

The Package

In bathrobe and slippers Carl van der Val shuffled into the kitchen, still squinting from the morning light. The only good thing about getting up early on Sundays to go to church was that Darina, his wife, already had the coffee brewing. If only she understood how hard it was for him to wake up and smell it. But no. She bounded out of bed every morning, wide awake and fully refreshed, did her exercises, and then started chatting before he knew what hit him.

“Good morning, honey,” Darina said, flitting up to him and kissing him on the cheek.

Carl returned her greeting with a nod. As a rule—and an almost inviolable one at that—he never uttered a word before his second cup of coffee.

“Sit down, sweetheart,” Darina said, “I have something exciting to tell you,”

How could anyone be excited about anything at this hour? Carl filled his mug and silently obeyed, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

“Guess what,” Darina said, beaming.

Carl raised his eyebrows as if to ask, “What?” then took a sip of coffee.

“You’ll never believe it.”

Peering over his glasses, Carl made a face that said, “Really?”

“Do you give up?”

Carl shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

“I’m pregnant!” Darina shrieked, bouncing on her chair and clapping her hands together.

Carl looked at her wide eyed, setting down his mug.

“But I thought you’d be happy. You said you wanted a child.” What disappointment in her voice.

“Uh, I am . . . and I do,” he said at last, violating his cardinal rule. “It’s just that . . . ”

“What?”

“They’re going to lay off two of the five pharmaceutical sales representatives at work, and since I’m the youngest and the most inexperienced, I’m the most likely to go. In this economy I don’t know where I’ll find another job.”

The young couple sat there in heavy silence until it was time for Carl to get ready for church.

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The moment Carl stepped into work Monday morning to pick up the day’s drug samples, Blake Barterman, his immediate supervisor, was waiting for him. “Carl, I need to see you in my office before you head out for your appointments.”

Oh, boy, this was it. He was getting canned. What was he going to do now? His stomach in knots, his chest tight, his breathing shallow, Carl followed his supervisor down the hall and into his office.

“Take a seat.” Blake pointed to a chair in front of his desk as he ensconced himself behind it. “As you know, these are hard economic times, and I’m forced to let two of our sales reps go.”

“Yes, sir,” Carl said and braced himself by gripping the arms of the chair.

“It’s been a difficult decision for me.”

Carl nodded, waiting for the blow.

“With just three reps instead of five, we’ll all have to pick up the slack. I need someone who can cross over the lines and fill in where needed.”

“Well, I am certainly willing to help out any way I can, Mr. Barterman.” Perhaps his supervisor hadn’t decided yet. Did he still have a chance? He breathed a little more easily.

“The person I keep will sometimes be called upon to do things that are not strictly in his job description.” Blake looked at Carl as if he were reading his reaction.

“Anything you ask, Mr. Barterman.” Carl wanted to appear eager but not desperate.

“It will sometimes involve doing certain things after hours.”

“I don’t mind working overtime. Not at all.” He was already working long hours, driving up to a hundred and fifty miles a day.

“And I’ll need to count on your complete discretion.”

“Of course.” Carl suddenly had an uneasy feeling in his gut. “Discretion”—what did that mean?

“You’ll have to be a real team player.”

“I’ll go to bat for you, Mr. Barterman. Just give me a chance, and you’ll see.” Carl knew Mr. Barterman liked baseball metaphors, and it seemed like a good thing to say, but he didn’t really know what he was getting himself into.

“Well, then you’re on the team. Congratulations.” Blake stood up and reached across the desk to shake Carl’s hand. “We’ll talk again soon, and I’ll have a special little assignment for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barterman. I won’t let you down.”

Out in the hall, Carl was glad that he had made the effort to get up and go to church yesterday morning. Now his prayers had been answered. He reached for his phone but stopped. Of course he could call her, but he wanted to tell Darina the good news in person. He could hardly wait till evening.

He was going to be a father, and his job was secure. Could things get any better? Carl floated through the day; nothing could bother him. Every time the thought of the “special little assignment” came up, he put it out of his mind. It was probably nothing anyway.

* * *

“Hi, honey,” Carl called out as he stepped through the front door. He could smell dinner on the stove. An Indian curry. Mmm. He was hungry. When he entered the kitchen, he saw Darina stirring a pot—without her usual glass of white wine on the counter next to her. He smiled when he thought why. Drawing close to her, he kissed her on the cheek. “Turn off the burner for a minute, and come sit down. I have something to tell you.”

They took their usual seats at the kitchen table, which Darina had not yet set for dinner.

“Mr. Barterman called me into his office first thing this morning,” Carl said. “He’s going to keep me on.”

“Oh, Carl, that’s wonderful,” Darina replied, clapping her hands. “That means he’s happy with your work.”

“You know, I hadn’t thought about it until just now, but he didn’t even mention my past job performance. He was only interested in what I would be willing to do in the future.”

“He’s probably just trying to figure out how he’s going to manage with three sales reps instead of five.”

“It was kind of strange. He said he needed somebody who could cross over the lines—or did he say ‘cross the line’?—and do things outside the job description, after hours, discretely. Then he said he was going to give me a ‘special little assignment’ in the near future. For some reason I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Why, Carl, that just means he trusts you.” She looked directly into his eyes.

Kindhearted Darina, always seeing the good in people, never the bad. “I’ve been so happy all day about becoming a father and keeping my job that I guess I didn’t notice how uncomfortable I felt deep down.”

“Oh, Carl, no matter how well things are going, you always find something to worry about.” She took his hand and squeezed it. “Just wait. Everything’s going to turn out fine. You’ll see. Now you go relax, and let me finish dinner.”

“Okay,” Carl said. “You’re probably right. As usual.” He got a cold beer from the icebox, went to turn on the television for the evening news, and didn’t give the matter another thought.

* * *

When Carl came into work that Friday morning, Blake Barterman stood waiting for him again.

“Good morning, Carl. How’s my pinch hitter?” Blake had taken to calling Carl his “pinch hitter” ever since he decided to keep him on the “team.”

“Ready to get into the game, sir,” Carl said with a good-natured grin, continuing the baseball metaphor and enjoying his position of trust.

“Come on down to the dugout for a minute, Carl. Let’s talk a bit before you set out today.” Blake had also started calling his office the “dugout” with Carl.

A minute later Carl was sitting in the same chair he had sat in on Monday in front of Mr. Barterman’s desk. How different it felt now. Not just the chair, but the whole office and the conversation with his supervisor.

“About that special little assignment I mentioned, Carl,” Blake began.

“Yes, sir.” Carl sat up a little straighter.

“I need you to deliver a package for me.” From behind his desk Blake took out a package wrapped in plain, brown paper with nothing written on it and handed it to Carl.

“That sounds easy. What’s in it?” It was an innocent question.

“You let me worry about that,” Blake said sharply.

Uh-oh. Mr. Barterman had just thrown him a curve ball, and he hit a foul.

“I need you to give it to someone who looks like this fellow.” Blake took his phone, scrolled down to the picture of a young man, and held it up for Carl to see. “Here, I’ll just send it to your phone.” Blake tapped a few times on the screen and then put his phone away.

Taking out his phone, Carl confirmed that he had received the picture. “What’s his name?”

“You don’t need to know that either,” Blake said.

Oh no, strike two. Carl had just swung and missed.

“Meet him at the docks, Pier Seventeen, tonight at ten o’clock, and hand him that package.”

“Ten o’clock? That’s kind of late, isn’t it?”

“Carl, are you going to play ball or not?”

Had he just struck out, or was he still in the game? “Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Barterman.”

“Then step up to the plate, boy,” Blake said, obviously playing hardball.

“Don’t you worry, Mr. Barterman. I’ll knock the ball out of the park.”

“Good. When you give him the package, take a picture of him with your phone. Show it to me first thing Monday morning. That way I’ll know you delivered the package, and to the right guy.”

“Yes, sir.”

Taking the package, Carl left the office. It was a whole new ball game. So this was what the big leagues were like.

Outside Blake Barterman’s office, Carl took out his phone and looked more carefully at the picture. Thick, dark hair. An olive complexion. Sort of a Mediterranean look. Carl had the strange sense that he knew this man. Not that he had ever been introduced to him, shaken his hand, or spoken with him, but he had definitely seen him somewhere. And more than once. Was it at church? So many people worshipped there. Or maybe the fitness club where he worked out? He saw hundreds of people there. Maybe this guy was a member of their softball league. Twenty-some-odd teams played in it. Well, he couldn’t stand there racking his brains all day. Even if he couldn’t place him, Carl knew this man from somewhere. He was sure of it.

* * *

Carl went to the drug supply room to get samples for the day’s appointments. For the third time this week the door was unlocked. That fact irritated Carl as much as the sloppy

bookkeeping system in use. Why wasn't Mr. Barterman more vigilant? He was only inviting abuse. But what could Carl do? He was just a rookie on the team; it was his first season.

Standing before the shelves, Carl remembered, as he did there every day, his father's agony in the final stages of his battle with bone marrow cancer. How helpless he felt six years ago at eighteen, watching his father die. That experience had motivated him to study pharmacology and to specialize in analgesics. In his own small way he wanted to spare other people his father's pain.

But wait. Something was wrong. What in the world? A large number of narcotic samples were missing. Where did they go? Carl suddenly became aware of the package he was holding with his left hand. Was it possible? No, it couldn't be.

Carl held the package up to his ear and shook it. Hmm. Impossible to tell for sure what was inside. But why did Mr. Barterman not want to say what was in it? Why hide the identity of the man he was supposed to give it to? And why the meeting so late at night?

Carl started to feel sick to his stomach. Was he about to do something illegal? If he refused to deliver the package, Mr. Barterman would just fire him and hire back one of the people he had let go earlier in the week. On the other hand, if he was diverting prescription drugs to the black market for Mr. Barterman and got caught, he would be arrested and sent to jail. No one would believe he didn't know what was in the package. In either case, how would he support his wife and child?

All the happiness Carl had felt at becoming a father and the relief he experienced at keeping his job vanished. In their place came a sick feeling that none of the drugs in the supply room could have dispelled.

* * *

After his first appointment Carl left the Emergency Care Clinic, located in a strip mall, and headed towards his car. Three slots to the left of his, a car pulled in, and two men in suits got out. Wait a minute. Was that the dark-haired man with the olive complexion? Carl whipped out his phone and checked the picture to be sure. Yes, he was the one all right. The man he was supposed to give the package to was about to go into the coffee shop next door with his associate. So that's where he had seen him. He was a regular at Carl's favorite coffee shop.

"Excuse me, sir," Carl called out.

The two men stopped and turned around as Carl hurried over to them. When the other man brushed his suit jacket back to put the car keys in his pocket, Carl saw a police badge fastened to his belt.

"Are you police officers?" Carl said.

"Detectives," answered the man Carl recognized.

"Boy, am I relieved to hear that," Carl said. "I have a package for you."

"For me?" The man looked surprised.

"Yes, I think so." Carl held up his phone to show him the picture. "That's you, isn't it?"

The man laughed. "No, that's my kid brother. He's a year younger and a little smaller, but we could pass for twins. His name's Emilio. Mine's Nico . . . Nico Fratellini. This is my partner, Dick Yeager."

"I'm Carl van der Val," Carl said and shook both men's hands. "Can I buy you gentlemen a cup of coffee? I think I'm in trouble and need your help."

Fifteen minutes later, after Carl had told the detectives of his suspicions and his predicament, he sat stirring his macchiato. "What do you think, detectives? Are my concerns justified?"

“Without a doubt—at least if I know my kid brother,” Nico said. “Here’s what I want you to do: tonight at nine-thirty meet me at Pier Seventeen, and bring me the package.”

“What then?”

“Then you go home to your wife, and I’ll take it from there.”

“But what about my job?”

“It’s your supervisor who has to worry about his job, not you.”

“Thank you,” Carl said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to be late for my next appointment. I’ll see you tonight.”

He shook their hands again and headed out the door to his car.

* * *

Dick Yeager watched Carl van der Val walk out of the coffee shop. “So what do you have in mind for tonight?” he asked his partner.

“I’m not really sure,” Nico said, cupping his mug with both hands. “But I’ve got to do something. This is getting out of hand. I’m really worried about my brother.”

“I didn’t even know you had a brother. You never talk about him. What’s got you so worried?” Leaning back in his chair, Dick sat silently while Nico thought.

“It’s been going on since we were in grade school,” Nico said after a moment. “I was not only older but bigger and stronger too, and school came more easily to me. Because of that, I got more of the attention and praise for doing well in academics and sports. Maybe Emilio felt he just couldn’t compete.”

“So, if he couldn’t get positive attention by succeeding, he looked for negative attention by acting out. Even negative attention is better than no attention. That’s classic. We see it in kids all the time.”

“Yes,” Nico said, nodding in agreement with his partner. “But it’s much harder to see it when it’s in your own family. It started with misbehaving in class, being disrespectful to the teachers, getting into fights with the other kids. Then, when we were teenagers, it was vandalism, petty theft, and smoking pot. But he didn’t grow out of it the way most kids do.” Nico sighed and shook his head.

“What’s he up to now?” Dick dipped a chocolate biscotto into his coffee and took a bite while he waited for the answer.

“Who knows? I haven’t even seen him the last few years, and we never talk on the phone. Maybe he avoids me because I have a real job and he doesn’t, and that fact makes him feel like a failure. Or maybe my being a detective feels like judgment and condemnation to him. Perhaps he’s just trying to avoid an arrest. Whatever he’s up to, I’m sure it’s no good.”

“Would you arrest your own brother?” Dick leaned forward for the answer.

“If I had to, though I would take no pleasure in it. But it may be the only way to stop him from reaching the end of the road to self-destruction.”

“You want some backup tonight?” Dick asked.

“No, this is family business. I’ve got it covered.”

Hmm. That answer didn’t sit so well with Dick, especially since drugs were probably involved. Was his partner playing the lone ranger out of his Italian machismo or because he was up to something crooked? Dick knew the temptation: the detective’s low salary, ready access to drugs confiscated as evidence, their high street value. The easiest of easy money. Yet, if he asked, his partner might take it as an accusation, and Dick knew better than to try to persuade Nico to accept backup he didn’t want or believe he needed. He sat there in uncomfortable silence.

Finally, Dick looked at his wristwatch. "Time for us to get going."

"Okay," Nico said. "It was nice of that young guy to buy us coffee."

* * *

After Darina had washed and Carl had dried the dinner dishes, he said, "Honey, I've got to go out tonight, on business."

"At this hour?" Darina asked, her tone betraying her disbelief.

Carl winced. "It's that 'special little assignment' I told you about, though I don't like it any more than you do."

"Well, be careful, honey. According to the weather report, a fog should be rolling in." Darina yawned. "Oh, I'm dead. Time to hit the hay." She kissed him goodnight. "Wake me if I'm asleep when you come home, so I'll know you made it back safely."

Carl smiled. Since Darina got up a couple of hours before he did, she was as listless in the evening as she was perky in the morning. He always found the contrast amusing. "Okay," he said, reaching for his jacket. With that, he was out the door.

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The weatherman was right. Soon Carl was driving through low-lying patches of fog. The closer he got to the docks the thicker it grew. With the headlights illuminating ever less of the road in front of him, Carl had to reduce his speed. He worried about making it on time. What if Emilio got there early? Or Nico got tired of waiting and left?

Suddenly, it hit him. It was all too easy. The detective pulling up at exactly the same time he did at the coffee shop, claiming to have a look-alike brother, meeting him alone at the pier, offering to solve his problem but giving no details as to how. What if it was all a setup? Maybe the detective was tailing him to size him up. He could have invented that story about a brother to

keep his partner in the dark. Now that Carl knew his identity, the detective might shoot him at the pier and dump his body in the water. What if he was just another dirty cop? He would never see Darina again; his child would grow up without a father. What had he gotten himself into? Whatever it was, at this point there was no way out.

When Carl finally turned into Pier Seventeen, visibility was zero. The fog sat as thick as split-pea soup, and the headlights shone no more than ten or twelve feet ahead. No sooner had he stopped the car than a man stepped into their beams. Was it Nico or Emilio, or were they one and the same? He had no way of knowing as he rolled down his window.

“You’re late,” the man said, now standing next to the driver’s door. “It’s almost ten.”

“The fog slowed me down.”

“Did you bring the package?”

“Of course.” This was his last chance. Should he put the car in reverse and floor it?

“Give it to me.”

With the motor still running, Carl got out and handed the man the package. With that his fate was sealed. He waited helplessly to see whether the man would draw a gun.

“Now get out of here. My brother will be here any minute.”

Carl turned to get back in the car then stopped. “Wait. I have to snap your picture for Mr. Barterman. Stand in front of the car.” The headlights lit up the man’s face just enough for Carl to get a good shot of it. Then he got back in the car and sped off as fast as the fog would allow.

What a relief. At least he had gotten out of there alive. Carl never felt so safe and secure as he did that night when he climbed into bed, kissed Darina on the cheek, and snuggled up next to her.

* * *

The man at the pier leaned against the hood of his car, his arms folded, the collar of his jacket turned up against the damp cold. Behind him the package rested on the hood. A few minutes later he perceived, by hearing rather than sight, the arrival of a car. He heard the engine go dead. Then the sound of a door opening and closing. Footsteps coming his way. The squeak of boards under someone's feet. A figure approaching almost to arm's length.

"Nico! What are you doing here?" the man exclaimed, obviously stunned.

"My job. What are *you* doing here, Emilio?" Nothing in his voice revealed a fraternal bond.

"Uh, I was just coming out to get some fresh air."

"You were coming to get this package." Nico pointed to the one behind him on the hood.

"Hey, I don't know nothin' about no package," Emilio said in a wise-guy accent he must have picked up from his associates.

"You scratched your nose when you said that. That's your tell. You're lying."

Emilio stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I ain't lying. You got nothin' on me."

"I've got a package with stolen narcotics, a picture of you from Blake Barterman, and his instructions to deliver that package to you, as well as a witness who is willing to testify to all of it."

"Well, I ain't received no package. You can't charge me with nothin'."

"You've received plenty of packages in the past. When we arrest Barterman for the theft and illegal sale of narcotics, he'll fold faster than a poker player with a bad hand." Nico stared steel-hard into his brother's eyes. "Who are you working for, Emilio?"

Emilio looked down and muttered, "The Signorelli family. I'm just an errand boy. It's no big deal."

“The mob? Are you trying to get yourself whacked?” This was far more serious than Nico had thought.

“A man’s gotta earn a living.” Emilio looked up. “You gonna arrest your own brother?” He sounded as though he had just been betrayed. “Some kind of family loyalty you got there.”

“It’s for your own good. It may be the only way to save your life.”

“You’re gonna break our mother’s heart.”

“You did that a long time ago by the life you lead.”

“That’s cold.”

“The cold, hard fact is that she cries for you every night.”

Right then a fog horn sounded from a ship in the harbor. When Nico instinctively turned his head in its direction, Emilio spun around and ran, disappearing into the fog. Nico could still hear his steps and sprinted after him. Within twenty yards he had caught up to him. A hard shove from the back sent Emilio sprawling to the ground.

“I always could outrun you,” Nico said.

Emilio rose to his feet, dusted himself off, then suddenly took a swing at his brother. Ducking, Nico avoided the blow. When he rose, Emilio swung again, landing a punch on his brother’s jaw. Nico swiveled to the right from the blow, pivoting on his left foot and raising his right leg, completed the circle, and planted his foot squarely on the side of Emilio’s head.

Standing straight, Nico looked down at Emilio, who lay dazed on the ground. “You forgot my martial arts training.”

“I should’ve brought a gun.” Emilio struggled to his feet, holding the side of his head with his hand.

“I brought mine.” Opening his jacket, Nico revealed a pistol in a shoulder holster.

“So, now what?”

Nico didn't take that question as either an admission of defeat or a surrender. But his brother had to know he was at an impasse. There was no way out.

“I'm good friends with the DA, and he owes me a favor. Of course, I can't promise anything until I talk to him, but I'm pretty sure he'll go for a deal. If you tell us everything you know about the Signorelli family's operations, you'll get a reduced, maybe even a suspended, sentence, and we'll put you in witness protection. Don't cooperate, we'll book you, put the word out on the street that you're a snitch, and release you on your own recognizance. You can take your chances with the mob. Maybe you'll make it to trial; maybe you won't.”

“That's some choice.” Emilio dropped his head and slumped his shoulders.

“Turn around, and put your hands behind your back.”

“You're gonna cuff your own brother?”

Nico answered not by word but by deed.

* * *

The first thing Monday morning Blake Barterman called Carl into the “dugout.”

“Did you deliver the package?” he asked without any preliminary greeting.

“Yes, sir,” Carl said.

“And you took the picture?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me see it.”

Carl took out his phone, pulled up the picture, and handed the device to Mr. Barterman.

The latter gave a big smile.

“That’s him all right. He’s put on a little weight, though. Well, living the high life will do that to you. Carl, my boy, you’re batting a thousand. You’ll be a heavy hitter in no time.”

Just then Detectives Fratellini and Yeager walked through Mr. Barterman’s office door.

“Are you crazy? You can’t come here,” Blake screamed. “We can’t have any direct contact. And you brought someone with you? Get out of here, now!”

“Mr. Barterman, I’m not who you think I am. I’m Detective Fratellini, Nico Fratellini, from Metro Police. And this is my partner, Dick Yeager. We are placing you under arrest for the theft and illegal sale of narcotics. Stand up, sir, and put your hands behind your back.”

“You’re way out in left field, detective, way off base. I didn’t steal any drugs. It was the kid here. He did it.”

“He’s the one who brought your illegal activities to our attention,” Nico said.

Blake turned crimson. “Why, you little bush leaguer,” he yelled, shaking his fist at Carl.

“I followed your instructions to the letter, Mr. Barterman: I delivered the package at ten o’clock to someone who looked like the picture you gave me and then took his picture to prove it. That’s exactly what you told me to do,” Carl said, standing up for himself.

“You’re fired,” Blake shouted, still red in the face.

“No, he’s not,” Nico said. “But we’ve got a package of narcotics with your fingerprints on it, your picture of the intended recipient, who happens to be my brother, Emilio, and now two witnesses against you. That’s three strikes. You’re out.” Nico cuffed him and started leading him away.

“I may be down to the last inning, but it ain’t over till it’s over,” Blake said as though he still had some clout.

* * *

With Mr. Barterman gone, Carl didn't know what to expect the next morning. When he arrived at work, he walked down to his former supervisor's office. The door was open, and he peeked in out of curiosity. Behind the desk sat an older gentleman.

"Ah, you must be Carl van der Val. I recognize you from your picture," the man said. "Come in, and have a seat. I'm Brian Elder, from upper management."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Elder." Carl took a seat in the same chair he had sat in twice before.

"Carl, we're very happy with the way you've conducted yourself in this Barterman affair. You nipped something in the bud and saved the company a lot of future embarrassment and money."

"Thank you, sir."

"We would promote you right into Barterman's position, but you're a little young for that. So we're going to give you a handsome raise and start grooming you to be a supervisor a couple of years down the road. Do you think you'll be up for that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll hit a home run for you," Carl said.

"I'm not really much of a baseball fan myself. The game's too slow for me. I'm more of a basketball kind of guy."

"In that case, I'll slam-dunk one for you, sir."

"Carl, I think you and I are going to get along just fine." Mr. Elder stood to shake Carl's hand. "Now you go about your business, son."

"Yes, sir," Carl said and did just that. He didn't mind changing metaphors—he just hoped he wouldn't be a referee who had to call a foul.

Glossary of Names

Carl: man (Germanic)

van der Val: of the trap (Dutch). Carl van der Val is a man caught in the trap set by his supervisor.

Darina: fruitful, fertile (from Gaelic). She is pregnant.

Blake: black (one possible meaning of an Old English word)

Barterman: a trader. Blake Barterman trades drugs on the black market.

Nico: victory (Italian from Greek). He wins out over Emilio.

Fratellini: plural diminutive of “brother” (Italian)

Emilio: rival (Italian from Latin). Nico and Emilio are brothers, and Emilio has always rivaled Nico, though in negative ways.

Dick: used in the slang sense of “detective”

Yeager: hunter (probably an Anglicized spelling of a German name). Dick Yeager, along with his partner, is a detective hunting for criminals.

Signorelli: little lords (Italian). They are the leading family of a criminal organization.

Brian: perhaps “high” from an old Celtic element

Elder: older. Brian Elder is an older gentleman from upper management.