

Exit Strategy

by Larry Strattner

Lurch is up front driving. I'm in the back, my paper, cash and a laptop spread all over the seat next to me. I try not to call Lurch, Lurch too often. His name is Steve. He's about six seven and he walks and talks slowly in a deep voice. Hence...you get the picture.

Steve is a hell of a driver though. Nothing rattles him and we do a lot of driving in a lot of touchy places. He has a sweet feel for the car. Calling him Lurch seems, well...cruel. For a guy who's known to be a little cruel on occasion it's funny this would bother me. We pull up to a red light and stop. A silver Lincoln Town Car pulls up beside us. Stops. The rear window slides down. It's Tommy Sangiovanni and he's making little circles at me with his index finger as in "roll your window down".

When my window is down he gives me a shit-eating grin and says, "Excuse me sir, would you have some Grey Poupon I could borrow?" mimicking that stupid commercial with the rich guys. I bring up the Walther .40 that's been on the seat beside me and shoot him in the face. At the sound of the shot Steve jumps on the gas, runs the red light and makes a few fast lefts and rights until it's clear we're truly gone.

"Was that you or the car next to us?" Steve asks.

"It was me. Lucky thing, too. When Tommy went over backwards I saw a gun in his hand."

"Jesus," Steve says. "Tommy was gonna' pop you?"

"Looked like it--unless he was just cleaning his piece on the way to the grocery store. Can't say I'm surprised. Tommy wasn't first on my list of things to do, but he was up there. He hasn't been too

friendly lately. Fuck 'im. They'll be able to put some caulk in his forehead and have an open casket 'cause the big hole's in back."

Steve laughed. He has an adaptable sense of humor.

My sense of humor is thin lately. Guys have been not coming across like they should. Tommy Sangiovanni wouldn't normally give me the time of day. It might have surprised him that I shot him. It didn't surprise me. The fucking little weasel made a career out of backstabbing people. Shit's been happening, suggesting unreliability in some quarters. It seems like business is off, just a hair. There's no significant product or cash at issue. Things are just...off. I know Tommy S didn't like me no way, no time, ever and it's true I was working on a deal to set him up. But today's little gunfight at the stoplight corral says to me someone else has escalation plans cooking. This makes me nervous.

I snap open my cell and punch in a number only a few people know. A voice answers. "Ho." Not "yo", not "hello", not "go". "Ho" like in Santa Clause "Ho".

I say, "Crombi, Al."

"I know who it is Fitch. I got caller ID."

"I just capped Tommy Sangiovanni."

"Fucker's always had it comin'." Big Al is not one to mince words. Neither is he one who is surprised very often. "You callin' me 'cause I'm in his Will?"

"Very funny fuckstick. I'm calling you because you're in *my* Will and I don't want my worldly goods passed on quite yet."

I describe the events at the stoplight.

"That has to be Ernie DeMarco behind that one," says Al. "He probably even made up that mustard bullshit and made Tommy memorize it. Tommy didn't exactly have your razor sharp wit. What a bunch of fucking *schemare*."

"All that aside," I say. "How about strapping up and coming over to keep me company? If we sit back-to-back maybe I'll last another few days before they blow me up."

"You're a fucking weenie," says Al. "Gimme thirty minutes...and don't open the door until you're sure it's me."

"How's that work?" I ask. "I wait to hear the porch cave in?"

"Funny. I'll be right there."

I've known Al since we were little kids. By the time we hit high school Al had grown into a veritable monster. Godzilla unchained. I was still on track to be your average American male with a six inch dick and a pair of sneakers. Naturally, during some of

life's ups and downs, I found myself occasionally turning to Al for protection. In our dotage now, we pretty much maintain our relationship. Recent protection activity has involved firearms, at which Al is pretty good. In his hand a .40 looks like a squirt gun and he can definitely hose you down.

I've needed to pal around with Al more frequently over this last year because my daughter moved to northern California. She went up there to get out of even the idea of snow and to be with other tree hugging, vegetarian hippies. She plays bluegrass violin for a living and she's good enough to get gigs all over the northwest but most of the time she plays in either San Fran or Seattle. She lives up near the Oregon border almost equidistant from the two cities. Some of the trees in her town are three hundred feet tall. The last three hundred foot tree in New Jersey is in the Nets floor at the IZOD Center and 300 backyard fences in Hackensack. On my first visit I discover the county she lives in has one of the biggest concentrations of clandestine pot farms in the U.S. Good stuff too. I take a couple hits with her during our visit and before you know it, I'm connected up there and moving some serious weight down to my town. Mushrooms too. The forest surrounding her on three sides is loaded with mushrooms and the hippies know which ones fuel space travel. On the fourth side of the county is the Pacific Ocean. I don't do

ocean products yet because for the first time in my life, I've found my way into some serious money.

But, as everyone but a newbie like me knows, serious money always attracts serious assholes, particularly if the serious money is illegal and tax free. So I'm sitting here fat-cattin' it, flush with cash, when I start noticing some of the local dirt bags getting overly friendly with me. I bring it up to Big Al who assures me, "What the fuck did you fucking think was going to happen, Crombie? You fucking idiot." I guess he knew someone would want to turn me into a franchise sooner or later.

Since I've never been greedy, and I'm not a big risk taker, when Al wised me up to what was coming, I decided to squirrel away some final cash on top of my already significant pile, and ease on out of the business. I'd leave the trade to those with more of a taste for discomfort, and even death, than I have.

But first I got hold of a nice Walther in case it became necessary to ensure my continued good health while playing my end game. After all, I'd spent two tours in the shit in Nam learning to stomach a messy exit, and wanted to make sure I'd still be standing when I did the exiting. And although I don't consider weed and fungus to be drugs, some would say the same for coke and heroin; drug dealing is an iffy business. It's starting to suck and I'm out.

Now that Al has arrived in his little Italian shoes, lightweight wool slacks and short sleeved silk shirt, left un-tucked to conceal at least one revolver, probably his customized S&W .40, he interrupts my pondering. "So, tell me we aren't gonna have to smoke

anybody else before I can get you outta here. And, speaking of smoke..." I hand him a spliff. Al is a 'weed guy' and one of the benefits of being retained to keep my ass in one piece is free weed. He lights up. Weed doesn't affect Al's job performance. It just mellows him out while he separates your shoulder and breaks your arm. Or shoots you.

I get busy packing my small, important stuff. No sense in procrastinating until Ernie DeMarco sends somebody else over with a Rocket Propelled Grenade this time, now that he knows Tommy Sangiovanni's stab at humor didn't work out.

The doorbell rings, startling me. Al looks out the window. "UPS," he announces.

"UPS?" I ask. "What UPS? I don't have anything coming UPS." I grab my bag and Al grabs me. We're out the back door and about a block away in the car when the front of my house blows off.

"Somebody's getting a little serious," Al says and we drive on.

After a couple of miles of thinking I say, "Al?"

"What?"

"I'm willing to leave. Fuck, I *am* leaving. But it concerns me that Ernie DeMarco is trying to blow my ass off while I'm going out the door."

"It would concern me too. So what?"

"Well, I just think maybe we should stretch the business succession plan up one more level. That way when new management takes over, they won't know me very well, and once they pick up the business, they'll be busy and I'll be forgotten. I think it would be a less stressful exit strategy."

"Who's one more level?"

"Oh, like Marino Francini over in Newark. The guy DeMarco lays his bets off to. You know. Someone higher up."

"What about DeMarco?"

"We cap him on the way out."

"Ooo, sounds like fun." Al was smiling in the way I knew wasn't really a smile, but more like a show of teeth. I can tell he's already thinking.

"I've got a plan," Al says, after a while. "A good one. Ernie has a numbers drop here in town over on Marshall Street. All the slips and

cash go there to get stacked for Newark and tomorrow will be a big night for them. I vote we hang out across the street, wait for

DeMarco to get there then wax him and blow the place up like he did to your house. They won't be expecting you this quick and we can catch 'em with their drawers down."

"Why go through all that trouble?" I ask.

"That's why it's a plan. We make it look like a rank *estupidez* took a swipe at DeMarco and got him. There'd be slips, cash, and aluminum siding all over the block and no one will be able to tell we've added half the numbers bets to our stash."

"Not bad. Not bad at all. Sounds like a plan to me."

Two nights later, we're across from DeMarco's drop in Chewey's Pub with extra clips and a healthy lump of C4, blasting cap already inserted. The bag men come and go until about eight o'clock when a 450 AMG Mercedes pulls up front and a couple of guys get out and go inside. I'd heard rumors the Mercedes was from an armored production run Damlier Benz made for the Middle East markets, so I'd scratched my passing thought about taking a run at DeMarco on the open road. No matter. Al and I pick up our drop bags filled with torn up newspaper and head across the street, getting set to pull our ski masks down.

Our phony drop bags and some mumbling by Al to the guy at the door lets us walk right in and without further ado, Al puts a couple rounds into DeMarco and his bodyguard, some "Porky" something guy. Fuck 'em. Then we start yelling to the people at the

counting tables to get up against the wall. It goes quickly. We zip tie the counters and run them into the cellar where Al herds them to the far wall at gunpoint.

"Get over there and stay there. Nobody's 'gonna get hurt. It's payback time and all hell is gonna break loose," he growls.

We run back up the stairs and get two blocks away when the front blows off the place. It was a good plan and I'm good with the way it went. We walk away with at least half of their numbers cash, and later, folks would remark the scene looked a lot like confetti over Times Square on New Year 's Eve, with a couple of fingers mixed in from Ernie and Porky what's his name, found while the crowd scrambled for the swag.

Al and I are divvying up the cash in a 'rent-by-the-hour' room when he tells me he's going to Costa Rica where a friend of his owns a couple of hotels. "I'm a good bar man and I can take it easy down there. These aren't the kind of hotels where the clients make trouble. I can relax."

"We'll see," I think to myself.

"I'm heading out to California," I say. "My daughter and her 'significant other' are talking about starting a family. I think it'd be fun to be around grandkids. And I've been thinking, maybe I'll try a little farming, too."

We smile at each other with that prickly, edgy feeling like we may see each other again. A little fist bump and, still smiling, we're gone.

