

When Dorsey O'Shea walked into the lock shop that morning in October, I was in the back room trying to figure out how to pick the new high-security Cooper locks. I saw her through the one-way glass that separated the workshop from the retail space.

My partner, Willie the Wire, was waiting on a customer. I don't think Willie recognized her at first—it had been two years since Dorsey and I were a number, she had changed her hair, and as I recall he had only met her on one or two occasions—but he remembered her as soon as she said his name and asked for me.

Willie was noncommittal—he knew I was in the back room. “How long has it been, Dorsey?”  
“I really need to see Carmellini,” she said forcefully.

“You're the third hot woman this week who has told me that.”

“I want his telephone number, Willie.”

“Does he still have your phone number?”

That was when I stepped through the shop door and she saw me. She was tall, with great bones, and skin like cream. “Hey, Dorsey.”

“Tommy, I need to talk to you.”

“Come on back.”

She came around the counter and preceded me through the doorway to the shop. I confess, I watched. Even when she wasn't trying, her hips and bottom moved in very interesting ways. But all that was past, I told myself with a sigh. She had ditched me, and truth be told, I didn't want her back. Too much maintenance.

In the shop she looked around curiously at the tools, locks, and junk strewn everywhere. Willie wasn't a neat workman and I confess, I'm also kinda messy. She fingered some of the locks, then focused her attention on me. “I remembered that you were a part owner in this place, so I thought Willie might know where to find you.”

“Inducing him to tell you would have been the trick.”

Obviously Dorsey had not considered the possibility that Willie might refuse to tell her whatever she asked. Few men ever had. She was young, beautiful and rich, the modern trifecta for females. She came by her dough the old fashioned way—she inherited it. Her parents died in a car wreck shortly after she was born. Her grandparents who raised her passed away while she was partying at college, trying to decide if growing up would be worth the effort. Now she lived in a monstrous old brick mansion on five hundred acres, all that remained of a colonial plantation, on the northern bank of the Potomac thirty miles up river from Washington. It was a nice little getaway if you were worth a couple hundred million, and she was.

When I met her she was whiling away her time doing the backstroke through Washington’s social circles. She once thought I was pretty good arm candy on the party circuit and a pleasant bed-warmer on long winter nights, but after a while she changed her mind. Women are like that... fickle.

I had the Cooper lock mounted on a board, which was held in a vice. I adjusted the torsion wench and went back to work with the pick. The Cooper was brand-new to the market, a top-of-the-line exterior door lock that contractors were ordering installed in custom homes. They were telling the owners that it was burglar-proof, un-pickable. I didn’t think there was a lock on the planet that couldn’t be opened without a key, but then, I had never before tried the Cooper. I would see one sooner or later on a door I wanted to go through, so why not learn now? I had already cut a Cooper in half—ruining several saw blades—so I knew what made it tick. I had had two pins aligned when Dorsey came in, and of course lost them when I released the tension on the wrench and walked around front to speak to her.

She eyed me now as I manipulated the tools. “What are you doing, anyway?”

“Learning how to open this lock.”

“Why don’t you use a key?”

“That would be cheating. Our public would be disappointed. What can I do for you today, anyway?”

She looked around again in a distracted manner, then sat on the only uncluttered stool. “I need help, and the only person I could think of asking was you.”

I got one of the pins up and felt around, trying to find which of the others was the tightest. The problem here, I decided, was the shape of my pick. I could barely reach the pins. I got a strip of flat stock from our cabinet and began working with the grinder.

“That sounds very deep,” I said to keep her talking. “Have you discussed that insight with your analyst?”

“I feel like such a fool, coming here like this. Don’t make it worse by talking down to me.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not that I didn’t like you, Tommy, but I never understood you. Who are you? Why do you own part of a lock shop? What kind of work do you do for the government? You never told me anything about yourself. I always felt that there was this wall between us, that there was a whole side of you I didn’t know.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” I said. “It was two years ago. We hadn’t made each other any promises.” She twisted her hands—I couldn’t help glancing at her from time to time.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?” I said as I inspected my new pick. I slipped it into the Cooper, put some tension on the torsion wrench, and went to work as she talked.

“Every man I know wears a suit and tie and spends his days making money—the more the better—except you. It’s just that—oh, hell!” She watched me work the pick for a minute before she added, “I want you to get into an ex-boyfriend’s house and get something for me.”

“There are dozens of lock shops listed in the yellow pages.”

“Please, Tommy, don’t be like that.” She slipped off the stool and walked around so that she could look into my eyes. She didn’t reach and she didn’t touch—just looked. “I feel like such a jerk, asking you for a favor after I broke up with you, but I don’t have a choice. Believe me, I am in trouble.”

Truthfully, when she dumped me I was sort of subtly campaigning to get dumped—I wasn’t about to tell her that. And you don’t have to believe it if you don’t want to.

I glanced at her. The tension showed on her face. “You’re going to have to tell me all of it,” I said, gently as I could. At heart Dorsey was a nice kid... for a multi-millionaire, which wasn’t her fault.

“His name is Kincaid, Carroll Kincaid. He has a couple of videotapes. He made them without my knowledge when we were first dating. He’s threatening to show them to my fiancé if I don’t pay him a lot of money.”

“I didn’t know you were engaged.”

“We haven’t announced it yet.”

“Who’s the lucky guy?”

She said a name, pronounced it like I was supposed to recognize it.

“So why don’t you ask him for help?” I said.

“I can’t. Tommy, even if I pay blackmail, there’s no guarantee Kincaid would give me the only copies of the tapes.”

“So you want me to break into his house and get the tapes?”

“It wouldn’t really be burglary. He made the tapes without my permission. They are really mine.”

Amazingly enough, when we were dating the thought never crossed my little mind that she might have a stupid stunt like this

in her. I made eye contact again, scrutinized every feature. I decided she might be telling the truth.

I was trying to think of something appropriate to say when I felt the pick twitch and the lock rotated. It was open.

I put the tools on the table and was reaching for a stool when she moved closer and laid a hand on my arm. “Oh, Tommy, please! Blackmail is ugly. I am really in love, and it could be something wonderful. Kincaid is trying to ruin my life.”

I reflected that sometimes having money is really hard on a girl, or so I’ve heard. And the prospect of burglary always gets my juices flowing. She gave me Kincaid’s address. I made sure Dorsey understood that I wasn’t promising anything. “I’ll see what I can do.” She gave me her cell phone number, started to kiss me, thought better of it and left.

I sat wondering how that kiss would have tasted as I listened to her walk through the store. When the front door closed Willie came into the workshop.

“I don’t know what you got, Carmellini, that drives all the chicks wild, but I’d sure like to have some of it. They’re troopin’ in here all the time wantin’ to know where you are, what you’re doin’ — makes a man feel inadequate, y’know? Maybe you oughta open a school or somethin’. Sorta a public service deal. What’d’ya think?”

“I got the Cooper opened.”

“How long it take you?”

“I wasn’t timing it. I was —“

“Three minutes for me,” Willie said with a touch of pride in his voice. “Course I wasn’t looking at a dish like that when I did it. What does she want you to do — steal the silver at the White House?”

“I can beat three minutes blindfolded,” I told Willie, and by God, I did. And I had to listen to a lot of his B.S. while I did it.

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