

# I

Barney Wurtz hopped off the trolley a half-block away from his San Francisco office building, as he did every other day.

He stood on the sidewalk and slid his left shirt sleeve above his wrist; exposing a leather-strapped Cartier watch. 8:51. Give or take two minutes, his arrival time was the same as any other day.

He glanced inside of the familiar storefront windows until he reached Dunk'n Donuts, where he purchased six long-johns and a dozen bran muffins— as he did every other day.

Barney relished his routine. He deemed himself as a meticulous, reliable, organized person. Unbeknownst to him, almost everyone else would've described him as anal. Had he known, it might've amused him as a sexually accurate pun; but, either way, he wasn't a man who cared about other people's opinions.

Barney reached the entrance of the J. Donald Flannery Building, pushed the steel handle that protruded from a segment of the rotating glass doors, and spun through the doors into the lobby. A portion of the black lacquered walls were engraved with a directory stenciled in white letters, and it performed the dual tasks of listing which office space a particular company was leasing— along with reflecting the image of the 35 year old, bleached-blond gentleman with an artificial tan that wore a jet-black Christian Dior suit, a heavily-starched white oxford shirt with button collars, and a blood-red satin necktie. He glanced approvingly at his reflection while his ears faintly registered the rhythmic clomp that the heels of his leather-soled Sergio Rossi oxfords created as they strode across the swirled marble tiles lining the lobby floor, as he made a beeline to the chrome horseshoe-shaped information desk that was manned by a lone security officer.

He acknowledged the guard with an almost indistinguishable grin and began their daily ritual,

“Good morning, Earl. Got anything for me today?”

“Just the usual, Mr. Wurtz,” the guard replied as he reached beneath the desktop and retrieved a *Wall Street Journal* and a *USA Today*.

Barney grabbed the newspapers and chided, “Well, I’m still waiting for the Russian mail-order bride I bought on E-Bay; so let me know if UPS drops off a huge box with holes drilled in it.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Wurtz,” Earl replied. They both knew that would never happen for two reasons: 1) all shipments were delivered to the mail room, and Earl only received the newspapers because they were delivered at the crack of dawn; and 2) he knew that Barney was sweeter than maple syrup.

As Barney began away from the desk, Earl offered a mock salute and added, “Have a nice day, sir.”

“You too, Earl,” Barney replied as he strolled to the elevator. He stood in front of the polished steel elevator doors, pushed the “up” button, then took another moment to admire himself in the door’s reflection before they slid open and revealed a cube adorned with walnut-stained

wood-paneled walls and maroon carpeting. He pressed the button for the 9<sup>th</sup> floor and hummed the smooth jazz tune that pumped from the P.A. speakers; a saxophone rendition of Paul McCartney's *The Girl is Mine*.

He was still humming the chorus when the elevator doors opened into a short grey hallway with matching maroon carpeting, lined with imitation Monet paintings hanging from the walls, and huge glass doors on each end of the corridor that granted unfiltered views of the luxurious office suites behind them.

Barney angled toward the set of glass doors to the left— with B.W.E. Modeling Agency stenciled in large silver letters— that acted as a transparent barrier to an eclectic rainbow.

A cherry wood reception desk, shaped like a huge podium, was strategically placed just inside of the glass doors so that the receptionist could meet-and-greet their clients promptly.

Two small offices were at the rear of the suite, and were shared as needed by the various talent scouts and agents employed by B.W.E.; with a third, much larger room located on the wall to the right. This was Barney Wurtz's office.

The entire floor was covered in plush green carpet. The left wall was painted fire-engine red; the back wall true blue; the right wall was orange; and the ceiling was painted canary yellow. Each wall was adorned with a huge 32"x 24" framed painting of colorful fruit baskets, clowns or helium balloon races that incorporated the entire spectrum of the room in each painting.

The left wall was lined with a row of matching cherry wood chairs; the seats and backs upholstered in broad, bright alternating pinstripes of red, green, yellow, blue and orange satin fabric.

The waiting area was simply the converted office space between the reception desk at the suite's entrance, and the offices placed at the rear of the suite.

A cherry wood coffee table was located in the center of the waiting area and was covered with various magazines; and a portable tempered-glass stand was nestled in the corner, supporting a clear coffee maker and a glass pastry platter. When contrasted against the suite's captivating collage of color, the coffee and doughnuts appeared to float on air from a distance.

When Barry entered the glass doors he was greeted by a petite, pleasant-looking woman seated at the reception desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Wurtz," the secretary announced dutifully.

"Good morning, Brenda," he responded perfunctorily as he walked past her station and into the waiting area carrying his donut boxes. He removed the glass lid from the platter, dumped yesterday's muffins in the trash, and refilled it with fresh bran muffins. He circled the muffins with long-johns, replaced the lid, then looked at the wall clock,

*'8:59. Perfect timing. Again.'*

"One minute until the rat race begins, Brenda. It's time to pump up the volume... and could you bring me a copy of my appointment list? Thanks."

Brenda sighed. *'It's the same thing every day.'*

The "volume" he spoke of actually represented 3 things: the phone's ringers, which were timed on auto-routers and only rang between 9am and 7pm; and the other two were the telephone "hold" music and the speakers in the office, which were both linked to the building's P.A. system — so Brenda was forced to listen to elevator music all day... even when she wasn't on the elevator.

She obediently increased the radio's volume— just in time to hear a commercial about how she could save a lot of money on her car insurance— then sought out the appointment list.

Even as she lackadaisically logged onto her computer and accessed her Outlook's calendar, she knew that she was fortunate. She worked for one of the most successful child modeling

agencies in the country, the pay was above-average, and the benefits were exceptional— which was very important to a mother of a child with bronchitis. There wasn't any tension in the workplace. No harassment. No animosity. No... nothing.

If anything, the biggest problem with her job was that it was so *boring*. So mundane. Every day consisted of either politely distancing herself from a new crop of over-anxious parents— escorting their beautiful 2yr old demons— that believed if they befriended her, she could increase their child's chances of being the next Gerber baby; or answering the phone calls of those same parents a week later when they wonder why their child didn't make the cut.

*'It's the same thing every damn day,'* Brenda thought as she clicked "print" and walked to the printer to get his itinerary.

Barney sat at his desk, hovered over his laptop like a vulture circling its prey, and barely heard the knock at his office's door.

"Come in," he bellowed.

Brenda pushed the door open wide and entered his office. She placed two pieces of paper on his desk and said, "Here's your list, sir. Your first appointment isn't scheduled until nine-thirty."

"Thank you." As his secretary turned to leave and reached for the door, he added, "Brenda, it kind of hot in here. Since we've got the office to ourselves for another half-hour, you can leave the door open."

She replied, "Yes, sir," then made her departure; and Barney went back to his laptop.

He looked at the list of their newest commissions, pouring over photo after photo of available models in an attempt to match their faces with the client's products— while simultaneously cradling a phone to his ear and dialing numbers. After a ten-minute conversation with a clothing designer, he arranged a lucrative runway deal for a modeling client, then hung up and concentrated on the computer screen. He typed furiously, unconsciously humming Cindy Lauper's song *Time After Time* while he continued matching faces with products; until it occurred to him that something was... *different* today.

Barney leaned back in his chair and tried to decipher what had changed. He heard the faint "ding" of the elevator door opening, followed ten-seconds later by the voice of a child. *'9:24. My appointment's on time.'* But something was still different.

On the radio, Cindy Lauper faded away and was replaced with Prince singing *Let's Go Crazy*.

Through the open office door, he watched mother and child take a seat in the waiting area. Barney's attention was suddenly diverted by a 3yr old girl in the waiting room dancing to the beat.

*'Dancing?'*

Then it clicked: the radio station had changed from smooth jazz to 80's music.

"This is some bullshit," he grumbled to himself. "I play jazz to keep the kids calm. If I wanted them dancing I'd play Brittany Spears!" He reached for the phone, "Earl had better fix this."

At that moment Brenda appeared in his doorway. As he lifted the phone receiver, she lifted a .25mm Remington automatic and aimed at his chest.

Barney glanced up at her a split-second before the chamber jerked, then he felt his chest explode. His life's fluid blended perfectly with his necktie as gravity slumped him across his desk, and his head banged loudly against his computer's keyboard.

The haze in Brenda's mind was slowly replaced by the sound of a piercing scream. Make

that two screams: a woman and a child. They seemed to be coming from behind her.

She blinked hard, trying to focus her eyes, and was assaulted by the sight of her employer sprawled across his desk, laying on a laptop that was quickly becoming an island in an ocean of blood.

The sight was nauseating. As bile filled her mouth and convulsions racked her body, she keeled forward and felt a stinging pain when her right hand banged against her knee; *hard*.

She looked at her hand. ‘*A gun?*’

Her grip loosened , and as the weapon thumped heavily on the carpet she suddenly realized that she was the culprit. Waves of guilt washed over her as she shrieked,

“HOW? HOW DID THIS HAPPEN???”

She cautiously approached the desk, then reached out and lifted Barney’s head; and his dead stare was the last thing she recalled before she fainted— then everything went black.

## II

The Taco Temple restaurant was a quaint, authentic Mexican-style eatery on the south-side on San Antonio, Texas. Despite its location and diminutive size, it was heavily patronized by the lunch and dinner crowds.

Sometime around 6pm, a short, stout Panamanian man in his late 40's sauntered into the small, bustling restaurant and headed directly to a vacant table on the back wall. He knew it would be vacant; it was reserved for him. Moments later he was trailed by two cocky Latinos wearing baggy clothes. One followed him through the diner and took a seat at his table; the other sat on a small bench next to the door. Both of them carried pistols in each pocket of their loose-fitting jeans, and their eyes constantly scanned the room.

The man was Cortez Mendez, and he fancied himself as a farmer. He owned coca fields in Panama, marijuana farms in central Mexico, and a stake in an opium plantation in the Andes Mountains. It constantly amused him that America, a country with some of the best farmland in the world, was waging a national war against his crops.

As lucrative as "farming" had been for him, Cortez believed life was nothing without family and purpose. He had many relatives that had migrated to the United States— including his great aunt and cousins that operated the Taco Temple— and he was visiting the States to find new ventures for his extended family.

The waiter brought Cortez a breadbasket full of freshly-roasted white corn tortilla chips, a cup of fresh guacamole and a saucer of homemade salsa. "Hola, Senior Mendez," the waiter saluted. "Just let me know when there's something else I can do for you."

There was a small tv mounted on the wall, broadcasting a Mexican show on Univision. Cortez nodded at the television and barked, "These gringo's are trying to pass immigration laws to kick you out this country, and start wars over Columbian drugs and Venezuelan oil— and you watch this nonsense? Turn to CNN."

"Si, senior. Anything else?"

"Si. Bring me four enchiladas and a shot of tequila."

The waiter walked away and headed for the television. Cortez watched the newscast as the anchor announced,

"... And this morning in San Francisco, California, a twenty-seven year old secretary was arrested in connection to a workplace homicide at the B.W.E. Modeling Agency. Brenda Amos allegedly walked into her employer's office, shot and killed the agency's founder— thirty-five year old Barney Wurtz— then called the police on herself. In a bizarre twist, Amos contends that she doesn't recall shooting Wurtz, doesn't know where the gun came from, and didn't have any problems with her employer in the past. A witness on the scene says that..."

The door opened and Cortez's accountant entered the restaurant. Everything about him stuck out like a sore thumb. First off, he was white in a neighborhood restaurant full of Hispanics. Secondly, standing at 5'10" and weighing 355lbs, he was extremely obese. He seemed to be sweating for no particular reason, and the grey suit he was wearing clung to his body like walrus skin.

Archie Roundtree was one of the top tax attorneys in the State of Texas. More importantly — to Cortez— he was also a member of Blue Ocean, LLC; one of the most efficient off-shore account management firms in the world. Panama was renown for their questionable banking practices, and Cortez was already heavily invested with Blue Ocean. So when they recommended Archie, Cortez never questioned it. And, truth be told, Archibald Roundtree was very capable... despite his personal health issues.

The Latino guarding the door hopped off his bench and attempted to pat Archie down. Between the blubber, the body odor, and the knowledge that Archie wasn't a bodily threat to anyone, he allowed him to pass.

Archie tried to navigate between the patrons, but his belly protruded so far over his belt that he even bumped customers when he turned sideways. He slowly, and ungracefully, made his way to the back table and sat across from Cortez. Sweat poured from his hairline, armpits and back, as he offered Cortez an oily hand to shake.

Cortez declined.

Archie had never been comfortable at these meetings. He joined Blue Ocean to help corporations reduce their taxable income; not to drive to mini-Mexico to meet with the leader of a Central-American drug cartel. Part of his perspiration derived from the panic he felt whenever he met with Cortez, knowing the type of person he was dealing with. That's why Archie always packed a .38mm snub-nosed revolver behind his belt buckle, hidden underneath his girth, in case he ever felt like he was in any mortal danger.

Cortez, on the other hand, had different concerns. He was fully aware that his operations were under surveillance by the CIA, which meant phone taps, shareware viruses, relays on his computers, and bugs in his vehicles— which is why he preferred to do business in-person. These periodic meetings with Archie were arranged to eliminate any paper trail.

Archie began, "The shell corporation we set-up in El Paso is up and running. The twenty-million you specified has been divided and converted into private company stock and can be liquidized into cash at your convenience, and Blue Ocean has designated six attorneys to make up your executive officers— but you're listed as the company treasurer, so you still have full access to your money. We even used our power of attorney to enroll you in the company health plan. Everything's legitimate, as far as tax purposes go, and all you have to do is—"

*WHUMP. WHUMP. BOOM. WHUMP. WHUMP. BOOM.*

Outside, music blasted so loudly that dishes rattled on the tables and the floor vibrated beneath their feet. Every customer in the restaurant stared out the window at a 1978 Chevy El Camino parked in front of the Taco Temple with its system blaring Duran Duran's *Take On Me*. The car was custom-painted plum purple with platinum graphics, and rested on 26" chrome Asanti rims outlined in plum. The interior was original, except for the 250watt Sony *Xplode* stereo and four 6"x 9" Pioneer speakers installed behind the seat. The trunk bed was stockpiled with two gold Die-Hard batteries powering four 450watt JL amps, four 15" Alpine sub-woofers housed in fiberglass boxes, and six 10" Pioneer woofers.

Cortez couldn't hear himself think! He tapped the bodyguard and pointed out the window, "GET HIM TO TURN THAT SHIT OFF!"

Meanwhile, no one noticed that Archie had frozen in his seat like a mime, as the song echoed through the diner.

♪*Ta-a-a-ake O-o-on Me-e-e-e (Take On Me)*♪

Archie abruptly stood, reached a grubby hand beneath his stomach and pulled out his 38mm revolver. As he aimed it at the Panamanian planter, Cortez screamed for help— but his voice was drowned by the music.

♪*Ta-a-a-ake Me-e-e-e O-o-on (Take On Me)*♪

*BLAM! BLAM!*

The sound of gunshots boomed off the walls, followed by screams from people who turned and saw Cortez's brains oozing from his head like noodles.

Patrons stampeded toward the door, while the bodyguards drew their weapons and ran against the tide.

♪*I-i-i-l-l Be-e-e Go-o-o-one*♪

the Hispanic hitmen rushed Archie with their guns blazing, blowing nine-millimeter-sized chunks of meat from his shoulder and rib cage, before a dome shot blew off the top of his head like a toupe'.

Archie was dead before he hit the ground.

♪*Take On Me-e-e-e*♪

In the ensuing chaos, the El Camino merged into traffic and drove away unnoticed.