

LOOPHOLE

Dark.

It's so freaking dark.

What the hell happened?

The floor vibrated beneath him, bringing a rush of nausea. The hotdog he'd eaten at the L.A. Superior Courthouse had been bad enough the first time around; the acrid taste of bile in his throat did nothing to improve the fake hickory flavor.

Raymond King fought his way to consciousness. The blanket he was lying on—the thinly padded kind movers use to protect furniture—trapped a thousand smells in its folds, none of them pleasant.

Ray rolled over and dragged himself onto his knees, groaning, struggling to keep from heaving as the truck lurched over a pothole. He fell against the wall and let his face rest for a moment against the cold metal before pushing himself to his feet; sucked in a deep breath, swaying as he planted his feet far enough apart to get the rhythm of the road.

The darkness couldn't have been any more complete if he'd been blind. Hell, as far as he knew, he might be blind. He strained so hard to see something, anything, he could feel his eyes bug out.

Dizzy, Ray sank back onto the blanket, trying to shake the fog clear from his mind; willing himself to remember how he'd gotten here. Why he was here in this truck, rolling along the road. What road?

His last clear memory was leaving the cafeteria. He'd stopped at the men's room before returning to the courtroom where he had spent the morning testifying in the Westcom identity theft trial. He closed his eyes and used the back of his eyeballs as a screen where he replayed the scene of washing and drying his hands. What came next? What next?

He remembered pushing the restroom door open. A guy who had gone in right after him had also followed him out. He'd been right on Ray's heels, almost tripped him, and...that was it! Something sharp against his neck, like a bee sting. He'd reached up to touch the spot, but the guy grabbed his arm, asked if he was okay.

After that it was pretty sketchy, but he thought a second person had taken hold of his other arm. He'd stumbled along between them. Then...nothing, until he came to in the darkness.

The Westcom case had been trouble from the gitgo, and that was nearly two years ago. The wheels of justice grind at their own pace—slow, slower, and I-could-be-ninety-years-old-before-this-case-ever-goes-to-trial.

Raymond King had glanced up from the stack of documents he'd been examining and met his client's eyes. "This is your number one suspect," he said, tapping the top sheet on a

separate pile. “A couple of the others are maybes, but this one is definitely lying.”

Marina Wilder looked at him for a long time before she spoke. “Who is it?”

Ray glanced at the name signed at the bottom of the statement. “It’s illegible, but I think it says Marc Baumann. Sound familiar?”

Marina sighed hard and let her head drop against the back of her chair. “Way too familiar. He’s the head of the department. Are you sure, Ray? Are you sure he’s the one?”

“It’s my professional opinion, Marina. You wouldn’t have brought me in if you didn’t think I could help.”

“I brought you in because the CEO told me to. He’s the one who trusts graphology.”

Ray shrugged. “It may not be rocket science, but it’s accurate when it’s done by someone who knows what they’re doing.”

She pursed the full lips, the glitter gloss lipstick making them look wet, and gave a slight shake of her head. “I just don’t see it. How can you tell if someone’s lying from their handwriting?”

“People don’t want to lie,” Ray explained, although he’d known plenty of people who made a good show of it. “Just before they write something that’s not true, they might hesitate for an instant. There can be extra wide spacing between certain words, or sometimes the writing will slant in a different direction all of a sudden. Things like that. You might not be able to see it with the naked eye, but look under the magnifier, and there it is.” He gestured with his magnifying glass to make his point.

Marina pushed her chair back and stood up. She came around the desk, slinking, Ray decided, as she stopped right behind him and leaned over his shoulder so that the pink silk of her blouse rustled against his suit coat. “Show me.”

Her perfume tickled his nose, teased his senses, and he wondered whether it was his imagination that she was coming on to him a little. Long, dark hair and subtly exotic looks. JLo had nothing on this one.

Ray held the magnifying glass over the statement Marc Baumann had handwritten, and pointed out the offending words.

I had nothing to do with the theft of the laptop. When I arrived at work that morning, I went to the break room and got coffee. After that, I went out on the roof for a cigarette. Then I went to my office and started looking over the third quarter reports. By the time I was finished reviewing the sales figures, everyone was here and I was ready to call the Monday morning meeting.

“See how he leaves this big space after the second word? He says he had nothing to do with the theft, but that space is a pause where he has to actually think about what he’s going to say next. Honest people don’t have to do that. Baumann did have something to do with the theft.

“Then he goes into too much trivial detail about his activities, which tells me he’s trying to distract the reader.” Ray twisted his head to look up at Marina. “The unnecessary words “After that,” and “then” means there’s missing information about what he was doing during that time. After he had his cigarette, he did something else, we just don’t know what it was. Maybe

that's when he gave the laptop to an accomplice. Okay, look here, in the last sentence, there's another big space after “and.” He was not ready for that meeting.”

Marina straightened, still looking doubtful, and returned to her chair on the safe side of the desk. “I don't know, Ray, that seems pretty thin.”

“True, you need some physical evidence, too. But it's not just the statement. The handwriting itself has several of signs of dishonesty: letters that look like other letters, extra complications in some letters, ornate capitals. Other things that would be too hard for me to try and explain in a couple of minutes. I can detail them in my report if you want me to.”

“Dammit,” said Marina. “Goddamn it. Why would he be so stupid?”

Ray shook his head. “He's not stupid, he's arrogant. He doesn't think he'll get caught.”

Marc Baumann's arrogance had paid off.

Despite Ray's warning to look for physical evidence that would link Baumann to the crime, Marina had gone ahead and terminated the manager, citing Ray's report as the reason. The day after being fired for stealing the personal information of several hundred thousand of Westcom's clients, Bauman had filed suit with one of the biggest, baddest law firms in L.A. for wrongful termination.

Now, after more than a year, two depositions, and more pre-trial prep meetings with the Westcom attorney than he cared to count, Raymond King had been called to the stand to explain to the Court the basis for his findings.

At ten-thirty this morning, John Duncan, counsel for Westcom, had dug into the details of Ray's credentials—his two-year apprenticeship at the police crime lab in San Francisco, the years of tutelage under the beady eye of the pre-eminent document examiner in the state; the hundreds of cases he'd handled as a private handwriting expert in the intervening years after leaving the state crime lab.

Duncan had invited Ray to tell the jury about the many papers he'd presented at professional conferences, but after the first half-dozen the judge insisted they move on. Duncan then asked him to describe the documents he had been retained to examine—the handwritings of all the department members who'd had access to the laptop computer that had vanished as if it never existed.

But before he had time to explain the reasons behind his opinion that Marc Baumann's handwriting identified him as the culprit, the judge called noon recess and everyone scattered.

Ray had accompanied the Westcom legal team to the courthouse cafeteria, where they held a post-mortem on the morning's witnesses.

"You were great, Ray," Duncan had assured him as he stuffed lukewarm french fries into his mouth. "Nothing to worry about. You come across as a total pro."

Ray thanked him, relieved, but half an hour later, the hotdog he'd sucked down felt like a two-pound weight in his stomach. Should have told them to hold the cheese and onions. He told Duncan and the others he'd meet them back in the courtroom and headed for the men's room.

So, why was he now a defenseless captive, jostled about in the back of a truck with a lot

of questions and no answers? Where were they taking him? Who were they? How long had he been out? Residual dizziness from the drug they'd stuck him with came in waves.

At some point they—whoever they were—would open the back door of the truck, and then he would...what if they didn't open it? Rising panic made his breath come quick and shallow. What if they left him in here to rot, or sent him driving over a cliff like Thelma and Louise?

He swore at himself in disgust.

Get a grip, Ray; you've been in worse spots than this.

His hand touched the rope of scar tissue under his shirt collar: his trophy from an old knife fight. You don't come up in a street gang without getting knocked around. You don't leave it without a shitload of bruises and worse.

His fingertips brushed the irregularities on the skin of his abdomen and right thigh. Bullet wounds. His mom had thought for sure they'd lost him that time. She'd best call the family priest, the doctors urged her, but as she'd told Ray a thousand times since then, she'd refused. Prayed all night at his bedside, soaking the sheets with her tears. In the end, her boy was given back to her.

That was when Ray had made the choice to embrace the biggest fight of all—the fight to get out of the gang life and take back his identity. He'd found a profession and built a career for himself. He'd battled long and hard to get to where he was now.

As Raymond King thought about the years he'd struggled to get his GED in night school, and his hard-earned Bachelor's degree, a seething fury started in the soles of his feet and burned

all the way up to the crown of his head.

His anger was directed at himself as much as the motherfuckers who had snatched him. He'd gone soft. In the old days you never would have found him leaning up against a wall feeling sorry for himself, waiting for them to come and get him.

Enough of this bullshit.

His eyes had adjusted to the darkness. A thin strip of grey light filtered through the bottom of the roll up door, but not enough to see anything in the truck. Ray tore off his coat and tie and threw them into a corner. Dropping to his knees, he began groping the floor to see if there was anything in the truck bed he could use to defend himself.

What do they want with me? he kept asking himself. "Who sees me as a threat?"

He crawled around the truck bed, wracking his brain for every detail he could remember about the Westcom case. His first meeting had been with the CEO, Jack Burns, who later turned him over to Marina Wilder. There must be something his captors thought he knew, Ray told himself. Some piece of information whose importance had escaped him. But why wait until he was on the stand, testifying, to shut him up?

His mind wandered to Marina, Westcom's human resources director. That girl was a stone fox. He'd felt the attraction between them bristling in the air from the start, and he was positive she had, too. If she hadn't worked for Westcom maybe they'd have hooked up, but he wouldn't risk the case over a personal involvement. Besides, he'd seen her handwriting. The too-large, too-round letters and stabbed ovals had disappointed him. She would never fall in love

with anyone but herself.

Ray continued his search of the truck. He ran into a wad of old chewing gum; could feel the grime of years clinging to his hands, but after navigating most of the three sides he encountered nothing else.

It was near the roll up door that his fingers detected a slight irregularity in the surface of the floor. He realized he'd found the cover to a small storage cubby hole in the floor.

He slid his fingernails into the groove, hands shaking with excitement, and probed until he found the small depression that allowed him to lift off the cover. He set the cover aside and stuck his hand into the hole, probing. An oily rag, a handful of spare lug nuts, and a bungee cord. Then he struck gold: a utility knife.

The truck slowed, made a sharp turn. Ray braced himself against the wall, adrenaline pumping, as they came to a bumping halt.

The outside lighting wasn't strong, but after the darkness inside the truck, he couldn't help squinting as the door began to rise.

Still, the enemy never knew what hit him.

Ray rolled out of the back of the truck as quick and as silent as a Ninja, taking the guy by surprise and knocking him to the ground with a grunt. More importantly, knocking his gun to the ground.

The other guy was big and beefy, but Ray was strong and wiry, and he wasn't above fighting dirty when it came to defending his life.

The lug nuts wrapped in the rag made a passable blackjack. A sharp blow to the temple and the guy was out cold, a second one just because Ray was pissed.

Easy enough after that to tie his hands and feet behind him with the bungee. He'd had the knife ready, but he was glad he didn't have to cut the guy. Those days were behind him and Ray wanted it to stay that way.

Panting from adrenaline, he surveyed his handiwork—fast and effective. James Bond couldn't have done any better.

From the lowering light he figured it was mid-afternoon. He'd been in the truck for at least a couple of hours. He still didn't know why he'd been kidnapped and he wasn't about to stick around to find out. The guy on the ground was already groaning.

The truck's engine was still running. Ray grabbed the gun from the ground and started for the truck's cab, where the driver door hung open. From the other side of the vehicle, he heard a pair of heavy feet hit the asphalt, then a voice. "Hey! What the—"

Without waiting to meet his second assailant, Ray ran for the cab and used the door as leverage to jump up into the driver seat. The passenger door was still swinging open as he jammed the shifter, grinding the gears when he hit the accelerator. He wheeled in a tight arc, the shouts of his kidnappers fading as the door slammed shut.

The big vehicle felt almost familiar and he laughed out loud as he thought of all the times

he'd complained when his mother made him drive the moving van for her brother every time he got evicted and needed to move in the middle of the night.

Ray glance swung wildly as he drove, trying to get his bearings. He could see that he was under an enormous bridge, and he knew which bridge it was.

Only the Vincent Thomas was painted that striking shade of emerald. They called it San Pedro's Golden Gate. He was in the Port of Los Angeles. But why?

His stomach clenched as he took in the deserted parking lot, the shipping containers that lined the dock. Maybe they'd planned to send him on an extended vacation. Or turn him into fish food.

But it hadn't worked out that way.

The truck barreled out of the parking lot and turned west to Harbor Boulevard. Half a mile later, Ray braked to the side of the road and shouted a loud whoop in a raucous burst of gratitude that he had survived.

He sat there for a couple of minutes, watching the traffic pass while his heart rate normalized. Dark clouds were gathering, heavy with the threat of rain, but the clock in the dash told him it was a little past three. He chewed over the case while he sat there, and wondered whether John Duncan had sent someone looking for him in the courthouse. Had he called another witness when Ray didn't show up after lunch? Did they think he'd just flaked?

He should call the cops.

But if he did, would they believe his story? Doubt niggled in his brain, reminded him of

his gang times when they hadn't. Even the years he'd spent working as a document examiner in the crime lab couldn't erase those memories. Trust was hard won in Ray's world, even now.

His briefcase was on the floor where his captors must have tossed it after throwing his sorry drugged ass in the back of the truck. Opting for common sense in the end, he leaned down to rummage for his cell phone. As he went to pick up the black leather attache, he noticed a clipboard underneath with a single sheet of paper attached.

Ray picked up the clipboard and stared at the handwriting on the paper. His mind wanted to reject what he saw, but there was no way to deny what he knew to be Marina's handwriting:

Light-skinned black male – early thirties – five-ten, one-
sixty-five.

Wearing a navy blue blazer, red tie, grey pants.

His eyes dropped to the charcoal grey trousers that had looked so spiffy this morning when he checked himself out in the mirror. The blazer and tie he'd shed were still in the back of the truck, of course.

Damn! He should have known. Had known, but ignored it in favor of a pretty face and a body that... He shook his head, still wanting to deny it but the sharp little angles she had unconsciously formed inside the *o*'s and *a*'s were a dead giveaway. Some of his colleagues claimed it meant the writer was a pathological liar. The sense of betrayal was as keen as if Marina had shanked him with an icepick.

But why? Why had she set him up? Because he knew in his gut that she had.

The blare of a passing car's horn broke the silence and startled him. He stared at his hands, gritty with dirt from crawling around the truck floor, and his ruined best trousers, stained and torn at the knee where he'd wrestled his assailant to the ground. Shit! He needed a beer. Better still, a twelve-pack; a dozen Fat Weasels would make him feel better.

He gusted a sigh. Beer wasn't going to solve this problem. Opening his briefcase, he took out the Westcom file. Fucking legal work, he thought, flipping through the bloated stack of paper. Too damn much paper.

Ray turned the pile face down and began with the first communication he'd received from Jack Burns, determined to figure out why Marina had waited until halfway through his testimony to remove him from the picture.

As he read through the employee statements, the time sheets, the disciplinary records, it occurred to him that with his absence that afternoon, the judge might have declared a mistrial. Ray's disappearance during lunch made him look flaky to the court. Westcom would appear to have done their best to defend against Marc's charges, but the weak presentation of the handwriting expert would leave them in a better position to offer him a settlement, rather than go through another expensive trial.

By the time Ray bulldozed the truck up Interstate 110 from San Pedro to the 405 North and exited at Wilshire Boulevard, the high rise that housed his office had pretty much emptied

out. Thirty miles on the 405 might as well be a hundred in rush hour. He hurried inside the building, acutely aware of the stares at his torn and filthy clothing.

His office wasn't much more than a walk-in closet but the price of commercial space in Beverly Hills meant it was the best he could do. At least the swank address gave him a certain cachet that he felt he needed to help counteract his background.

Locking the door behind him, Ray dropped into his desk chair and booted up the computer. First things first. Open an internet browser, then navigate to ZabaSearch.

He typed in the name "Marina Wilder" and got 6 Public Information hits; winnowed out the obvious duplicates and one that would have made her too old. That left two. Taking out a credit card, he keyed in the information and ordered Comprehensive Reports on both of them.

No criminal record turned up for either, but one lived in Alaska and the other had a history of home ownership in a small Pennsylvania township. There were no references after the year 2000. He Googled the name.

The chilling headline that came up first made his stomach drop. "Murder of local woman goes unsolved."

Clicking on the link brought up a newspaper article dated seven years earlier.

Marina Wilder, 28, was last seen alive on her way home from a bar on Saturday night, where she had spent the evening drinking with friends. Her roommate, who was out of town for the weekend, reported her missing on Monday, after receiving a phone

call from her employer, wondering why she hadn't arrived at work.

Wilder's partially decomposed body was found at the side of a heavily wooded road. She was fully clothed and there was no evidence of sexual assault. Her pocketbook was missing, along with her uncashed paycheck, and robbery is considered a motive in the killing. Bar patrons were questioned, but there are currently no suspects.

Ray scrolled down to the photo below the story, holding his breath.

A dark-haired young woman he had never seen before smiled back at him, her eyes full of life. A life she never had a chance to lead, he thought. Because someone else was leading it for her. Someone at the center of an identity theft ring.

The woman calling herself Marina Wilder had tried to distract him with her hot sexuality so that he wouldn't press her about not looking for physical evidence to use against Marc Baumann. By firing Baumann without that evidence, she had set Ray up to fail in court. She and Baumann were probably partners. When Ray picked Baumann's handwritten statement as evidence of his guilt in the theft of the laptop computer, they'd probably panicked and decided that Ray would have to be eliminated.

By waiting until the trial to act, they could discredit him. If they'd let him go, who would believe his tale of being kidnapped? And if they hadn't let him go...he would have shared the fate of the real Marina Wilder.

16
Loophole
Sheila Lowe
sheila@sheilalowe.com

Raymond King picked up the phone on his desk and did something that went against his grain as a former gang member. He called the cops.

###