

The Criminal Intern

by Joe Tripician

"You have a collect call from the Lompoc Correctional Institution."

He held the rim of the plastic coffee cup top, tried to loosen a ridge for sipping.

"Internee Lawrence Zimmerman is calling. Will you accept the charges?"

He let the steam drift up from the coffee and watched it rub against the train window. He thought of Kathy, the drugs, the son -- why had he answered his cell phone, and when might his coffee be not so hot to sip.

"Okay, yes."

"Ted, this is Larry Zimmer. How are you, man?"

Before he could answer, Larry continued. "As you may have heard, I've been incarcerated for the past 14 months out here and not once have I been able to see my son."

"Well, I know. I'm sorry. And your son is doing fine. I saw him just the other day."

"You saw him?" Larry's high-pitched voice cut through the prison cacophony and into Ted's ear, trying to chase away the thoughts of Kathy and her son's gentle face.

"Kathy brought him by to see the fireworks. I have a good view of the East River, and he had a great time."

"Well, I don't know about that, but I hear that you started a new company."

"Yeah, Larry, we're still in stealth mode, looking for some angel investors. It's exciting, but all hand-to-mouth."

"Look, Ted, I'm on a timer. It's really hell here, you can't imagine. And I have a chance to get paroled early, if you do me a solid."

"What do you want, Larry?"

"Hire me. I mean, your company. Let me work for you. I know how to hustle."

"No doubt, but, Larry, I don't have the money to be hiring now. We all work for sweat equity, you understand? And besides, there's nothing for you to do."

"I would bring in such value for you. I can do biz dev, sales, promotion -- these are all things I'm proven good at."

Through the back and forth, Ted thought of Kathy's hair, long and auburn, the way it fell like a cascade of perfume against his pillow. He thought of Mikey, her son, who so proudly and quickly mastered all the game levels of *Katamari Damacy* under Ted's tutelage.

Finally, he saw an image of Larry, being carted away by weapon wielding DEA agents, and Larry's rented U-Haul impounded by the Feds, every square inch filled with Grade-A pot.

The sounds from the prison, creaking under the strain of so many incarcerated, for so many victimless crimes, and the image of a father and son reunited, and reunited solely because of him, gave Ted the final reason to commit, even against his better judgment.

"Okay, you're hired."

The good feeling began to melt once Larry started paying for his stay with hundred dollar bills, each one unrolled from his hand like fresh toilet paper, each one counted out to include his personal payroll and payroll taxes.

Not much later, Larry brought a balding beady-eyed man named Horace to the table, a self-professed rainmaker who immediately requested equity for various dubious introductions, including a waste recycling company that operated out of a single room office in the Bronx. Curtis was another Larry associate. A faded hippie in SoHo whose invention of a smokeless cigarette filter Larry was certain would bring in millions.

"You can't sign business deals for the company, Larry. You don't have the authority."

"But I owe you so much, Ted. It's my obligation to bring you to the next level. I don't really understand your business, but I do know that there's gold in these prospects."

Larry then coaxed him into a trip to Austin to meet his good friend Tex, the refrigerator-sized owner of a head shop who expressed interest in investing in Ted's company. Larry was not allowed across State lines, so Ted spent the day with Tex, who proudly displayed his inventory of hash pipes, bongos and multi-colored dildos.

That evening, after Ted explained his company's projections and investment opportunity, Tex unlocked a large metal safe, and unloaded \$50,000 in cash to Ted.

"How am I supposed to carry this back on the plane?" Ted asked.

"Don't know, friend. How 'bout sticking them in yer boots?" Tex lit a huge joint, wrote on the inside of the matchbook, and spoke with breath inhaled. "Make them stock certificates out to 'The Christian Emporium Holding Company, Limited.'"

After fielding daily calls from Tex asking, "Where in the hell's tits are my dividends?" Ted called Larry in for a talk.

"I have to let you go, Larry."

"You can't. You're the only thing keeping me out of the slammer."

This Good Samaritan thing was wearing thin. On Larry's desk Ted saw a photograph of Kathy and Mikey at play on a Hamptons beach. He had taken that photo several months after Larry's arrest. It was then Ted knew he would see her again.

Two weeks later Larry's probation officer Charisse paid a visit to the office. This slight young dark woman wore a smirk that aged her past retirement. She reviewed Larry's pay stubs; then went through his desk. Ted watched it all.

As he cleaned out Larry's desk, Ted retrieved the pack of rolling papers. The words "Tex Lex's Head Shop and Emporium" were printed over the Texas Flag. "Shouldn't Charisse have collected them for evidence?" he thought. "I guess the two 12-ounce Baggies of fresh pot were enough."

