

## ~ONE~

The simple truth is sometimes life just isn't fair.

A lawyer friend once told him *'Steve, life isn't fair, it's just legal.'*

Legal or not, it wasn't fair that his glass was empty while the barmaid was at the other end of the bar letting some young stud chat her up. If he wasn't trying to maintain a low profile he would have gotten her attention.

Rule number one when you're tailing somebody...don't draw attention to yourself.

The mark was an overweight, balding guy named Fred Cranston. His wife, Rhonda, was looking for enough evidence to prevent him from squirming out of alimony in the divorce.

Cranston sat on the opposite side of the oval-shaped bar. A large-breasted woman sat next to him hanging on his every word as if he were dictating a cure for cancer, world hunger and hangovers. From what Steve could see, she was probably half of Cranston's age. Another great unfairness...how these middle-aged loudmouths managed to convince gorgeous, young women to sleep with them.

As was usually the case, Cranston had no idea he was being tailed and even less of an idea that his wife was preparing to take him to the cleaners.

That was where Steve Salem, former Boston cop, now a private investigator in Flagler Beach, Florida, came in. He made a comfortable living thanks to people who refused to play by the rules – which didn't seem fair either, but it was legal.

Not that he had any room to talk; his career with the Boston PD had been terminated prematurely for nearly beating a suspect to death – a flagrant rules infraction, but Steve didn't see it that way at the time.

When you crash through a door and find a twenty six-year-old asshole torturing and sodomizing a wheelchair-bound girl who wasn't even eleven years old yet, the rules take a back seat to justice.

What he did wasn't legal, but in his mind it was fair.

The Mayor of Boston disagreed and because it was an election year, Steve became an example.

So now he was tailing unfaithful spouses and insurance scammers.

Aside from Cranston, his girlfriend and the guy talking to the bartender, there was one other patron in the bar – a woman in her mid-twenties with the looks of a swim-suit model. Steve wondered what such a good-looking woman was doing in a bar, alone on a Friday night.

The door opened and three kids walked in laughing as they shook off the rain. Steve thought he recognized one of them. They walked around the bar and sat next to the swim-suit model.

One of them fed a bill into the jukebox and the quiet of the bar was assaulted by an obnoxious rap song.

Cranston and his companion were getting cozy and one of the woman's hands disappeared beneath the bar.

Back at the other end the three kids were getting a little rowdy and one of them bumped into the swim suit model.

As they apologized, the one Steve thought he knew stood and walked quickly to the men's room.

Steve took a glance at Cranston – who was still enjoying the hand-job from his partner – then walked to the men's room.

He saw the feet of the kid under a stall door. When the kid emerged from the stall Steve stepped into his path.

"Aren't you gonna wash your hands?" he asked the kid.

"Huh?"

Steve looked at the kid's face and his hunch was confirmed, he knew him.

"I said, 'aren't you going to wash your hands,' Brad?"

"What? You know me?"

C'mere," Steve said, guiding the kid back to the stall.

On the floor behind the toilet was a woman's purse.

"Pick it up," Steve ordered.

Brad paused before he complied, handing it to Steve.

"Now let me have whatever you took from it."

Brad dug into his pocket, handing Steve a few credit cards and a wad of cash. Steve read the name on one of the credit cards.

"Her name is Valerie Casey, if you're interested."

Steve stuffed the contents into the purse and slapped it against Brad's chest.

"Bring it back," he said.

"But..."

"Just drop it on the floor behind her stool. She'll think it fell when your buddy bumped into her. Then you and your two friends finish your beers and get the hell out of here and I won't have to tell your Uncle Ralph I saw you."

"You know my uncle?"

"Yeah, now, do we have an agreement?"

"Yeah."

"Atta boy."

Steve waited a few beats after Brad left before leaving. He took his seat and watched as Brad and his friends walked out into the rainy Daytona Beach night. A minute later, Valerie Casey left. Steve admired her as she walked to the door then turned to check on Cranston.

Cranston and his mistress were gone.

He trotted through the rain to his Jeep and did a slow drive around the parking lot, spotting Cranston's Lincoln next to the dumpster.

Steve found a place to park where he could observe the car.

He reached into the glove box and took out a digital camera.

A Ford Taurus drove by - its headlights hitting Cranston's car, then stopped just past the Lincoln.

Leaving the motor running, but turning the headlights off, a figure climbed out of the Taurus and took a look around the parking lot. Steve began to get a bad feeling.

He dropped his camera and took out his .45.

The figure walked to the Lincoln and drew a gun.

Steve threw open the door of the Jeep and slipped on the wet asphalt. As he tried to regain his balance, he heard three shots. The gunman was in his car and gone before Steve could get close.

He walked through the rain and looked into the back seat of the Lincoln. Cranston sat with his back to the passenger's side door. His pants were bunched around his knees and his shirt was stained bright red from two bullet holes in his chest. His mistress was on her knees on the floor, her head, or what was left of it, was still in Cranston's lap. The odors of sex and blood mingled and wafted into the rainy night.

Steve re-holstered his .45 and took his cell phone out to call 9-1-1. While he waited for the call to go through he shook his head at Fred Cranston and his mistress.

"Getting caught with your pants down is usually a metaphor, Fred," he said.