in a couple of months. I called him last Saturday, but his cell number is dead."

"Where was he from?"

"He was an Orange County native, Midway City born and bred. His folks live a couple miles from here. We went over there for dinner last Christmas. They were real nice."

She told me the bass player's last name and his parent's first names. When *Back in Black* by AC/DC came booming from the loudspeakers, Cherry got up on the bar and started dancing. A couple of Mexican Painters shooting pool in one corner voiced their approval in Spanish, and a crusty biker shooting pool in the other corner barked like a dog.

I left the Humdinger for the peace and quiet of the parking lot. I called information and got the number I needed. Then I called the bass player's parents in Midway City, a tiny municipality on the other side of Garden Grove. They told me their son was at work. When I asked for his number, they said he didn't have a cell phone, but they did have the phone number for the contractor that he worked for. I called the contractor, and he told me the bass player was over in Costa Mesa doing some tile work on a remodel. When I got to the job site, the dude looked miserable. Musicians should never do manual labor.

"Hey man," I said. "Remember me? I worked at the Rainbow up in L.A."

"Yeah—yeah—I remember. You were the bouncer who was really drummer in between gigs."

“That’s right. I was wondering if you’d seen Coco.”

“Yeah dude. I went to see Warbeast at the Galaxy Theatre. She was there, and she looked smokin’ hot. Coco was talking about putting another band together.”

“Really,” I replied, scratching my chin. “She’s putting together another band. Maybe I could play drums. That would be so fucking epic.”

“Yeah dude—you should call her and set up an audition. She said she wanted to get started right away. I hope so. Construction work is sucking the life out of me.”

The dude gave me Coco’s new cell number and told me she was living in Huntington Beach. I punched in her digits, and she picked up on the first ring.

“Who’s this?”

“Who’s this?” I replied.

“Who would you like me to be?”

“I was looking for Coco Stiletto.”

“If you want to find Coco, meet me at Turk’s Bar in Seal Beach at precisely one o’clock.”

“How will I know who you are?”

“Look for Lucifer’s daughter sipping an apple martini. Don’t look directly in my eyes, or you might turn to stone.”

“I might turn to jelly,” I said.

“Don’t be late,” she said, closing the conversation.

I rushed to my car, hopped in and squealed out, heading south on Harbor Blvd. toward Newport. As I got close to the beach, the cool breeze lifted my spirits, and I really felt that my luck was about to change for the better. That was when I hit the weekend traffic jam at Coast Highway. It was 12:30. I crawled through Newport. Traffic bogged down around the Huntington Beach pier, and I watched the digital clock on my dash while the minutes ticked away. At 1:15 I pulled into the parking lot at Turk’s Bar, a cocktail lounge on the ocean side of Coast Highway in the little hamlet of Sunset Beach. I parked in the Fire Lane and ran for the door.

I paused in the entry while my eyes adjusted to the light. The bartender was a husky man well past his prime with a full handlebar mustache and curly black hair.

He said, “You must be John. You’re late.”

“Is she still here?”

He grabbed a gift box off the backbar and handed it to me. “I never saw her. A cab driver came in here at exactly 1:00 and handed me this box. Then he hand me a C-note. The driver described you to a T, the shaggy blond hair, the Heavy Metal t-shirt, even the Converse High Tops.”

I tore off the ribbon and ripped open the box. There was a folded note on top of tissue paper. The note instructed me to put on the shirt, and meet Coco in the lobby of the Huntington Hilton at exactly 2:00. The shirt she bought me was an up-scale t-shirt with some weird looking guys painted on it. The material was nice, although I liked my Anthrax t-shirt better, but if Coco wanted me to wear this freaky looking thing, I was cool with that.

Things were looking better. Coco was buying gifts, and leaving big tips. She had cash. I might get back some of the money she owed me. If she was starting a new band, I might get back in a group. Best of all, she was waiting for me at the Hilton.

I was less than thirty minutes away with time to spare. I relaxed in traffic and thought about what Coco would be wearing. I could picture her carving carpet in a pair of thigh-high stiletto boots wearing a barely legal mini. In my mind she wasn't wearing a top. In my sick and twisted exhibitionist mind, Coco was standing in the middle of the lobby at the Huntington Hilton half naked, half erotic as fuck. That's when I rear-ended some family from Missouri.

The minivan I hit was twelve years old, and the damage was minor. The husband was a nice guy who admitted to stopping short, and we agreed to forget about it. Things went pretty well, considering the circumstances, but it cost me about twenty minutes.

I arrived at the Hilton at 2:10. Coco wasn't there, so I asked the concierge if he'd seen a femme fatale force of nature sitting in the lobby.

"You must be John," he said, with a double entendre smile. He handed me a gift box. It was long and narrow, like a big jewelry box. "A gentleman from one of the taxi companies came up to me a few minutes ago and asked me to give you this when you arrived."

"What else did he say?"

"He said this was your last chance."

The box had some heft to it, and I thought it might be a watch. The contents of the box were way cooler than a watch. It was a set of drumsticks, an awesome collector's set. The sticks were autographed by Lars Ulrich of Metallica, and they had the tour info on them—1984 Seven Dates of Hell Tour.

I stroked the hardwood shaft and then opened the note. My instructions were to rent a room and get some rest, because the party was just getting started, and the best gift was yet to come. I danced over to the desk clerk and started playing an ultra fast drum roll on the check-in counter. The manager came out of his office and gave me a dirty look, so I stopped and put the sticks away.

The clerk looked down his nose. "May I help you Sir."

"How much for a room?"

"Let me see what I have available." The guy acted like I was wasting his time while he typed something in the computer. "I have a room in the back for \$240.00 a night."

My mouth dropped open.

"If you'd like," he said. "I can give you directions to the nearest Motel 6."

I pulled out my wallet and threw my Visa Card on the counter. It was declined. I wasn't sure if I had enough money in my checking account, but I took a chance and tried my Debit Card. When it was accepted, I breathed a sigh of relief.

After I got to my room, I flopped on the bed and drifted into a fantasy world where I was shredding a drum solo at the MTV Music Awards. All my heroes, guys like Bill Ward from Sabbath and Lars from Metallica, were standing on the side of the stage and they were cheering me on. When my drum solo achieved mythical status, I heard tapping on the door. Like Pavlov's Dog, I started to salivate.

I slithered to the door and pushed down the handle. The door opened by itself. Coco was wearing a black fedora, Havana shades, a secret-agent trenchcoat, and a pair of soul-stealing stilettos. She stepped forward, and I stumbled back."

"Silly boy," she said. "What's the matter; are you afraid of Coco?"

My head bobbed up and down.

Coco walked through me and ordered me to sit on the bed. She threw off her hat and shades, and then peeled off the trenchcoat. As the garment slid off her shoulders, my eyes followed it to the floor. Armed with a leather corset and seven-inch stilettos, Coco towered over me in all her unbridled female majesty.

My head started to spin.

Coco told me to take off my all my clothes, except my boxer shorts. She slammed me on the bed, held my arms down, and mounted me. Coco was bending my mind with an exotic grind, and I was well on my way to a higher state of human existence, when I completely lost focus and prematurely tossed off.

“Silly boy.”

She tugged off my boxer shorts and threw them in the trash. Then she pulled the plastic liner out of the trashcan and tied it off. Without hesitation, she pulled on her trenchcoat and put the bag in her pocket.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Be a good boy and don’t ask silly questions.” Coco slid a small bundle of envelopes from her coat pocket and threw them on the bed. “Be a darling and open these for me while I freshen up.” She slid a letter opener out of her boot sleeve and handed it to me. “Use this to open them.”

Coco went in the bathroom, and I stared at myself in the mirror. In a daze, I started opening the letters and mumbling to myself.

“What just happened? I can’t believe I so completely whiffed it. Seventh game of the World Series, bottom of the ninth, two away, bases loaded, I step up to the plate and strike out. I’ll never get another chance with Coco. I can’t fuckin’ believe it.”

“Silly boy,” she said, coming out of the bathroom.

“Sorry about the mishap. You kind of caught me off guard.”

Dismissing my comment with the wave of her hand, Coco took back her things, picked up her hat and sunglasses, and walked out the door. I felt my soul wither and die. I couldn’t believe it. I sat on the bed for fifteen minutes before I could even move. I called her cell, but she didn’t answer. I got dressed and looked around the hotel. No luck. I called every hour until midnight. She didn’t pick up. I waited until four in the morning. She didn’t come back.

### 3

I left the Hilton sometime after four and took PCH south. Dense fog shrouded the coast, and the glare of the streetlamps looked broken in the mist. I turned off PCH and headed north up Newport Blvd. toward the freeway. I was feeling in the dumps, so when I spotted an open donut shop, I whipped my car across three lanes and stopped out front.

I ordered chocolate milk and three strawberry cake donuts. After I paid, I turned around looking for a place to sit and was engulfed by the emptiness. No longer last night, but not quite daylight, the loneliness of the city was palpable as I stared across the vacant tables. I spotted a dark corner and headed that way. Taking a seat, I noticed a pair of UGG Boots tucked up on a chair, and I realized I wasn’t alone.

Huddled in a cubbyhole behind a support column, a girl cocooned in a *Cal* hoodie was writing in a spiral notebook. Strands of chestnut hair fell across her face, and she was



wearing smart-girl glasses. When she looked up, I realized the depth of her understated beauty.

“Don’t try anything,” she said. “I know jujitsu.”

“I have a black belt in Karate.”

“I’m a paid assassin for the CIA,” she replied. “And I’ve been trained in the ancient art of killing a man with a donut.”

“I surrender.”

“That would be wise,” she said, and went back to her writing.

“What’s your name?”

“Sarah.”

“Sarah Sensible Shoes,” I replied.

“That’s right,” she said. “I’m sensible, and reliable, and loyal, and caring. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“Not a thing. I like your hoodie. Do you go to Berkley?”

“I’ll be a junior next year. Why’d you make that comment about my shoes?”

“I always go for chicks that wear exotic footwear and dress like sluts, but they always end up making me feel like a fool. Your practical shoes made me think that maybe I’ve been dating the wrong kind of girls.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe you’re sitting next to the best thing that’s ever going to happen to you, and you don’t even realize it because I’m not wearing *Fuck Me Pumps!*”

“Whoa.”

She laughed. It was genuine and sweet. Her cheeks flushed, and she was even prettier than before. She said, “I’m sorry. My boyfriend of two years just dumped me for some tramp. He said that’s what he wanted, so I said she’s all yours. I wrote him a poem. Do you want to hear it?”

I nodded.

“I gave everything—Why’d you blow it—Heart and soul shattered—How can I show it—I could be dead—You wouldn’t know it.”

“Killer poem. I feel the exact same way. I just had the woman of my dreams crush my soul. It was like I ceased to exist.”

“Are you sure she was the woman of your dreams, or was she just a dark fantasy that left you feeling empty with a life that had no meaning?”

“That blows my mind. This could be a cosmic encounter?”

“It might be a meaningful encounter, or we could be ships passing in the night?”

“Before we go any further,” I said. “Who’s your favorite band of all time?”

“Rage Against the Machine.”

“Awesome choice. This could work. Would you like a donut?”

“I’ll take a blueberry muffin.”

“Would you like some more tea with that muffin,” I said, picking up her half-empty cup before she could answer and strolling over to the counter. I returned with a fresh cup of tea and a hot-out-of-the-oven muffin. “I’m John. Do you mind if I join you?”

“Okay...but only because you’ve got good taste in music. Although you are kind of cute, just not my type.”

“So...” I said, settling in and taking a closer look. “What are your plans for summer break?”

“I volunteer every morning at the local animal shelter. What do you do when you’re not out trying to hustle rebound booty in donuts shops.”

“I’m a rock & roll drummer...most of the time. And sometimes I work as a bouncer at nightclubs. I’m in between gigs right now.”

“What do you do during the day?”

“Don’t tell anyone, it might blow my hardcore rocker image, but I go over to a Senior Living Home in Fullerton and spend time. A couple of the old codgers are pretty good musicians, and we play *Jazz Standards* together. Actually—it’s not really volunteer work, they’re doing me more good than I’m doing for them.”

She reached across the table and touched my hand. It was nice. Sarah and me talked about real life while the world woke up around us. I even opened up and talked about getting fired from my band—Slammerkin. With the sun rising in the window behind her, Sarah stood up to go.

“I bid you adieu Sir. It’s been an unexpected pleasure talking to you. Good luck finding a new band, and good luck finding the woman of your dreams. You seem like a nice guy.”

“Where are you going?” I asked. “It’s early. Let’s go have breakfast...or take a walk on the beach.”

“I’m sorry; I can’t. All the furry little critters are counting on me. If you feel like picking up dog poop, you’re welcome to come along.”

Dog poop never smelled so good. After we cleaned the kennels, we took a couple of shelter dogs for a walk. We went pretty far, and on the way back, Sarah started running. It was a pretty good workout, and when we got back, she took off her hoodie. Underneath, Sarah was wearing a light cotton v-neck sweater, and it accentuated her perfect little titties.

“I better go,” I said. “If you’d like, I’ll meet you for tea and muffins tomorrow, and we can do this again.”

Sarah agreed. She even offered me her cell phone number. We exchanged numbers, and I took off. When I pulled into my parking place back in Anaheim, my cell rang. It was Sarah checking to make sure I got home safely. As I got out of the car, Glock and Beretta came out of nowhere, and I dropped my autographed drumsticks.

“Damn—you scared the shit out of me. What the hell are you two doing here?”

“Where have you been,” Glock asked. “We followed you yesterday, but we lost you in Seal Beach. Just where in the hell have you been for the last twenty-four hours?”

“None of your fucking business,” I replied. “You know—I’m about to call my lawyer and sue you guys for police harassment.”

Glock’s laugh was condescending. Beretta stared at my t-shirt.

Glock turned to Beretta and asked, “What’s up partner? You see something?”

“Son of a bitch” Beretta said, pulling his sidearm in one fluid motion and pointing it at my head. “Turn around and put your hands on the hood of the car. Do it. Do it right now, or blow your fucking head off.”

I spun around and faced the car. Glock clutched the back of my neck and drove my face down on the hood. I bucked, and Glock let me know he didn’t like it by throwing me to the ground. Things got a little sketchy after that. While Glock cuffed me, Beretta asked

some questions. I was dazed, and really didn't understand, so I didn't answer. Glock took it personally and punched me in the ribs.

"When my partner asks you a question. He wants an answer. Where'd you get the shirt punk?"

"A friend gave it to me."

"You're lying," Beretta said. "You stole it off a dead man. That shirt you're wearing is a one-of-a-kind *Dolce and Gabbana* original. That's a thousand dollar t-shirt, and the former owner was Huntington T. Letters. We have a pile of photographs with Mr. Letters wearing that very same shirt."

"I didn't steal the shirt. I got it from Coco. You know—Coco Stiletto, the woman you've been looking for."

Beretta didn't react. Glock was checking out my autographed drumsticks.

He said, "These sticks aren't the same kind of wood, one's maple and the other is hickory."

"Who cares," I said. "I didn't do anything. This is crazy."

With all the neighbors watching, Glock spit out my *Miranda Rights* and frisked me, while Beretta searched my car, tossing everything on the ground. They crammed all my stuff into the trunk of a solid-black Crown Vic, heaved me in the backseat, and hauled me off to O.C. Jail, where I was booked on multiple counts of homicide. When I got my obligatory phone call, the only phone number I could actually remember was the number I'd heard earlier that morning—Sarah's phone number. I called and left a message on her voicemail.

I was in a holding cell by myself for hours. I figured the whole thing was a misunderstanding, and they were just sorting things out. When a jailer came and got me, I thought they were going to let me go. Instead, he dragged into an interview room, pushed me down in a chair, and chained me to the floor. Across the table from me from me was a frumpy woman who looked like an elementary school teacher dressed in a cheap gray suit. She was studying some files. She introduced herself as the Assistant District Attorney and got right to the point.

"Why'd you kill those men?"

"Kill what men?"

"I don't have time for games Mr. Struggles. You've killed at least three men, and I can prove it. I want a full confession, or I'll see you get the Death Penalty."

"I didn't kill anyone."

"If you didn't kill anyone," she said. "Then you won't mind giving us a blood sample. It might prove your innocence."

I agreed to give blood, and that was it. She got up and left, like I wasn't even in the room. The guards jerked me around for a few hours, moving me from cell to cell, and finally dumped me in solitary confinement.

They kept me completely isolated until Wednesday morning when a jailer came and locked me in chains with leg irons. As they dragged me into court, that's when I really got scared. I guess I hadn't really believed it was happening. Shuffling along in chains, escorted by three guards, I felt like Hannibal Lector. The judge set my bail at a million dollars and assigned me a court appointed attorney. Making bail was out of the question, so they took me back to jail, and two days later I finally meet with my *Public Pretender*. He was a bundle of laughs.

“Plead guilty,” he said. “It’s your only chance of avoiding Lethal Injection.”

“I didn’t kill anyone. Did the cops talk to Coco? I think she set me up.”

“Who’s Coco?”

“She gave me the fancy t-shirt.”

“Forget about Coco,” he said. “Even if we can prove she gave you the shirt, which we probably can’t, the prosecutor still has enough damning evidence. Can you explain your semen?”

“What’s semen?”

“You know—that goopy stuff that squirts out of a man’s penis when he ejaculates.”

I wasn’t in the mood for his smart mouth. I wanted to punch the guy, but I was locked in restraints, so I settled down.

“I’m going to give it to you straight,” he said. The Orange County District Attorney is convinced that you killed Huntington T. Letters. After your arrest, the Newport Police went back and searched his home. They found dirty bed sheets with a big gob of your semen on them. They also found trace amounts of semen from the late Huntington T. Letters.”

“What’s that mean. I don’t get it?”

“What’s not to get? It’s pretty obvious that you were having sexual relations with Mr. Letters.”

“Homie don’t play that,” I said. “I like women.”

“That may be true. Good luck proving it. The D.A. is convinced that you had an affair with Huntington Letters, and that’s what matters. Even if you could explain away the semen, that’s not the worst evidence they have against you. On their subsequent search, the police found a steel letter opener under a desk. It’s a perfect match for the murder weapon, and your prints were all over it. The police think you panicked and lost track of the weapon, because you wiped off the blood, but you forgot to wipe off your fingerprints. This is were things get worse.”

“They can get worse?”

“Considerably,” He said. “The L.A. District Attorney wants to prosecute you for two murders. The letter opener appears to be the same weapon used to kill the openly gay drummer from Annihilation of Innocence. Him and Mr. Letters were having an affair, so the theory is you got jealous and killed the drummer. After you killed the drummer, you kept the letter opener. Later, you used it to kill Mr. Letters.”

I started to say something. He interrupted.

“Coco again. Don’t bother. Unless you have money to hire a private detective, you aren’t ever going to find this mysterious Coco Stiletto. The police no longer consider her a suspect, and they aren’t going to waste valuable man-hours chasing her down for your benefit. And the District Attorney doesn’t care. She has her man, and it’s you. Please don’t tell me Coco gave you the drumstick too?”

“She did.”

“Did you know the Manager from the Seventh Veil Strip Club was murdered with a drumstick exactly like the sticks in your possession at the time of your arrest?”

“I heard he was murdered. I don’t know anything about it.”

“Why am I surprised,” he said. “It’s amazing how little you do know. You’ll fit right in at San Quentin.” He looked at his watch. “Anyways—the L.A. DA likes you for that

one too. You know one of those drumsticks the cops found on you had a forged signature. And the wood was different. The matching stick was in the manager's neck."

"What's our defense?"

"Pray for a miracle."

A guard came through the door and told me I had a visitor. The lawyer told me he'd be in touch, and the jailer led me to a high-security visitation booth. I plopped on a stool, picked up the phone, and looked into the eyes of an angel.

"Thanks for coming Sarah."

"What's going on John? Why are you in jail?"

"Don't get upset, because it's not true, but the police think I murdered three men. I need someone to help me find the real killer."

"Oh my God. I knew I shouldn't of come. I can't believe it. Are all men certified lunatics? You killed three men, and you want me to help?"

I figured honesty was the best policy, so I told her every detail. She calmed down as I talked, and her sympathetic eyes told me something insider her believed me.

She said, "It's pretty obvious that Mrs. Letters is Coco Stiletto. She found out her husband was having sex with other men, so she killed his lovers and then killed him. She set you up to take the fall."

"Does that mean you're going to help me? I need a woman like you to save me?"

"I might have been able to save you," she replied. "But I'm too late, and you're just too far gone for my help."

"I thought you were the woman of my dreams."

"I might have been the girl of your dreams, but we'll never know, because you chose the girl of your fantasies."