

THE RIGHT STIFF

Praise for *The Right Stiff*:

“...Fast-paced, riveting...hilarious. In this inventive tale, Ingrassia both captures and skewers the hard-edged vernacular of the detective thriller...The narrative skillfully presents a winning combination of droll cynicism, intriguing crime-solving, and wondrous magic.”

Kirkus Reviews

“...**THE RIGHT STIFF** combines suspense, deception, and intrigue with a healthy dose of humor...a quick and gripping read.”

Readers' Favorite

“...The lean, fast-paced writing and compact storyline will entice readers to absorb it in one continuous read...The settings are also vividly portrayed. Best of all, this is a fun crime romp despite the otherworldly obstacles and potentially deadly consequences. Readers will reach the tale's conclusion in stitches, hoping to see Charlie McGinley stumble into more literary and film-worthy adventures.”

US Review of Books

RECOMMENDED by US Review of Books

Also by Sam Ingrassia

SOMEBODY FOLLOWED ME

The Right Stiff

A mystery with magic, the Mob &
a frozen beauty queen

Sam Ingraffia



Blue Telescope Publishing

THE RIGHT STIFF

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To Maggie

*“To be a great champion,
you must believe you are the best.
If you’re not, pretend you are.”*

Muhammad Ali

Chapter One

LA was still hot. The Devil Winds were blowing. Bad things happen on nights like this.

Charlie McGinley, in baggy shorts and a Roscoe's House of Chicken and Waffles T-shirt, sits at a card table surveying the words on his laptop screen. The cursor winks, as the window air conditioner moans. Outside, the Santa Ana winds gust, setting off dogs and car alarms.

Charlie types: *The sweltering stillness of the room was suddenly shattered.* Through a window, Charlie watches a nearby elm tree dance. Across the street is an apartment building with a brick planter. *A brick crashed through the window. Shards of glass on the Persian rug glittered in the moonlight.*

Charlie eyes the framed poster of Ernest Hemingway on the wall. Below the scowling likeness of the author is a quote. "A writer must stare at a blank page until blood comes out of his forehead."

The cursor blinks, taunting Charlie. He types. *The brick had a note attached to it. "You're a dead man, Dent." That's me. Johnny Dent. I'm a PI. I knew another adventure had just begun.*

Charlie stares at the words on the screen. He looks like he might be ill. He stands and paces.

Unfortunately, Charlie's studio apartment is so small, he can only take three strides before he runs into the unmade bed. When he rented the place, the ad had said, "Cozy & charming. Ocean view." That's real estate for tiny and old. If you stood in the shower, on your tiptoes, you could see a one-inch sliver of ocean.

The curtains are drawn. No lights are on. The computer screen casts a blue-gray glow on the room. The Spartan furnishings consist of two brown metal folding chairs, a card table, and a lumpy, unmade bed. The only oddity is the sixty-five-inch flat-screen LG OLED television mounted on the wall. A throwback to the days when Charlie had an actual house with a "media room." The set is on but muted. *Smart Money*, a gangster film from the '30s with Edward G. Robinson, flickers. Charlie picks up the remote and unmutes the television. Eddie G., in glorious black and white, enters a smoke-filled room full of thugs playing cards. He introduces himself.

“I’m Sam the Barber. I heard you boys like to play cards.” Charlie mouths the words along with Eddie G.

The doorbell rings.

Charlie freezes. Over the last few months, the ringing of his doorbell has rarely been followed by good news. He turns off the television and tiptoes to the front door. “Who is it?”

“Michael.”

Charlie opens the door a crack. Michael Beevers, sporting a very expensive suit and a very bad toupee, stands in the doorway. Charlie attempts to look cool. “Michael.”

Michael makes no attempt at looking cool. “We need to talk.”

“This isn't a good time. I'm just finishing the new book.”

Before Michael can respond, a female voice booms, “He told my lawyers that six months ago. Make him show it to you.”

A hand shoves the door open. Darlene Dawson, Charlie’s latest ex-wife, a statuesque blonde in a short skirt and stilettos, bustles into the apartment.

Charlie tries to hide his shock and repulsion at seeing Darlene, as he closes the laptop. “Darlene, what a surprise.”

“You told me on the phone you had a check coming. I went to Michael’s office. I figured I'd get it before you had a chance to blow it on the ponies. Guess what he told me?”

Michael looks down at his tasseled Tom Ford loafers.

“The publishing company’s starting legal action against you today.”

Charlie turns to Michael, hoping for some kind of reprieve.

“Charlie, as a friend, I wanted to tell you in person before the papers from legal arrived. Darlene insisted on coming.”

“Damn right, I did.”

Darlene flips open the laptop. “That's it? One page?”

Michael looks at the screen. “Charlie, the book is two years overdue.”

“This one has taken a little longer than I anticipated.”

Darlene grabs the laptop. “This should be worth something.”

Charlie yanks the laptop out of her hands. “You can't have my words!”

Darlene swipes it back. “You're obviously not using them.”

“You don't understand the creative process.”

Darlene whacks Charlie in the head with her purse. “And you don't understand the *legal* process. You owe me alimony. A lot of it. And I intend to get it.”

Charlie and Darlene play a vicious game of tug-of-war with the computer. She finally loses her grip and sails into Michael. They crumple to the floor.

Charlie reaches down to help her up.

“Get your paws off of me!”

Darlene and Michael struggle to their feet. Michael readjusts his toupee, as Darlene whips a cell phone out of her purse. “I’m calling the police.”

“I’m sure Charlie and I can find a mutually satisfying solution.”

“Shut up, Michael. You're almost as big a loser as he is.”

Charlie rummages through a huge stack of *Racing Forms* and unpaid bills. He unearths a manuscript. “Michael, take another look at *Shaman Warrior*. Please. For old times’ sake.”

Darlene punches 9-1-1 on her phone. She adjusts her hair as she waits for the cops to answer. “Nobody wants that dumb book about Indians. How many rejections—Hello. Yes, I’d like to report an assault. My ex-husband. 1416 Ocean Avenue. Apartment 6. Hurry. I think he's armed.” Darlene smirks as she disconnects the call.

“Why would you say that, Darlene?”

“Because somebody has to make you grow up.”

“Give me six months, Michael. I swear, I’ll finish the book.”

“Charlie...”

“I’m begging you.”

“Maybe if you paid back the money we advanced you, with interest, I could ask the company to forget the whole thing.”

In the distance, a siren wails. A pained look crosses Charlie’s face. “It's gone.”

“Everything?”

Charlie nods, as the siren grows louder.

“I can’t cover for you anymore.”

Darlene smiles at Charlie. “Cheer up, sugar. I’m sure your social life will improve in prison.”

In that instant, Charlie knew he had reached the proverbial fork in the road. He had to change. No more flitting through life. Whenever he was asked to take responsibility for his actions, he always found

some excuse. People covered for him because he was funny and smart and charming. Charlie knew it was time. Darlene was right. He had to grow up.

Or, not.

Grabbing his keys and computer, Charlie dashes out of the apartment.

Chapter Two

Charlie darts around the corner of the Tahitian Arms Apartments. It's one of those places that stands with shabby pride among the other newer, nicer apartments on the block. "The Arms" was built in the late 1950s. It has a sparkly facade and a big stone Polynesian tiki head out front. The tiki, which at some point was black, is now gray from multiple generations of bird poop.

Charlie's Corvette is parked at the curb. He presses the fob attached to his keychain. It beeps, unlocking the car. He flings open the door and jumps in.

Heels clacking, Darlene teeters around the corner. "All I'm asking from you is a couple beatings, some hot sex and a few murders."

Neighbors open their doors and windows.

"What are you all gawking at?"

The doors and windows close.

The Corvette is blocked in front by a parked car and from behind by Darlene.

"But you'd rather waste your time with that stupid book about a witch doctor."

Charlie pushes the starter button on the dashboard and the car's engine roars to life. He lowers the window a few inches.

"He's a shaman. He makes magic."

"So does David Copperfield, but nobody wants to read a book about him."

Michael, sucking wind, staggers up next to Darlene. Charlie rams the stick shift into gear. He cranks the steering wheel and stomps on the accelerator. The Corvette clangs up over the curb and onto the sidewalk.

“I want my alimony!”

Neighbors go to their windows again and gape. Several pull out their cell phones and punch 9-1-1. The wheels of the car spin as they tear up the sod in front of the building. It fishtails, then gains traction, and lunges forward. Charlie yanks the steering wheel, and the Vette barely misses the tiki head. The car cuts donuts in the lawn. Charlie turns the steering wheel to the left. Undercarriage screaming, the Corvette plunges off the curb.

Charlie dodges an oncoming Toyota pickup full of gardening tools. “Talk to you soon, Darlene.”

“You’ll talk to the police!”

When Charlie was heading off to college, he told his parents he was going to be an English major because he wanted to be a writer after he graduated. His mother, Rose, had said she thought that was a risky idea. She’d heard most writers didn’t earn very much money. She hoped he would be an accountant. “With an accounting degree, you can always make a living.” Charlie explained he hated math and loved writing. Rose would nod, hug Charlie, then walk into the kitchen and cry.

His father used much more colorful language when discussing Charlie’s potential career choice. Buddy McGinley could best be described as difficult. What few dreams he had early in life never came true. So, he decided to give up dreaming. He also decided anybody who had dreams, big or small, was a “freakin’ moron.” He spent his days at the General Motors assembly plant hating his job and just about everybody he worked with. When he got home, he would consume large quantities of cheap scotch, then proceed to yell at his son and wife. He’d finish off the evening’s festivities by passing out in front of the television.

Michael Beevers was Charlie’s roommate in college. The chubby guy who always said the wrong thing to women. He was also going bald at nineteen, which made the nerdiness quotient even higher.

Michael and Charlie both graduated in the same year. Michael got a job at a big publishing house. Working like a madman, in a few years he had a real office and could green light books for publication. At the same time, Charlie was writing tomes that nobody was even remotely interested in reading.

Michael and Charlie had stayed in touch, and one afternoon Michael gave him a call. He said the publishing house was looking for somebody to write a detective franchise. Charlie knew fast-food chains had franchises. He didn’t know snobby publishing houses did. Michael offered Charlie three grand to spit out a detective novel. Charlie said yes, even though he had never read a detective novel.

Charlie loved movies. He decided the easiest way to write a detective novel was to make himself the central character in a film-noir movie. He would get up around noon and hammer down a couple shots of cheap scotch. Didn't real authors always drink when they wrote, especially writers of detective yarns? He'd go through his extensive jazz collection and play a CD by Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, or Ben Webster. Their smokey sax would be the soundtrack for the movie that unspooled in his head. Charlie would visualize every scene. Hear every line. Then he'd sit down and type into his computer what he'd just watched in the multiplex of his mind. It was like stealing the money from Michael.

Johnny Dent stood alone in the elevator. His dark blue pinstripe hung on his bony frame. It looked like it was tailored for a guy who used to box in a higher weight class.

The .45 slug took less than a second to shatter his knee. The replacement surgery took six hours. It took two years to walk without a limp.

He'd already closed the security grating on the elevator, but he hadn't pushed the button for the fourth floor. In the dim overhead light, staring at the rusted grating, he felt like he was back in stir.

A woman and a young boy hurried up to the elevator. She and Johnny eyeballed each other. He opened the grating and she and the child hustled into the car.

The woman turned to Johnny. "Four, please."

Johnny closed the grating and pushed the button for the fourth floor. The door slid shut, and the elevator started to ascend.

The boy looked at Johnny. "I'm going to the dentist."

The woman held the boy's hand a little tighter. "

Are you going to the dentist?" the boy asked.

"No."

"You're lucky."

Johnny nodded and continued to watch the numbers above the door light up.

The elevator stopped. The door dinged open. Johnny pulled aside the metal grating. The woman clutched the boy's hand and led him out of the elevator and down the hall.

Johnny took a deep breath, then marched out of the elevator.

As he slogged down the putty-colored hall, his footsteps were almost silent on the gray wall-to-wall carpeting. He stopped in front of a door with a frosted glass window. A name is stenciled on it: JOHNNY DENT - PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS.

The door was open. It shouldn't have been.

Charlie knocked the book off in ten days. It was a huge success. Reviews trumpeted, “Harkens back to Dashiell Hammett.” They described Charlie as “a modern-day Raymond Chandler.” The publishing house rushed out multiple reprints. Michael wanted another book, soon.

Charlie just popped in another CD and turned on the projector in his head.

He quickly completed Johnny Dent number two: *Johnny Dent, Murder and Magic*. More good reviews.

Charlie met Darlene at a book signing. He married her after only knowing her for three weeks. The first few years of their marriage were grand. He and Darlene traveled, partied, and had lots of sex.

Charlie wrote three more *Johnny Dents*. Even more good reviews. He made a shitload of money, which allowed him to buy a house by the beach and a new Corvette.

Charlie drove his Laguna-blue Corvette home from the dealership and parked it in the driveway of his house overlooking the ocean. He glanced around at the Kalahari-Black interior. He gently stroked the car's perforated Mulan leather seats, revved the gas-guzzling engine, then cranked up “Moon Dreams” by Miles Davis. It blared from eight 6.5-inch, three-way component speakers. Life was indeed good.

Then, a strange thing happened.

After book number five, Charlie started to hate Johnny Dent.

He dreaded even thinking about him, let alone writing about him. Each time Charlie started on book number six, the loathing, like bile, welled up in him. He hated the way Johnny talked. The way he walked. The way he dressed. Charlie dreamed of painful, sadistic ways to kill Johnny. But in order to kill him, he first had to write a book about him, which he couldn't do.

Finally, after months of soul searching, Charlie realized he had to do something. He had to be decisive. He would crank out one last Johnny Dent. The final installment. As he stared out at the expansive Pacific, from the great room of his heavily mortgaged beachfront home, he vowed to be done with Johnny Dent, once and for all. He would then go back to being a serious author, who would never again prostitute his art for mere financial gain.

But when Charlie went to the movie theater in his head, the projector was on the fritz. There was no picture playing.

That was two years ago.

Charlie stands in front of a gas pump, filling the tank of his car. As he holds the nozzle with his right hand, he massages a large welt on his forehead with his left. This welt was caused when Darlene cracked him on the noggin with her purse. Neither of his wives before Darlene had ever physically struck him with a purse. Although, Nicole did throw a toaster oven at him once. Luckily, it didn't hit him, but it never worked properly after the incident. Which was unfortunate, because it did a terrific job toasting bagels.

As Charlie fills the gas tank, rubbing his head and attempting to come up with a game plan for dealing with Michael, Darlene and Johnny Dent, he hears music.

A man stands a few feet from Charlie's car, playing the harmonica. He's a huge guy with long hair, who looks like he just escaped from a '60s costume party—beaded headband, lizard-skin cowboy boots, black Jimi Hendrix tank top, topped off with a fringed suede jacket.

He plays a snippet of "On the Road Again," as a gust of warm wind blows Charlie's hair, then...the rear tire of the Corvette explodes.

"Looks like a flat," the man says.

Charlie looks down at the tire. Definitely flat. He pops the trunk and sees three golf clubs, a broken beach chair, and a Ramones T-shirt.

He also spots the QGB—the Quick-Getaway Bag. A canvas duffel that Charlie always keeps in the trunk. He has learned over time that you never know when you might need to make a quick getaway. He has a toothbrush, shaving cream, and a razor in the bag. He also has socks, underwear, and a long-sleeve shirt, along with a V-neck sweater, just in case his escape route should lead him to more formal locations or less temperate climes.

Charlie has forgotten that a Corvette doesn't come with a full spare tire. He lifts up the carpet in the trunk, and in a small well is a tiny tire that closely resembles a child's life preserver.

As Charlie pulls the miniature tire out of the trunk, the man says, "Name's Ben Fox. So, whatdya do?"

Charlie is surprised and a bit unnerved.

"That depends on who you talk to."

Charlie jacks up the car. Ben watches. He doesn't comment, pose any more questions, or volunteer to help. He just watches.

"Sometimes I'm a writer," Charlie says as he removes the last lug nut.

"Working on anything new?"

Charlie steadies the life preserver that was pretending to be a spare tire on the Corvette's hub and tightens down a lug nut. Before he can stop himself, he shakes his head.

"Uh, oh," Ben exclaims. "Hemingway had that same look."

"Hemingway?"

"Yep. Two days later, he blew the top of his head off." Ben pulls a battered wallet out of his back pocket and removes a dog-eared black-and-white photograph. He hands it to Charlie. It's a snapshot of Ben standing next to Ernest Hemingway. The white-maned author is holding a rainbow trout in one hand and a can of Hamm's beer in the other. Ben is holding a can of Dr. Pepper and a slightly smaller fish. Charlie is so shocked at seeing Hemingway, he doesn't even notice Ben looks the same age in the picture as he does standing in front of him.

"That's you and Ernest Hemingway."

Ben smiles a lopsided grin. "Indeed."

"He's, like, the primary reason I became a writer."

"You don't say?"

"I read *Old Man and the Sea* in high school and I knew I wanted to be a writer."

"That would mean a lot to Papa."

Charlie hands the photo back to Ben. "I'm Charlie.

As he slips the picture into his wallet, Ben says, "Think I could have a ride?"

Charlie tightens the last lug nut. "Sorry, I'm in a bit of a jam. I've got to—"

Ben smiles his lopsided grin again.

And for a few seconds, time seems to stand still. Traffic noise fades. Charlie forgets about Darlene and the bump on his head. Any thoughts of Michael and Johnny Dent drift away on the warm breeze.

"Sure. Why not?"