

# Earning Freedom

## Section 2—DEA Agent’s Car



### Blurb:

*Introspections after my arrest, while DEA agents drive me from my residence in Key Biscayne to the office where they will process me. Contemplating the influences that led to my criminal charge, and the challenges ahead.*

### Story: August 11, 1987

I’ve never been to prison, nor have I been locked in custody before. That doesn’t mean I’ve never had a problem with the law.

While I was a senior in high school, in 1982, I organized a sports gambling pool. When one student couldn’t pay his debt, he offered to settle the with me by giving me a stereo he stole. I accepted. A few months later, when police officers caught him in another theft, he told the officers that he had given the stereo to me. That incident led to my conviction for receiving stolen property.

When I confided in my father about the problems of the stolen stereo, he stood by my side. For my sanction, a judge ordered that I pay \$900 in restitution and fill out a form for a probation officer each month for nine months. We concealed the incident from my mother and sisters, not wanting to disappoint them with my bad behavior.

While sitting in the back of the DEA agent’s car, I think about how my arrest will devastate my family. I’m now in a predicament that’s going to expose the deceitful life I’ve been living, and I’m humiliated. Still, I can’t bring myself to come clean. I’ve got too much invested in the lies I’ve already told. I’ve chosen my path, allowing Raymond to fight my battle. I’m determined to go all the way.

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My father, an immigrant from Cuba, married my mother soon after he settled in California. Together, they moved to Seattle and they built a contracting company that provided

well for our family. We lived in a comfortable five-bedroom home on several acres in Lake Forest Park. A stream with waterfalls ran through our front yard, with a thick forest behind the house. My parents worked hard to give my two sisters and me every advantage. They tried to prepare us for success, grooming me to lead the family company.

My father took pride in operating heavy equipment, pouring concrete, and creating lasting value for our community. His company specialized in public works, installing highway lighting and traffic signal systems.

My dad was an “old-country” kind of guy, and he aspired to teach me a strong work ethic. As an adolescent, I didn’t have his character. I resented pulling wire and carrying pipe. I dreaded working on weekends or summers when my friends were waterskiing on Lake Washington. Even though I worked by my dad’s side since I was as young as six, I couldn’t see myself doing physical labor for the long term. I wanted the good times my friends enjoyed.

After graduating from high school with mediocre grades, I maneuvered my way out of the field and into the office, wanting to wear clean clothes and position myself close to the money. With high expectations, my parents gave me the position of vice president, even though I lacked the maturity, education, and experience to wield the responsibility such a title implied. They trusted me, and I exploited their confidence in my abilities.

The pursuit of money and possessions has always driven me. With a sense of entitlement, I wanted more than what my parents gave me. Their friends were professionals and business owners, people whose influence and style impressed me.

The family business was small when I joined it full-time after graduating high school, employing only a few electricians. My dad worked alongside them to install illumination and electrical systems while my mom kept the books. The company remained free of debt and afforded us a comfortable life, though it wasn’t enough for my tastes. To me, bigger seemed better.

Rather than studying and working through a four-year apprenticeship program to earn the state licenses, I thought of ways to expand without having to dirty my hands. I could always hire people with the necessary licenses; I spent my energy devising strategies to increase revenues.

I joined trade organizations and socialized with other contractors. Those relationships led to collusion, bid-rigging, and other violations of contract laws. My parents didn’t object too strenuously as the company’s annual revenues increased from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars. To finance the growth, I persuaded my parents to sign agreements

that required them to pledge their home and assets as collateral for higher credit lines with banks, suppliers, and bonding companies.

Within three years, I convinced my parents to expand the company from one of boring stability into a leveraged business with more than 50 employees. My dad could oversee jobs across the state while I acted as the big man, schmoozing with people, and working with numbers that impressed me.

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Greed was a sinister enticement, clouding my judgment. My friend Alex had been supplementing his income by selling cocaine. Since I had unencumbered access to money from our family's business, I proposed a scheme to finance bigger coke deals and allow Alex and me to work together. I was 21, and the prospect of a quick score seemed harmless, too good to pass up.

Taylor, our mutual acquaintance, agreed to supply us with several kilograms of cocaine. For our first transaction, I pulled cash from the company account to pay Taylor on the morning of delivery, and Alex contacted customers to sell the cocaine the same day. By late afternoon Alex gave me back the money to reimburse the company's account. The deal left Alex and me with tens of thousands in profits.

All went as planned until the following day when a maid discovered more than \$100,000 in Taylor's hotel suite. After she reported what she'd found, the hotel management contacted the Seattle police, and the officers seized the money. When Taylor tried to claim it, the police required an explanation.

"Just give us a receipt that shows how you received the currency, and you can have it back," the officers told him.

Taylor called me at work to explain what happened and asked for my help. "I'll give you 20 percent if you can provide a receipt that will get me the money back."

"Thirty percent," I countered.

Since I'd withdrawn substantial cash to finance our illicit transaction, I had a plausible explanation, or so I thought. We concocted a story that we would use the money to establish a leasing company. I then brought Taylor to the high-rise office tower of our company's attorney and hatched a plan to dupe him into helping us retrieve the money. I had an excellent relationship with Geoff, a partner in the firm. Since I'd worked with the attorney before, I assumed he would make a few phone calls and resolve the complication.

Taylor and I sat facing Geoff across his polished cherry wood desk. His office overlooked the mid-rise buildings of South Seattle and Puget Sound. With hopes of fooling him into helping me, I told the story that Taylor and I made up.

“I gave the money to Taylor so he could make a cash offer to purchase construction equipment from a contractor going out of business.” Geoff listened patiently to what I said, but in his eyes, I saw skepticism.

I pushed forward with the story I fabricated, telling him that Taylor and I would lease the equipment back to my father’s company. Supposedly, we would rely upon the leases to collateralize a bank loan to reimburse the company.

“Is your dad a part of this new venture you’re launching?” I’ll always remember the doubt in Geoff’s voice from his first question.

I told him that I’d made this deal on my own. Geoff nodded, then he turned his interrogation to Taylor, who sat across from Geoff’s polished desk as if he were an accomplished businessman, there to consult on a corporate merger rather than seek help to retrieve a duffle bag full of cash.

“And where do you live?” Geoff’s question was direct.

“I keep an apartment in The Grosvenor House,” Taylor answered.

“That’s on Queen Anne, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.” Taylor didn’t yet realize he was out of his depth.

“About five minutes north of downtown?” Geoff persisted.

“Yes.”

“So you keep an apartment in the city.” Geoff nodded, holding a finger to his temple as he rocked his chair.

“I do.”

“Then help me understand why you’d take a hotel room a few blocks from where you live. More to the point, why would you leave so much cash in a hotel room while you went to the gym for a morning workout?”

Taylor stumbled through Geoff's penetrating questions. I remember squirming in my chair, knowing the meeting was a disaster. The longer we sat there, the more I realized how foolish I'd been to think that I could manipulate a skillful attorney with lies.

Geoff dismissed us, saying he'd make some inquiries with the police and call me later with a plan. I left the office feeling sick, knowing I'd permanently destroyed my reputation. I wouldn't have the courage to face Geoff again.

"Are you alone?" Geoff asked when he reached me in the car later that afternoon.

"Yes." I was driving north on Interstate 5 toward the company office. Rain drizzled on the black Bronco I drove.

"Taylor isn't with you?" He sounded concerned for my welfare.

"No, I'm alone."

"I'm going to ask you some direct questions, and I want you to answer honestly. Is that okay?"

"Of course." I knew what was coming.

"Does your father know about this money?"

"No."

"Did you give that money to Taylor?"

"No."

"Does that money belong to you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Michael, please listen very carefully to me. I'm speaking to you as a friend and as your attorney. You have a bright future with your father's company in this city. But I smell drugs with Taylor. Please run as far away from him as you can. He is cancer, and he will destroy you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. You're right. I'm sorry I brought Taylor to your office."

“That’s okay. We’ll keep our meeting today between us.”

Despite his kind tone, I sensed that I’d lost his respect. I hung up, humiliated. Taylor had created the problem by leaving money in a hotel suite while he exercised. By intervening, I made Taylor’s problems my own; there wasn’t any way for me to erase what I’d done or re-establish trust with Geoff.

Instead of running away from Taylor as Geoff advised, I did the opposite. I abandoned my responsibilities and obligations to our family business. My poor judgment had forced my hand, I thought. Considering the irrevocable damage I’d done to my reputation, I chose to leave Seattle for Miami, intending to earn a few million by becoming a coke dealer.

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And that’s how the scheme began that led to where I sit now, locked up in the back of a DEA agent’s car. I’m now a prisoner, on my way to new places and unknown experiences.

### **Retention Questions:**

1. Why did Michael bring Taylor to a meeting with his lawyer?
  - » A) Taylor got arrested and needed a lawyer.
  - » B) Authorities confiscated Taylor’s money and they devised a ruse to retrieve it.
  - » C) Taylor and Michael needed the lawyer’s help to start a business.
2. What kind of company did Michael’s father own?
  - » A) He owned a shoe store.
  - » B) He owned a restaurant.
  - » C) He owned a contracting company.
3. What kind of student was Michael in high school?
  - » A) He was an honor-roll student.
  - » B) He quit school.
  - » C) He earned mediocre grades in high school.

### **Critical Thinking Question:**

1. When you contemplate a challenge you encountered in the past, what thoughts do you have about your initial response to that challenge?

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