

Mea Culpa

By Jeffery Greb

“I know how this sounds, especially now, but I did it as a favor to the kid.”

He sat on the sectional looking out the bank of windows on the sun setting into the ocean. The view was spectacular and unhampered by the deck extending from the floor above – pinks and purples reflecting off the increasingly choppy water – but his eyes weren’t focused on the view or anything else in particular. His fingers drummed lightly on the old fashioned glass in his hand, empty save the remnants of some ice.

“Look, I know how this goes. The story needs a bad guy. People demand simple explanations. Nobody wants ambiguity.” He looked at his guest. “Ambiguity doesn’t sell. The complexity of reality doesn’t meet the demand. But the truth is I loved the kid, loved him like he was my own. I’m more hurt by this than any of them. But that’s not the story, right?”

He didn’t wait for answer. When he raised his glass to his lips, he saw it was empty and moved behind the bar. Two fresh cubes clinked in his glass. He pulled the bottle of scotch from beneath the bar and poured some into his glass. He set the bottle on the bar without offering any to his guest, nor did he drink. Instead, he resumed gazing toward the sunset. After an uncomfortable length time, he sighed and looked at his guest. He spoke quietly.

“This is off the record, and I mean *off*.” He paused to take a sip of scotch. “Everybody knew the kid was in trouble. Everybody. Look at how his performance deteriorated. You can see it for yourself. You *should* see it for yourself. It’s painfully obvious. And we *all* looked the other way.”

He started to raise his glass but put it back down.

“Pointing out that everybody knew doesn’t mean I’m trying to deny any responsibility. I’m just trying to make you aware of the situation. I can see the story’s going to be that I didn’t do anything because I was trying to protect my financial interest in the kid, so I wanted to keep it a secret. But it wasn’t a secret, you see? Besides, I was doing great before he ever came along. He was *one* of my successful clients, but not the only one. Not even close.” He took a sip of scotch. “This isn’t about trying to milk the cash cow for everything it was worth and killing it in the process. I didn’t act because I wanted to help the kid.”

He moved back to the sectional and put his glass on the end table. After rubbing his eyes and temples beneath his raised glasses for a moment, he regarded his guest again.

“Look, you have some inkling of what he was like. If I had tried to force him to get help, or if he *thought* I was trying to force him, that would have been it between us. He would have cut me out of his life altogether, not just his business, his life. I thought maybe, just maybe, if I kept him close, I could protect him until he finally realized what he was doing to himself. When he was ready, I would be there to help. Someone who cared about *him*. But it didn’t work out that way. Maybe I should have done something differently; maybe then things would be different. But I didn’t, and they aren’t.”

He finished the scotch in one swallow. The disk of sun was below the horizon now.

“I didn’t say anything to him as a favor to the kid, so he could get help when he was ready for help, when it would work. But instead he’s dead, and the story’s going to be I knew and didn’t help him. Or didn’t help him enough. Anyway, I’ll be publicly pilloried and forced to disappear. Probably I deserve it. But it won’t last. Why? Because everybody knew, and everybody also knows I wanted to help him. Oh sure, they’ll be relieved I took the fall. They’ll let me do that. They’ll relax when I don’t squawk and point fingers elsewhere. Because there really is enough blame to go around. And after a respectable time, the clients will come back, or new ones will sign-on. Because I’m good at my job, and everybody knows I was trying to do the kid a favor, help him see for himself the damage he was doing. And eventually there’ll be an interview. Only by then the tone will be different. It’ll be ‘what a tragedy, what a senseless loss.’ The focus will be on *him* then, not *me*.”

He gazed out the windows as if he could see this future.

“And the wound will be healed. The whole thing will no longer be real; it’ll be nostalgia. And I’ll shake my head and agree that it’s a terrible shame.”