

Chapter 11

No smoking. It really sucked. The one time in your life when you had to have your wits about you, and you couldn't even smoke. He'd killed a pack-and-a-half since morning. Now it was nearly one, and though his brain was screaming for another fix, it didn't seem likely it would get one soon. No one in the court was smoking, and large signs, placed at strategic intervals, said NO SMOKING in twelve-inch type. If they had said "Thank You For Not Smoking Please" or some other wishy-washy crap, our hero would have ventured it at once. NO SMOKING, however, was an *order*, and not a polite request. So what the hell could he do?

Jackie was there. She was sitting with her attorneys across the aisle, looking more beautiful and sensually appealing than she ever had before. Jesus Christ, if he had had a dick it would have been straight up by now. She had picked up a golden tan, to go with her light blonde hair, and now she was looking every bit as confident as he was a nervous wreck.

Only once had she glanced at him, and when she did, and flashed a ten-thousand dollar smile, the look was so malicious that he had felt the urge to spring from his seat and take her life right then. But it wouldn't do, because he was so tightly sandwiched in between Ernie Shyster and Mrs. Stanislawski that he could barely lift his leg to fart, much less do any athletic maneuvering. And the bailiff . . . holy Christ, what a bailiff!

Seven feet tall, with legs like tree-trunks, hands the size of catchers' mitts, and a teeny little head that couldn't hold a chestnut for a brain. His appearance told a simple tale, and the moral was: "*Don't fuck with me.*"

The lunch recess was nearly over, and the atmosphere within the courtroom, which for the past ten minutes had been bustling with activity, now grew quiet and subdued. A number of attorneys, with smug looks on their faces, were strutting to and fro, talking to the people in the gallery, who no doubt were there to have *their* cases heard that day. One of them exchanged a word with Ernie, at which he turned to Harry, and with a dark look said:

"It's Judge Curette. Don't worry. She's tough but fair."

"*She?*"

"That's right."

"Damn it, Ernie, I don't want no fucking bitch"

The attorney's face grew frightfully severe; so much so that it startled our hero, who drew up halfway through his sentence and stared dumbly at his counsel.

"Listen to me," hissed Ernie, in the direst of tones.

"Whatever the hell goes down in this courtroom here today, I'm warning you, don't"

He didn't finish. The courthouse clock struck one.

Immediately the bailiff stationed himself before the bench, and

cried out in bullhorn tones "Family Court for the County of Kent, the Honorable D.C. Curette presiding. All rise."

Everybody in the courtroom was instantly on his feet. Presently the judge came huffing in, smoking a cigarette, which stuck out from the most hideously ugly face our hero had ever seen. She stood upon no ceremony, but bounded to the bench, hiking up her robe as she straddled the witness-box to reach her seat. Her bared leg was a road-map of purple veins.

"Siddown!" she roared, not taking the cigarette from her lips. And instantly all were seated.

"She's smoking," thought our hero, with a feeling of relief. "The signs are all a crock." He took out a cigarette, and promptly lit it up.

"NO SMOKING IN THE COURT!" screamed the judge, as she went all red in her frightful face. "Bailiff! *Bailiff!*"

And before our hero could react, the bailiff had snatched the Marlboro from his lips, crushed it in his prodigious fingers, and stomped it down on the courtroom floor. The judge, satisfied, nodded her pleasure to the bailiff, then took a long, deep drag of her own. She blew the smoke out through a warty nose, then coughed and hacked.

"What does it say in the docket?" she demanded of the clerk, who was fumbling nervously about.

"Ah . . . ah . . . case of"

"Give it to me, asshole." She leaned right over the bench, exposing both her thighs, and snatched the paper clean away.

"Custody case . . . minor dependent, Little Peter. Jacqueline Hyde, complainant, versus . . . Shithead."

Ernie leaped dramatically to his feet.

"Your honor, I object. His name is not Shithead."

"Mr. Shyster," said the judge, taking out her cigarette and jabbing it at the air, "I have tolerated your insolence long enough. Just let me hear another sound from you, and you will find yourself defending yourself in a very different sort of tribunal. Do you understand what I mean?"

Ernie said nothing in reply, but instantly took out his wallet, removed his Rolex watch, his ring, and his diamond tie-tack, and handed them to Mrs. Stanislawski, who deposited them in her purse. That done, he gave an idiotic grin, and then sat down.

"Allright," said Judge Curette, in a calmer tone of voice. "Now we'll get somewhere. Let the parties approach the bench."

Our hero was at once confused. Did that mean him? He was a party, wasn't he? He sought his counsel's guidance, but it was all to no avail, for Ernie only smiled and sat there motionless. Fortunately, the secretary gave him a clandestine kick, for Jackie was already up and advancing toward the bench. Flushed and uncertain, our hero stood up.

"Ah," he said, in a too-loud voice, and as he spoke he felt about three feet tall. "Did you mean *me*, your honor?"

"Is your name Shithead?" asked the judge.

"Ah . . . no, your honor, it's Harry Toole."

"Then why does it say Shithead in the docket?"

"Ah . . . I dunno, your honor."

"Mr. Shithead"

"Yes, your honor?"

"I don't like your attitude."

Here a ripple of mirth ran through the court, which sent the judge into a hissy-fit. She pounded with the gavel. "Order! Order in the court! Bailiff! Remove that man!"

At which the bailiff bodily picked up one of the miscreants and booted him with a hard kick out the door.

"Now listen to me, Mr. Shithead," said the judge, when all was calm again. (Our hero's knees were knocking together and he was trembling from head to foot.) "Do you know what contempt is?"

"I . . . I think it means, like . . . like getting smart in the court."

"Like getting smart in the court," she mocked, and gave a little sneer. "You're not very clever, Mr. Shithead, but you get an 'A' for that. Right! Get smart in *my* court, and I'll cite you for contempt. And that bailiff there will drag your ass outside.

And you'll be arrested, and handcuffed, and taken to prison, and raped. Got it?"

"Yes, your honor." Jesus, she wasn't shitting!

"Good. Now listen up: I'm only gonna say this once. It is not the intention of this court to allow the rules of judicial procedure to stand in the way of justice. *Cox versus Kuntz*, 10,364,768 Civil Record, Section 64b. There are plenty of other precedents, but they're a pain in the ass to cite. Any objections?"

"None from us, your Honor," said the attorney for Jacqueline Hyde. Mr. Shyster, still grinning, remained mute.

"Mr. Shithead?"

"Huh?"

"Any objections? I'm losing my patience!"

"Objections to what?"

"Mr. Shithead," said the judge, with solemn gravity. "You are one dumb son of a bitch."

There was a round of hearty applause.

"Put it in the record: no objections! Now to the business at hand. Who's got Little Peter?"

"She has, Your Honor!" blurted out our hero, pointing an accusing finger at his wife. "She kidnaped him while I was asleep!"

"One at a time!" yelled Judge Curette. "Come on, Mr. Shithead, let her talk. You'll get a chance to defend yourself."

"It's true, Your Honor," said Jackie, speaking in measured, even tones, and shooting an accusing glance in her husband's way. "I won't deny it."

"Where is he now?" asked the judge.

"He's here in court," said Jackie. "Only he's hiding somewhere. You see, he's very shy, and he doesn't want to show his little head."

"No problem," said the judge, and she gave our hero a look that seemed to say she defied him to *make* it a problem. "He's suffered enough already. Why did you kidnap him?"

"I didn't, Your Honor. I took him from my husband for his own good. You see, I had knowledge that Little Peter was being . . . was being abused."

"That's a god-damned lie, bitch, and you know it!" screamed Harry.

"No swearing in the court!" Down came the gavel, half-a-dozen times. "Jesus H. Christ! Why do I gotta put up with this shit?"

"I'm sorry, Your Honor, but it's the truth!" cried Harry, passionately. "I never abused Little Peter. I was good to him. I always took him wherever I went: baseball games, and bowling, and I even took him in to work. How could I abuse him? He was like . . . he was like a *part* of me!"

"Were you attached to him?" the judge inquired.

"Yeah! Sure! And *he* was attached to *me*. He was, Your Honor!" cried Harry, as tears sprang to his eyes. "He was attached to me; very much attached!" The tears rolled down his cheeks. "He was never attached to *her*!"

"Well, what about it?" asked the judge, turning back to Jackie. "Is he lying, dear?"

"Your Honor, he's lying through his teeth."

"Call me Donna," said Judge Curette. "We don't have to be so formal. Except for you, Mr. Shithead." She gave him a warning glance.

"Well, Donna, it happened like this. For about the past six months I'd had these suspicions that my husband--that is, Mr. Shithead--was up to something. It was a change; a subtle change in Little Peter. He's a feeble-minded child, you know--mentally retarded--and he only has one eye, and that one eye is blind. But he was a happy child; I mean, he was always so bright and bubbling and he always held himself erect. But one day all that seemed to change, and for some strange reason he wasn't what he used to be. I mean, he would alternate between periods of high elation, and days of dark depression when all he could do was just hang his little head and mope. Bless his little bald head! That's when my suspicions began. Then one day I came home unexpectedly and found my husband in the bedroom. He was beating Little Peter." She paused, all misty-eyed, and held a hankie to her face.

"Shut your lying mouth, you bitch!" cried Harry, at which his wife burst into tears.

"Now look what you've done!" growled Judge Curette, as she started up from the bench. "You've made her cry. God you're a heartless bastard!" Hitching up her robe she hurried down from the bench, and putting her arms around Jackie's shoulders promptly began administering an assortment of little hugs and kisses, and other small tokens of female consolation.

"There, there," she soothed, fondly patting Jackie's head and looking daggers at our hero. "Never mind that shithead, dear: he'll get his and a lot to spare. That's right, Mr. Shithead, the Law will out, and when it does . . . you callous bastard! I wouldn't treat her that way, not if she were *my* wife! I'd love her and pet her and show her all the kindness in the world. You bet I would! I'd give her presents, and send her flowers, and take her anywhere she wanted to go. But I guess that's a little bit much for the likes of you! Go on, dear," she said to Jackie, "just cry it out. Are you allright? Try and hold out now, if you can."

"I think I'm better now," sniffed Jackie, wiping her nose with the embroidered hankie. "I don't care. I just want to get it over with." She sobbed.

The judge mounted the bench once more. Jackie shot a glance at Harry, and seeing that the judge's back was turned, stuck her tongue out at him.

"Now there, finish what you were saying, when Shithead made you cry."

"I will, Your Honor . . . I mean, Donna. I will. As I said before, he was . . . he was beating Little Peter."

A low buzz rippled through the court.

"Beating him?" inquired the judge.

"Yes. Beating him; flogging him; in a frenzy; like I had never seen before. I had always known him to be a peaceful man, but when I saw him there, he was completely changed; his face was red; so red, and his eyes. . . oh God, it was terrible! I'll never forget those eyes! And the violence! He had one hand around Little Peter's throat, and I thought . . . I thought he was going to kill him! And when he saw me, he just kind of stopped, and let go of Little Peter's neck, and the poor thing just sank down, lifelessly. And he acted like it had never happened, and he just stood there, grinning. And when I asked him why he did it, he just kept grinning, that awful, leering grin, and he said . . . oh Donna, do I *have* to?"

"Yes," said the judge, with great solemnity. "You must."

"He said he did it because it made him feel good."

Another murmur rippled through the court.

"Of course it did!" cried Harry. (His emotions were at a peak.) "He's *my* Little Peter, isn't he? I got a right to beat him! Of course I beat him! I beat him every day; sometimes two or three times! And I loved it! It felt great!"

"Mr. Shithead," said the judge, "you are one sick pup."

Our hero faintly smiled. The judge returned it with a menacing snarl.

"I can assure you, Mr. Shithead, you have nothing to smile about." Another round of applause burst from the gallery. The judge turned back to Jackie and said,

"Is that why you were forced to leave?"

"Yes," was her reply. "I thought he would kill Little Peter . . . beat him to death in one of his senseless rages."

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"I was afraid he would kill me."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No . . . but . . . you know the way men are."

"I think I do," said Judge Curette, with firm conviction.

"I think I do. And that's why you took Little Peter?"

"Yes. I'm not ashamed of it. And I only regret that I wasn't able to take his brothers too."

"Brothers?" exclaimed the judge. "There are other dependents?"

"Yes . . . twins. Two of the dearest little creatures, who unfortunately have been diagnosed as manic depressives. They're certified insane."

"Do they depend on him?"

"No . . . they depend *from* him. But as of now, he's their only means of support."

"Well, Mr. Shithead," said the judge, turning to our hero. "Is it true?"

"No it isn't true!" cried Harry, his fear turning into indignation. "They're not dependents. And they're not insane. They're . . . they're just a couple of nuts!"

Down came the gavel.

"The language of insensitivity will not be employed in this court!"

"Whatever, Your Honor."

"What?"

"Ah . . . well . . . nothing, Your Honor. I was only"

"Being a typical shithead!" concluded the judge, at which there was general laughter.

"Shaddap!" she screamed, taking up a fountain-pen and hurling it into the gallery. "I'm not here to entertain you! Now, Mr. Shithead: about these nuts. Do you support 'em?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I wear Jockey shorts."

"No, asshole, I mean in a pecuniary sense."

"Oh no, Your Honor!" declared Harry, placing his right hand above his heart. "I would never *dream* of such a thing!"

"What the *fuck* do you mean by that?"

"I don't know," said Harry, in desperation. "What's 'peculiar'?"

"It's money, moron!" screamed Her Honor, nearly losing all control. "Money, you stupid ass! What do you do for a living, fool?"

"I'm a salesman."

"How much do you make?"

"A hundred and fifty grand a year."

"What?"

"A hundred and fifty grand."

"Louder!"

"A HUNDRED AND FIFTY GRAND!"

The courtroom buzzed.

"Your Honor!" cried Jackie's lawyer, rising up with papers in his hand. "Through the efforts of our investigating firm it has come to our attention that Mr. Toole . . . I mean, Mr. *Shithead* . . . has recently lost his job."

"Lost his job, has he?" said the judge. "Thank you for that information, Mr. Weiskopf." She lit another cigarette and turned to Harry, who was beginning to feel that something momentous was at hand.

"So here you are, Mr. *Shithead*, seeking justice in this court. Well, let's sum it up. You haven't got a job; you've got a violent disposition; you beat Little Peter because it makes you feel good, and you can't support your two little nuts. So what on earth do you think this court should do?"

Poor Harry. He had believed in the rightness of his cause. But standing in the court, before so many clever people, his firm beliefs gave way to doubt. If right were on his side, then why were all these people set so dead against him? And who was he to contradict? Wasn't he a shithead, and a moron, and a fool? Could a fool convince a judge? Could a moron find the words?

He scanned the faces that surrounded him. Jackie smiled, a smile of savage glee. There were stern, accusing glances from the stony-visaged people. Counsel for the defense sat impotent and dumb. Suddenly he forgot why it was that he was there, and he could only think that somehow he was powerfully to blame.

So like a sheep he hung his head, and bleated out, "I don't know, Your Honor . . . Jeez . . . you don't wanna break up a family"

The gavel came down hard.

"Right!" said the Honorable Judge Curette. "That's exactly what I had in mind. So listen up. Here's how it's gonna be. I hereby award full custody of the said Little Peter to Jacqueline Hyde, with no right of visitation to the respondent. That's you, Mr. Shithead. For their own protection, I likewise order that the two insane dependents be handed over to Jacqueline Hyde as guardian, full custody granted, and no right of visitation to the respondent. Which once again is you, Mr. Shithead. Last, the court orders Mr. Shithead to make remittances of support in the amount of . . . oh, say, ten thousand dollars a month."

"Ten thousand bucks a month!" cried Harry, shocked at once into a sense of his position. "Your Honor! She's a fucking specialist! She's making twice my dough!"

"You are not going to shirk your duty, sir!" snapped the judge, as she raised the gavel and prepared to strike. "Not in this court, at any rate! She's got a blind Little Peter and two psychotic nuts. You don't expect she's gonna work?"

"But . . . but . . . I haven't even got a job!"

"You're a man, you'll think of something." Down came the gavel. "Next case!"

Suddenly our hero felt very alone. People were rushing past him; running up against him; the courtroom was alive with frantic activity. He turned and looked toward the door. Jackie was going out; he could see her swaying backside as she made her exit in the throng. Ernie was leaving too, and none too slowly. He looked like a man reprieved. And in the middle of it all stood our hero, in shock; not fully comprehending what had come to pass. Spots danced before his eyes; his head felt light, and there was a pounding in his brain. A small, white hand appeared before his face. Mrs. Stanislawski was accosting him.

"That's five thousand dollars for today."

And with that our hero swooned, falling heavily to the floor.