SAMPLE CHAPTER

The Painter

Sample Chapter — Chapter 7

by Ray Lopez

Getting into Big Sandy went smoothly. John placed his Luger in the trunk of the rental. The Warden had prepared his staff for the visit. Gio had been there for less than a week, which meant that he was still being processed and had not yet entered General Population. Paul had timed it perfectly, hoping it would be a while before Gio joined the herd. He had briefed Warden Robinson before making the trip, and Theodore welcomed them in the lobby after they passed through security. He was a tall, dark-skinned black man with white hair that amplified his skin tone. John sized him up at around 6'3" and 220 pounds but thought he looked more like a professor than a warden of a federal penitentiary. Maybe it was just the glasses he wore at the end of his nose.

As usual, Paul spoke first, another of his MOs, laying the groundwork for the interaction.

"Teddy! How long has it been, ten years?"

He grabbed Teddy's right hand, covered it with his left, and gave a few firm shakes.

"At least that long counselor. How are you?"

"I'm great and cut out this counselor shit. It's Paul."

John fought the urge to shake his head in dismay as the introduction was made.

"Teddy, this is Agent John Taurino, the head of our Organized Crime Task Force."

"Agent Taurino," Teddy shook John's hand, "it's a pleasure to meet you. I've heard a lot of good things. May I call you John?"

"Thank you, Warden." John always kept things professional. "You can call me anything you like as long as you let me out of here when we're done. What you do with Paul on the other hand is none of my concern."

Once he got over the moment of shock at hearing humor from his agent, Paul offered his fake, but convincing laugh.

“Ha ha ha. An agent with a sense of humor. That’s what The Bureau needs more of these days.”

The Warden led the men to his office, which was down the hall from the lobby, through a locked door and down another hallway that housed the administrative wing.

“Come in gentlemen, and have a seat.”

The office had a huge window with a breathtaking view of the valley surrounding the prison, adorned in the full colors of fall.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? I take time each day to appreciate God’s glory and to ask him to bring his light into this dark place.”

Paul knew that Teddy was raised Baptist, and scripture rolled off his tongue like it was the most natural way a person could speak. He also knew of Teddy’s ambition, his dark side, but that had no bearing on their mission. He had begun calling it their mission in the interest of justice, trying to keep that flame burning in Taurino’s heart. Teddy sat behind his desk, which John thought must be cherrywood. And again, Paul started the conversation.

“Let me begin by thanking you for meeting with us and arranging this visit.”

“I should be thanking you, Paul. Better it comes from the horse’s mouth than from one of my staff. An indefinite stay in the Security Housing Unit is not usually well received. Per policy, inmates are in a single-occupancy cell and are only allowed out five to seven hours a week, depending on staffing. And they usually earn their way in, unlike your man.”

John decided this would be a good time to jump in.

“Well in a way, you could say that Bruno earned his way in when he made a public service announcement about the Mafia at his sentencing.”

Paul interjected.

“Bruno’s very smart. We’ve got his school records, and you know he has an IQ of 160. It’s in the blood, I guess. His father got through the life spotless, and Bruno’s kid just got into law school at Stanford! I’m sure he’ll understand that we’re obligated to keep him safe.”

“Well, OK then, let me take you guys down to the processing unit, where you’ll visit with Inmate Bruno in an isolated interview room. The two weeks in processing is somewhat like SHU. Inmates have very little interaction with each other. The time is spent doing medical and psychological testing, including observation, of course, before assigning a unit. We also study the presentence report and the file we receive from the

Government to see if there are any separation orders that need to be addressed. I think you took care of that when you got the judge to recommend Big Sandy."

Paul had met with Judge Nunez in chambers a few days after the sentencing to advise him of their "investigation" and concerns and requested that he make this recommendation to the Bureau of Prisons directly, rather than on the judgment.

John and Paul had never been inside a federal penitentiary. They would usually have cooperators taken from Wyatt and secretly interviewed them at the FBI field office. As they followed Warden Robinson down an endless hallway, they both felt the sensory deprivation, no windows to the outside. They went through three locked doors, all opened electronically, and walked about a quarter of a mile with no sign of life until they came to the Processing Unit. Paul was reminded of the opening of the Get Smart TV show where Don Adams walked down numerous halls and through a bunch of automatic doors before getting to the headquarters of Control. This brought a smile to his face—until they came to the interview room. Bruno was already there waiting for them. He hated Paul but respected John. Both had agreed that John would take the lead.

The room was 10' by 10', with light yellow concrete walls and a gray concrete floor. It was lit by a four-foot halogen light fixture. Gio sat behind a small table facing the door, wearing a yellow jumpsuit. There were two chairs opposite him, a fourth chair in the far-right corner and a surveillance camera just above the door. Paul entered first, and Gio's eyes locked on him immediately. He showed no emotion. As Paul approached the table he thought, What's with the yellow? John quickly stepped around Paul's right side and made eye contact with Gio, thinking, Man he looks a lot older than 38. The case had aged Gio considerably, burrowing deep lines in his forehead, pushing back his hairline, and some gray hair around his ears.

They both stepped forward to take their seats, but before sitting down, Paul offered his hand.

"Mr. Bruno, how are you?"

Gio's arms stayed folded on the table, and his eyes remained focused on Paul. They seemed darker than John had remembered. Paul put his hand down, and they both took their seats.

"What the hell is this?" Gio asked.

And before John could respond, Paul said,

"This? This is this."

John couldn't believe what he was hearing and thought, Paul has totally lost it. Does he think this is a movie? Gio snapped back.

"What the hell does that mean?"

John quickly jumped in.

“It doesn’t mean anything, Gio. We just took a five-and-a-half-hour flight, with two layovers and a two-hour drive to get here. The U.S. Attorney drove, and I think he’s just tired and watched too many movies during the flight.”

John was royally pissed. They had agreed that he would take the lead. He knew that Paul was just fucking with Gio’s mind, which made absolutely no sense. Paul just loved to mess with people, using his power for leverage.

“Let me get right to the point, Gio. Our investigation has revealed that there is a contract hit on your life. I’m sure that doesn’t surprise you,” John said.

Gio looked straight at Paul.

“Nothing surprises me.”

Paul couldn’t keep quiet.

“This information is what led to your designation to Big Sandy, but this doesn’t mean you’re untouchable …”

John seized the moment to regain control at this critical point.

“Which is why you’re being placed in the Security Housing Unit, the SHU.”

“Let’s cut the crap and call it what it is, Agent Taurino. You’re putting me in solitary confinement!” Gio said, with an edge in his voice like a serrated knife cutting through meat. “What about my wife, my ex-wife, and my son?”

“We have no evidence that they are at risk,” Taurino answered. “We’ve been in contact with them and have offered our assistance.”

The knot in John’s gut tightened when Paul added,

“You know Gio, may I call you Gio? The Government is still very interested in working with you, and if you were to sign a cooperation agreement, your wife and son could be placed in the security witness program.”

John tried to regain control.

“Gio, this is old school. They don’t want your family; they want you to die in prison.”

Paul jumped back in.

“Gio,” (Bruno’s eyes were now burning a hole through the back of Paul’s head) “I mean Mr. Bruno. This is no longer your father’s La Cosa Nostra. Silence is no longer necessary. We have a member of one of the New York families working with us right now.”

The room was suddenly filled with that ear-splitting silence. Gio looked at John, then back at Paul. As he stared at the U.S. Attorney, John thought Gio’s eyes had just turned a little darker. Gio then ended the meeting.

“Go fuck yourself, counselor.”

As the U.S. Attorney and Agent Taurino began the long walk out, the only sound to be heard was the echo of their footsteps down the empty halls and a slight jingle of their escort’s keys. Paul broke the silence.

“Well, I thought that went pretty well.”

“Go fuck yourself, counselor,” John said, as he increased his pace to stay several steps ahead of the U.S. Attorney.