

## Not So Fast

Cold morning sunlight oozed through nicotine-stained blinds, giving the drab, cluttered efficiency a moldy hue. Hung over and still wearing my clothes from the night before, I stumbled half asleep through piles of dirty clothes and help-wanted ads to the frigid tiles of the tiny bathroom.

I splashed water in my face and my stomach reminded me I hadn't eaten in three days. I found a bent cigarette next to the bed, then poured luke-warm tap water through leftover coffee grounds for the third time. Trying to quell a case of the D.T.'s, I sat at my kitchenette window staring through a rust-pocked screen and dingy glass at the alley with its collection of overflowing garbage cans.

"All right, all ready!" I yelled when someone started banging on my jalousie door. The way I was feeling I was ready to hand the rude s.o.b. a knuckle sandwich and a large piece of my mind.

"It's about time," Garit Jones said, shouldering past me and surveying the room with a suspicious eye. "Kee-rist, Jazz, it's freezing in here. Don't you have a heater in this dump?"

A full head above my six foot, the ebony giant and I occasionally did the gum-shoe shuffle together. The money was good—while it lasted.

"Sure, Jonesy," I said, massaging my temples. "But it helps if I pay the electric bill."

"Put some clean clothes on, Malone, and let's go eat," he shot back. "I got us a case."

"The one on the right is Nora Baxter." Sipping coffee, Jonesy handed me a photo. "Louie G's latest squeeze."

I glanced at the picture, the last fork-full of scrambled eggs halfway to my mouth. "Quite a looker," I said. "How did she get strapped with somebody like Garafolo?"

"The guy next to her is her father, J. David Baxter," Jonesy said. "The woman is an airhead

but she's probably the only reason Baxter's law firm represents Garafolo's interests around Tampa Bay."

Appetite sated, I lit a cigarette from a fresh pack and blew smoke rings at the imitation Tiffany lamp hanging over the table. "I know the routine, Jonesy," I said. "You feed me, then you bleed me. What gives?"

Jonesy grinned and pulled out a white envelope with the name Baxter Brannon Moss & Amato embossed in the corner, then spread the contents out on the table. "A case, direct from Baxter's office," he said, waving the contract in one hand and greenbacks in the other at me. "And these, my man, in case you've forgotten, are hundred-dollar bills, your half as partner in Jones & Malone. Twenty-thousand more, if and when we close the case."

"You meant to say, Malone & Jones," I said, pocketing the greenbacks. "And no ifs about it, just when. Tell me more."

Jonesy rolled his eyes. "The other picture is Lenny Berkowitz. A real piece of work."

A thickly built man, Berkowitz had the hammered face of a boxer and thinning brown hair combed into a bald man's bluff. He stood in front of a shiny black Cadillac with his beer gut hanging over his belt and an idiotic grin on his face.

"Berkowitz was Louie G's driver slash bag man," Jonesy went on. "He was skimming the proceeds and telling Garafolo the accounts were shorting the payouts. When Garafolo found out and hung a contract on him, Lenny offered his services to the D.A., asked for witness protection, then dropped out of sight. On the way out, he snatched Nora Baxter for insurance and old man Baxter wants us to find them before Louie G does.

"I'm on it," I said, snatching the pictures and heading for the door. "I'll call you later."