

## *The Toll*

by Dan Duling

[originally published in *Orange County Noir*, edited by Gary Phillips, published by Akashic Books, 2010]

Robbie froze as he felt a cold, metallic object press into the back of his neck. He realized what it was. The barrel of a handgun. This night was not turning out the way he'd hoped.

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It had been the longest six months of Robbie's life. Hiding out in a rented room in a crappy apartment building in the unincorporated part of East Orange County just off the 241 toll road, waiting for the heat to die down back in Laguna Beach, the town he'd grown up in, the town he could no longer afford to live in, the town he wanted to get back to as soon as possible. All he wanted was another chance.

When the call had come from Michele late that afternoon in August, he was stoked. She wouldn't elaborate on the phone, but she had a job for him. That was all he needed to know.

It was a little after three o'clock the next afternoon when he hopped in his two-tone – rust and primer – road-weary Corolla and headed toward Laguna. He didn't like the sound the battered Toyota was making – bearing or ball joint? – as he pulled up alongside the 241 toll plaza and heaved a handful of coins at the bin. Car repairs were going to have to wait.

“Fuckin' toll roads,” he muttered as a BMW with a *FasTrak* transponder raced by him. He grimaced. *That's what this place is all about now. They make you pay to get where you're going and pay to come back. It's all about the cash.* He'd been around long enough to know the difference between the old money that seeded this area and the new, stupid money that was spoiling it for everybody.

Robbie had grown up in Laguna and graduated from Laguna Beach High back when their teams were still called the “Artists,” not the newly-minted “Breakers.” After school, he'd been eager to get away from the domestic horror show at home, but he'd always assumed he'd stay local and figure out a way to co-exist among the filthy rich and

infamous who were determined to price him out of his hometown market. For somebody with no real sense of direction or ambition, Robbie quickly learned the score.

Influence, that's what it was all about. And most of the locals didn't really want to get their own hands dirty when it came to passing along "financial or psychological incentives" to make things work. Robbie was happy to do what he was told without leaving a trail. He thought of himself as smart enough to know better, pissed off enough to not give a shit, and savvy enough to get his assignments done without making the *O.C. Register's* back pages.

Bottom line, between 2002 and 2007, if Michele and Jeff had a case in Laguna they didn't want to go to trial, or a business dispute or vendetta that needed settling the old-fashioned way, Robbie had a hand in the "mediation." And there were plenty of opportunities: planning commissioners trying to play both sides, hotshot developers eager to flip properties before the next landslide, mayors caught with their hands in the till, lawsuit-happy execs with a taste for strange, or city council members laboring under the notion that they were appointed to think for themselves.

This was no longer the sleepy little coastal hideaway that had bored him to tears – not to mention various pharmaceutical diversions – during his teen years. No, now even a tear-down shack a mile from the beach would run you a minimum of a million bucks. Face it, the only thing tennis pro Lindsay Davenport, the dude who played Freddie Krueger in the "Nightmare on Elm Street" movies and the guy who made all those "Girls Gone Wild" videos had in common was they all made the kind of "fuck you" money it now took to call Laguna Beach home.

Robbie had to laugh as he cruised past that BMW pulled over to the side of the 241 by a state trooper. Tickets on a toll road! He leaned back and shook his head. *They know how to hit you where it hurts. In the fuckin' wallet.*

Next stop, the toll plaza for the 133 South. More coins in the basket for the privilege of heading west. Looking around, Robbie remembered when this area was all orange groves and strawberry fields, not corporate headquarters, industrial parks and high-end theme parks for shopaholics. What Robbie saw now was the reassurance of returning job security.

He'd learned his lesson: *Don't let it get personal. Never lose your cool. You're a messenger, that's all.* He wasn't about to forget these past six months of purgatory, going stir crazy and watching his meager savings run out in the middle of nowhere. All because he got a little too rough and didn't cover his tracks well enough after a job.

That wouldn't happen again. And when Michele had finally called, Robbie knew he'd be on probation for a while, but that was okay. He wouldn't let them down.

Just past the 405, the toll road portion of the 133 ended and he cruised into Laguna Canyon. After his "sabbatical," it was like he was seeing the place with fresh eyes. When he was growing up, this was an eight-mile, funky two-lane road that twisted toward the Pacific like a sidewinder on peyote. Now there were four lanes most of the way and shuttles from the Act V parking lot a mile from downtown. But, on an August day like this, it was still stop-and-go from El Toro Road on into town where finding a parking place for less than ten bucks still felt like winning the lottery.

So, the Corolla inched along that final mile, until, at last, he cruised past the grounds of the arts festivals, the Sawdust Festival and Art-A-Fair on the left, the Festival of Arts on the right, a mere six blocks from the "T" where the Pacific Coast Highway briefly paralleled the Main Beach boardwalk and Laguna's famous "window to the sea." With its surf, sand, volleyball and basketball courts and a relatively unobstructed view of the Pacific, Main Beach owed its existence to a movement to stop its development back in the 1960s. Its preservation was made possible by the Festival of Arts with funds skimmed off 30 years of ticket sales to the Pageant of the Masters. As always, money talked, and that only-in-Orange-County theatrical show with its "living pictures" still pulled in crowds from all over the world every summer. And as long as it did, the City made certain it got its cut.

Once, when he was nine, Robbie had volunteered and been a cast member in the Pageant. As a porcelain figurine. As crazy as it sounded, that summer was just about his only decent childhood memory, a brief refuge from the endless fights, the drunken beatings and humiliations at home. Now, as he passed the front entrance of the Festival of Arts with its banners and gated grounds filled with artists' displays, Robbie remembered how, back in high school, he'd thought about becoming an artist. Laguna certainly had

enough of them. But, even then he knew himself well enough to know it wasn't in the cards. Instead, he'd just drifted after school, a loner with no real sense of direction.

Michele and her husband Jeff, lawyers and partners in their own two-person legal firm, had originally hired him to run errands and do odd jobs. They liked that Robbie didn't ask too many questions and he paid attention to details. When had his work for them turned from just being a go-fer to the more delicate tasks of money drops and eventually "enhanced mediation"? It had just been a natural progression, with Robbie quickly developing a feel and a taste for anonymous intimidation. Most of his targets were basically small-town cowards who were deathly afraid of having their dirty laundry aired in the pages of the *Coastline-Pilot*. But, Robbie didn't really care why Jeff and Michele had him do what he did. As far as he was concerned, he got paid to turn "no" into "yes, of course, it'll never happen again" by whatever means was necessary.

The Corolla angled into the left-turn lane, and when the light changed, he turned onto Forest Avenue and cruised past the lumber yard parking lot, City Hall and the fire station. There wasn't much of a chance to build up any momentum before climbing the steep "blind crest" hill up to Park Street, but he was pleased that the old Toyota managed it without much complaint. Turning left on Park, Robbie slowed just a bit as he drove past the high school. Was he kidding himself that his time there hadn't been so bad after all? *Is this what nostalgia feels like? If it is, it really sucks.*

Park Street continued its winding ascent up through the canyons and steep turns that eventually led to Thurston Middle School and Top of the World, that elite enclave of homes with the multi-million-dollar views overlooking Laguna Canyon. Everywhere he looked, Robbie saw new houses under construction. He'd watched most of the homes on these same hills burn to the ground in the Laguna Canyon fires in the fall of '93, but you'd never know it now. Taking a left at the middle school, Robbie made his way through the maze of homes to Skyline Drive.

Parking on the street across from another mansion-in-progress construction site, Robbie walked to the front door of Michele and Jeff's house, a California modern, split-level bunker of interlocking concrete and glass boxes. Checking his watch, Robbie rang the bell on the bronze and wood double doors. After a moment, a guy Robbie had never seen before, about six-two, 240, opened the door and looked down at him. Tan and

ripped, the guy looked to be in his twenties. Robbie noted that he was barefoot and wearing a Hawaiian print shirt and shorts.

“Michele’s expecting me,” Robbie said, trying to cover his surprise.

“You Robbie?” the bodybuilder said. When Robbie nodded, the guy took a moment to size him up, then opened the door. “Michele’s in the living room.”

Robbie wracked his brain trying to think of a way to ask the guy who the hell he was. As he entered the hall, he gave up and simply muttered, “And who are you?” The guy turned and looked at him, then smiled. “I’m Terry.”

“You work for Michele and Jeff?”

“Michele.”

Terry stepped aside and Robbie stopped short as his eyes met Michele’s. She was sitting next to the wall of windows in the living room. In a wheelchair with a cast on her leg. She smiled.

“Terry’s my physical therapist.”

“What happened?” Robbie couldn’t hide his concern. He guessed Michele was probably in her late-fifties by now, but she’d always kept herself in shape. She was attractive in her self-assurance, well-built, solid, comfortable in her skin.

“Tennis. Leg one way, knee the other. Cast for another week. I figure three months rehab minimum.”

“Ouch.” Robbie felt completely tongue-tied.

“Want something to drink?”

“No, thanks.”

“Terry, could you give us a few minutes?”

“Sure. If you need anything, just let me know.” When Terry was gone, Michele gestured for Robbie to join her by the windows. As he sat down next to her, he suddenly felt like a kid in the principal’s office.

“It’s good to see you,” she said quietly.

“You, too,” he stammered. “How’s Jeff?”

“Jeff’s Jeff,” she offered flatly. “He’s down at the Festival. Got juried in again for his watercolors.”

“No kidding,” Robbie said, nodding.

“He’s doing the meet-and-greet on the grounds today, always trying to drum up new business.”

There was a pause, then Robbie asked, “You guys are good?” God, did that sound even dumber than he’d feared.

“Robbie...” She looked at him, sighed and smiled wanly. “Let’s just say we have a very spiritual relationship. Every day we learn to live with less....”

He looked at her, confused. “I don’t...”

“Never mind.” She smiled. “It’s Jeff who needs your help. And we both agreed it was a safe way to ease you back into the swing of things.”

“I really appreciate that. I’ve been goin’ a bit stir crazy.”

“Well, that’s all behind you now. And the guy you put in the hospital...well, let’s just say he’s got other things to worry about these days. Like a company in Chapter 11 and a palace in foreclosure.”

“Look, I...”

Michele smiled. “It’s okay, Robbie. Everybody gets a Mulligan. And I think you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Yeah...yeah.”

She picked up a file and handed it to him. Opening it, he looked at a couple of grainy photos of a guy crossing a street. “Who’s this?”

“His name’s Madison. He’s going after Jeff. Wants to extort two hundred grand to keep quiet.”

“About what? What’s he got?”

“We’re not sure. But Jeff’s arranged a meet with him. Tonight on the fire road up above the Festival. You know where I’m talking about?”

“That dirt road that goes up behind Tivoli Terrace? With the great view of Main Beach and the police shooting range?”

She smiled. “Nice recall.”

“I used to hike up there to clear my head.”

Michele leaned forward. “They’re supposed to meet at midnight at the little turnout overlooking the shooting range. This file has all you’ll need to know about Madison to put the fear of God into him. His kids’ names and ages, where they go to

school, what picture's hanging on the wall in his bedroom. And if that doesn't scare him off, you have my blessing to ruffle his feathers a bit. Just no easily visible bruising."

"Jeff going to be there?"

"No. You're going to get there early and surprise this arrogant little asshole. See, Madison's a ceramics exhibitor at the Festival. It seems he and Jeff have at least one thing in common. They like to pretend that art can save them from their fundamental boorishness. News flash: it can't."

Robbie studied the file to cover his nervousness. "So, I guess you and Jeff are..."

"Robbie...Jeff's a lawyer; I'm a lawyer; we're partners. If I took him to court, I could wipe him out, but we'd poison the well in the process..." She pointed to the file. "You know, there's hardly any moon tonight and that fire road can be a bit treacherous and steep in places. I'd hate to think Madison might fall and hurt himself."

"Right." Robbie grinned. He was relieved she was changing the subject.

"Study his file. If you can reason with him, so much the better. If not..."

"Midnight," said Robbie, savoring the thought.

"I recommend you park above the shooting range and cut across. And get there early."

"Not to worry." Robbie rose, holding the file.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?"

"Your fee?"

Robbie almost blushed. "Right, right...Actually, I could use the cash, but I figure there'll be more where this one came from. So let's just call this one 'pro bono.' How's that sound?"

She smiled. "Come here." Robbie moved to her and bent down. With one hand, she pulled his face to hers and lightly kissed him on the cheek. "It's good to have you back."

"It's good to be back."

Terry opened the door for Robbie as he headed back to his car.

Robbie spent the afternoon getting ready for his midnight rendezvous with Madison. At the Ralph's on Glenneyre, he bought a recycled canvas grocery bag, six bars of Zest soap, a Coke Zero and a deli sandwich.

Back in town, he turned off Broadway and headed up the steep hill on Acacia, then a hard right on High Street and another right onto Poplar. He followed it to where it meets up with Harold Street at the turnaround next to the entrance to the access road leading down to the LBPD shooting range. Parking on Harold, Robbie walked over to the heavy chain hanging across the access road entrance and read the sign. "*No Trespassing. Authorized Vehicles Only. Unauthorized vehicles and pedestrians subject to prosecution and fine: joggers, hikers, walkers, skateboarders, bicyclists. Laguna Beach Police Department. Do Not Enter.*" He looked across the gulley and spotted the fire road and the overlook. Maybe a quarter of a mile down this side past the range and up the other side. Chaparral and scrub brush all around. Not much cover, but all he really needed was the dark later on.

Surveying the turnaround, he could see maybe a half-dozen houses. No signs of life. He could hear a blues band playing on the Festival grounds below. And he knew there'd be another Pageant performance that night. Plenty of distractions. He went back and sat in the Corolla and read through the Madison file. He imagined the look on the guy's face when a stranger wearing a ski mask got the drop on him. *Sweet.*

Robbie drank his soda, took a few bites of his sandwich, unwrapped five of the bars of Zest and tied them into the canvas bag. It had a nice heft. *Who needs a sap when you've got soap?* You could break a rib and barely leave a bruise.

It was already starting to get dark. Robbie drove around the neighborhood, then back down to PCH. He was suddenly aware of how pathetic the Toyota looked as he cruised through town. For now, it was all he could afford, but as soon as he was flush again, he'd get something less conspicuous, and a whole lot more reliable.

At a quarter to nine, he pulled back up to the turnaround near the entrance to the shooting range. In the canyon below, the Pageant was under way. The production shops next to the Irvine Bowl blocked his view of the theater, but Robbie could hear the orchestra and the audience applauding the *tableaux vivants* onstage.



The curtain fell on Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," the traditional Pageant finale, just before 10:30. Time to go. Grabbing the soap bag, he loped across the turnaround, stepped over the chain across the entrance to the shooting range access road and disappeared. He crossed the dark, empty range five minutes later, reached the bottom of the ravine five minutes after that, and began the slippery ascent up the shadowy hillside. Footing was surprisingly treacherous, but twenty minutes later, he stepped out onto the fire road. Accustomed to the darkness by now, he located the viewpoint and crouched nearby behind a large chaparral.

As he sat there, he went over in his mind the notes he'd been studying: Madison's family and the little, intimate details that would let the jerk know just how vulnerable he was. Robbie's adrenaline was pumping. He was out of practice. By now, Laguna Canyon Road was full of cars heading home. The Festival was shutting down for the night, and the maintenance crew in the Irvine Bowl was almost through cleaning up after the Pageant.

Suddenly, Robbie tensed. He'd heard something. But what? He listened again, then laughed to himself at his nervousness. He checked his watch. Three minutes to midnight. He closed his eyes and strained to hear any activity below.

Five minutes later, he heard footsteps coming up the rutted dirt road. It had to be Madison...But, wait. Something was wrong. He could make out more than one voice. Madison wasn't alone. Michele hadn't said anything about this. The voices were getting closer. In another minute, two shadowy figures came over the crest and meandered toward the overlook. Robbie adjusted his position to get a better view. They were walking arm in arm, whispering to one another. It was a man and a woman! The man seemed to have a parcel, maybe a bag under one arm. As Robbie watched, the man shook the parcel and flipped it out. It was a blanket. Spreading it in the darkened clearing, he turned to embrace the woman. Robbie strained to make out their hushed whispers. Could this just be a coincidence? A couple looking for a place to make out at the exact wrong place and the wrong time? Robbie cursed his luck. Obviously, they'd scare off Madison. But, there was nothing he could do but wait them out.

As Robbie crouched there, helpless, he heard the couple start to undress one another. In the dark, they giggled at their clumsiness. No foreplay, no chit-chat. In

another minute, they were lying together groping each other while trying to find a comfortable position on the hard earth. Soon enough, however, discomfort gave way to passion. Amid sighs and gasps, he heard the woman emit a muted squeal.

Robbie sat up and peered down at the shadowy figures. Even in the dark, he was sure he recognized the guy. There was no mistaking his clumsy movements and his labored, rheumy breathing. Could it be? Yes, it was Jeff!

In that same instant, he felt a cold, metallic object press into the back of his neck. He froze as he realized what it was. The barrel of a handgun. Jeff had always carried one, but Robbie had refused to have anything to do with them. He wasn't afraid of them. He just always knew there was no hope for a successful negotiation once the guns come out.

Robbie tried ever so gingerly to turn his head in hopes of seeing who was behind him. He winced as the barrel jabbed into the base of his skull. The couple, now fully engaged, were oblivious.

Responding to the prodding of the barrel, Robbie slowly got to his feet. He felt the figure moving around to stand beside him. Then, in a single motion, the figure lifted another pistol in his other hand. Robbie could make out the silhouette of an imposing silencer attached to the barrel of the other weapon. Before Robbie could react, the pistol emitted four dull bursts, and, after two labored gasps, the couple fell silent.

What the fuck was going on?! Robbie turned to look at the assassin, who now leveled the other pistol directly against his forehead. It was too dark to make out a face.

"Nice shooting," said a strangely familiar voice. After a second, Robbie realized where he'd heard it before.

"Terry?" Silence. "What the—?"

Terry's voice was flat and calm. "You shouldn't have tried to blackmail Jeff about his thing with that cute little jewelry maker. You thought if you caught them in the act, they'd pay up. Too bad Jeff never goes anywhere without his piece." Terry flicked the barrel of the smaller pistol as he centered it on Robbie's chest. "And he managed to shoot you before you finished them off...Poor Michele."

"Who the fuck are you?" Robbie could barely hear his voice over the pounding in his chest.

"I'm the new you, motherfucker..."

Robbie started to lean back, then swung the bag of soap bars with all his might toward Terry's gun hand. In the blackness, the tinny explosions, like leftover fireworks – two quick bursts followed after about ten seconds by a third – echoed weakly across the canyon.

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Michele opened the front door for Terry. She was barefoot, wearing a sheer silk nightshirt. In the hallway behind her, the removable cast was leaned up against the wheelchair. "Don't tell me you forgot your key again..." she said as the door swung inward. In the next instant, she did her best to mask her surprise.

Robbie reached out an arm and leaned heavily against the door frame. In his other hand, he held Jeff's pistol. "Terry's not coming home."

Michele's mind was racing and all she could think to say was, "You're hurt."

"I'll live." Robbie pointed the gun at her. As she backed away, he stepped through the door, gritting his teeth, willing himself through the pain. As he backed her down the hall, Robbie glanced at the boot-cast and wheelchair. "Your knee's better."

"Robbie—"

"Just shut up, Michele...I might have expected something like this from Jeff. But I always thought you..."

"You don't know what it's been like."

"I guess not."

"Look, Robbie, we can get through this. We can make this work for both of us. But we've got to get you to—"

"No, we don't."

"You've lost a lot of blood." They were in the living room now. Low lights. Through the panoramic windows, the faint glow of the town below. She tried to scan the room for possible weapons as Robbie moved closer, the gun still leveled at her.

"You had it all figured out. Get rid of Jeff and me...clean slate."

"Robbie, it's just you and me now. We could be in Mexico before dawn."

"Right." His attempt at sarcasm hurt like hell.

"I'm worried about you."

"Wouldn't want bloodstains on your furniture."

“Robbie.”

“You taught me that it’s never personal. Well...let me tell you...” He lifted his blood soaked hand from his abdomen and held it out toward her. “This feels personal.”

“Let me get something.”

“No. It ends here. But first I’m gonna need every cent you’ve got.”

“Of course. It’s in the safe.” She turned and pointed toward the bedroom hall. When he nodded, she moved in that direction.

“It’s in here,” Michele said, indicating a walk-in closet in the master bedroom. Pushing back clothes hanging on a rack, she revealed a wall safe. She flicked on an overhead light and punched at the safe’s keypad. “We’re going to get through this.” She looked back at Robbie, who watched her through heavy-lidded eyes, then opened the safe and reached in. “You won’t be sorry.”

Turning, she pulled out a .22 handgun and swung it toward Robbie. But he was ready, firing three quick bursts at point blank range, hitting Michele twice in the chest and once in the neck. Her pistol fired once, wildly, the bullet lodging in a chest of drawers to Robbie’s right. She fell to the carpet in front of him. Robbie looked down at her for a moment, closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh. He noticed blood from his abdomen was now staining his pants leg and overflowing from his sock down his shoe and onto the carpet. Turning, he walked slowly from the room.

At the toll plaza for the 133 North, Robbie turned on the dome light in the Corolla and fumbled in his pocket for the exact change. As he inspected a handful of coins, he looked down at his gut and let out a half-laugh, half-howl. *You forget who you are, you forget what you believe in, but you still remember to pay your toll!* Reaching up, he flicked off the dome light and sat there, breathing slowly, deliberately, trying to ignore the wet, hot black that used to be his midsection. Rolling down the window, he leaned out and flung the handful of change toward the collection bin. It was an awkward toss. The coins clattered to the pavement and his elbow banged against the window sill. The effort was too much. Robbie leaned back. He wanted his eyes to work, to keep on working. But they were letting him down. The last thing he remembered was reaching over to turn off the Corolla’s ignition. The old car was grateful for the rest.

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