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 Chapter 1
 

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The last case I'll ever try ended in a whopping judgment. Against me.

Things had started off innocently enough. I was in Small Claims Court, representing the firm's cleaning woman, Marita, in a suit against her lying abusive brother, Jorge. She wanted back the five grand she'd scraped together and lent him for a "coyote" to smuggle his wife and kids up from Nuevo Laredo. I was doing this pro bono, which meant Marita was getting what she paid for. The gallery was packed with DC's unemployed and unemployable, waiting for their day in court, their chance to nail the ex-landlord who'd kept their security deposit, the auto mechanic who'd charged them for repairs he hadn't made, or the dry cleaner who'd lost their best velvet sweatsuit. None of them had a lawyer, except Marita.

What's more, she had evidence. So far I'd introduced four exhibits: a letter from Jorge in San Antonio to Marita in DC begging for the loan, a Western Union receipt recording the transfer, a

second letter from Jorge promising to pay Marita back as soon as he moved to DC, and a third letter from Jorge's wife in Mexico to Marita asking where in the world Jorge was. Then I'd pulled out the last exhibit, a stack of credit card statements, and I asked Jorge where he'd gotten the money for all the stuff.

"What stuff?" Jorge said.

"Let's see," I said. "An emerald necklace your wife never received, a membership to a 'gym' convicted of being a front for selling steroids, and an apartment full of expensive exercise equipment. Tread mill, stair climber, home gym. There's also the boxing gear: heavy bag, speed bag, double-end bag. I could go on."

Jorge just ducked and jabbed. "You think I write these?" he said, waving the letters.

"Are you denying it?"

"You *mamom*."

"Excuse me?"

"How you say, a sucker."

"Your defense is I'm mistaken?"

"For believing my sister. *La puta*."

Marita gasped. Although I didn't speak Spanish, I had a pretty idea what the word meant.

"Objection," I said, "nonresponsive."

The judge's head was down, his fingertips supporting his forehead, his hand shielding eyes which were, no doubt, closed. He was pushing mandatory retirement and had missed his noon nap.

"He no listening," Jorge said.

I raised my voice. "Motion to strike."

Jorge laughed. "Who you gonna strike? You skinny arms."

There was some laughter from the peanut gallery.

"Motion for sanctions," I said to the judge.

"I sanction you," Jorge said. "Pop, right in the nose."

He rammed his fist into a flattened palm. More laughter.

A string of drool dripped from the corner of the judge's mouth. The scales of justice were going to need a nudge.

I smiled at Jorge and leaned closer to him, lowering my voice. "From what I hear, you couldn't punch a hole in a donut."

"What you say?"

"That you talk a big game out of the ring, but when you step through the ropes you go down like a *puta*."

The laughter stopped. Jorge was on his feet now, starting to climb out of the witness box. I stood my ground, not believing he would do it.

But he did it, all right.

He crossed the room to counsel's table, and I went down under a torrent of fists. A fairly impressive show of skill on his part, I have to admit. Although I was waiting for him, I didn't even see the first blow. It took three court security officers to pry him off me.

I picked up my glasses, popped a lense back in, and took a good look at Jorge. He was writhing on the ground, face red, sputtering Spanish at me. *Leguleyo! Bastardo! Muerto!* I licked my bloody lip and turned to the interpreter, the cute single one I'd been glad to draw from the roster, until now.

"What did he say?" I said.

"He doesn't care for lawyers so much."

"Did he threaten to kill me?"

"When he's through with you, if you're lucky."

"Don't act so worried."

"I'm trying not to make a scene." She was filing a fingernail.

"How do I look?" I said.

"Skinny."

"Want to buy me dinner?"

I'd decided things couldn't get any worse, but before I could add rejection to the day's accomplishments my cell phone rang, rousing the judge. He cracked his gavel.

"No telephones in my courtroom. How many times do I have to tell you people? Bailiff, cuff the culprit."

The officers, who were sitting on Jorge, looked back at me.

"You heard the judge," I said. "Cuff the culprit."

I shouldered my way through the gallery, stepped into the hall, and took out my phone. It was my boss, Mac.

"Hammerin' Hank," he said with more than a trace of sarcasm.

"How's your first trial?"

"Better than expected, actually," I said, "and it's not my first."

"The first one I'm not holding your hand through. Is it over already?"

"I guess you could say we're on a break."

"You gonna win?"

"Does our malpractice insurance cover fines?"

He chuckled. "When you get out of jail, and you're done threatening to appeal to the Supreme Court, hustle back to the Bat Cave. Commissioner Gordon called."