

SOL

By Charisse L. Heath

“You know what ‘S.O.L.’ stands for, don’t you? Sure, you do. You’re a lawyer, Mr. Prosecutor. Most people think it means ‘shit outta luck’ and really, that’s kinda what it does mean for prosecutors like you. But you know that it also stands for ‘statute of limitations’—three of the finest words in the English language. That’s what I want to talk to you about. I want to...”

“Mr. Wade,” interrupted County Prosecutor Wright, “I’m being patient with you because of your ... um ... circumstance, but I really think you could use your time more wisely right now.”

“Please, call me Luke. My ‘circumstance’ sorta puts us on a first-name basis, doesn’t it?”

“Fine ... Luke. Now, why have you called me here? Wouldn’t you rather talk with family members now?”

“I don’t really have any family any more. Howard is my only family. We’ve been best friends since we were six—from the first day of first grade. That’s what, 36 years now? Let me tell you about Howard.

“Howard is Howard Fuller. We grew up in Pontiac. We went to school together all the way through high school. When Howard got the job as a security guard at the Ford House in Grosse Pointe Shores, he naturally called me when there was another opening. Me and Howard did everything together—we chased skirt together, we got high together, we got into shit together—never anything too bad; that’s how we got clearance to go into that level of security. Howard is the brother I never had and always wanted.

“Well, anyway, we were working security at the Ford House when Howard gets the idea that there’s a lot of art comin’ into and goin’ outta that place all the time and maybe we can ‘better our condition’ if we ‘appropriate’ a little of that art for ourselves. That’s how Howard talks—‘better our

condition' and 'appropriate.' He's a really smart guy even though he only got as far as Central High School. He's got an Ivy League vocabulary in that Pontiac mouth. See, Edsel and Eleanor Ford were big supporters of the arts. They got all kinds of funny-looking shit in that place. They call it a 'collection', but I call it a hot mess. You shoulda seen this skinny Buddha-looking statue they had and it was worth a million dollars. You can't account for rich peoples' tastes.

“Anyway, in February of 2005, Howard hears that this Chinese vase is coming. Howard says it's from the Qianlong period, which doesn't mean squat to me, but Howard's all excited so I go along. We plan to lift that little vase just as sweetly as you please. Howard has a friend who can make stuff that looks like original pieces of art. Howard said she is a 'reproduction specialist.' Sounds like a broad with a bunch of kids to me, but Howard says she can make a vase that looks exactly like the vase that's coming and she'll do it for 20 g's. Now, I don't wanna spend 20 g's for nothin', but Howard promises it'll be worth it, so we pool our money to pay the chick. I gotta tell you that that was the worst part of the deal for me. I had a little money saved and I sure hated usin' it to pay for some vase. But I trusted Howard with my life so, of course, I pony up.

“The plan was that one Sunday while we were working the graveyard shift, we just switch the vases. We know all the security precautions at the house and we definitely know how to get around them. For all the valuable stuff in the house, their security isn't too tight. I mean, they hired me and Howard, didn't they? If anybody suspects that the vase isn't the original, we join in on the search and act just as shocked and surprised as everybody else. Besides, those rich people have insurance up the wazoo, so probably nobody will even care. Sunday, February 6 rolls around, and easy breezy, we switch the vases. I mean, that switch went off without a hitch. You know how in movies somethin' happens and everybody is all nervous and everything? Not a thing. Nothing. Smooth as silk. The vase is only 12 inches tall, so we walk out with it wrapped in a coat and nobody notices.”

“You simply walked out of the Ford House with a priceless Qianlong vase and no one stopped you?” Wright inquired incredulously.

“Yep, surprised us, too, how easy it went. And you know what else; it took a week for anybody to find out that the vase had been swapped out. It only happened then because some insurance guy was goin’ through checkin’ on stuff and found the vase wasn’t the original one. I gotta hand it to that reproduction specialist ‘cause she made one fine copy. Anyway, when they discovered that the vase was a copy everybody was in an uproar. Insurance or not, I guess they really *do* care about all that crap. They investigated everybody who worked in the house. Man, I mean they stopped just short of water boarding, but they never even came close to suspecting me and Howard. See, Howard is really smart and he comes across all goody-goody. They mighta suspected me if I had been by myself, but they figured that me and Howard was good friends and he would keep me on the straight and narrow.

“Now, here comes the real beauty of Howard’s plan. Here’s where you see how much a genius he really is. You probably already know, Mr. Prosecutor, but as Howard explained to me, the statute of limitations—the S.O.L. —on stealing stuff in the state of Michigan is six years. Howard says that we can swipe the vase, sit on it for six years, and then sell it. After six years, there’s nothing the law can do. After six years, you can’t touch us. He said even if you try to get us on selling stolen property, it’s at most a slap on the wrist ‘cause it’s the ‘fruit of the poisonous tree’ or some such Garden of Eden thing. I don’t know. All I know is that Howard said you *can’t* get us for stealing the property in the first place. I had never heard of such a thing and, as much as Howard’s word is gospel, I knew he musta been wrong. I can’t believe we can swipe something that could be worth millions of dollars and the law can’t get us for it. So he whips out this page from the Michigan statute book and the sweetest number in the world is there: 767.24. I’ll never forget it—767.24, subsection 5, says that after six years, we are rich, free, and clear! I read that page over and over

again until I *could* believe it. I'll be loaded if I can just sit still for six years. Howard says we should just let the heat cool down on the missing vase, put it away somewhere safe, let it 'appreciate in value' (his words), and wait until February 2011. If we try to get greedy before Valentine's Day 2011, the law can put our butts in prison, but if we can wait, we will have enough money to choke a horse and you can't touch us. Hey, if Howard says it, it must be true. So, we pinky swear like we're kids, put the vase in a safe deposit box under both of our names, and go about our lives. We even stayed at our jobs at Ford House.

"I gotta tell you that sometimes it was brutal. I was itchin' to fence that vase. I had gotten married and divorced and that money woulda come in handy, but Howard was always there reminding me of 767.24. His mother's house got foreclosed and I know that he wanted to help her, but 767.24 said his mother had to find another way. The economy tanked, we both got laid off from Ford House and needed money bad, but we filed for unemployment, called MARVIN every week, took crappy jobs when we could find 'em, and stayed true to 767.24. I used to go to bed at night and wake up in the morning with 767.24 on the brain. I don't know if you read about this, but last November some guy in England sold a Qianlong vase that was just sitting around his house for \$83 million. I thought I would die! We got this vase just sitting in a safe deposit box that could be worth all that money! Howard said we had to sit tight. We couldn't move that vase until February. It might be worth more money than God or Oprah has, but we wouldn't get a dime if we wound up in prison. I knew he was right, but sweet good Lord, it was hard to keep it together after that."

"Mr. Wade ... Luke, do you really want to recount to me how you have passed the last six years right now?" asked Wright.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but I gotta tell you the rest.

"Before I knew it, it was February of this year. I got so excited I couldn't sleep anymore. Who needed sleep? After Valentine's Day, I could buy an island and sleep unbothered for as long as

I wanted. Hell, I could buy people to sleep for me! I have never been a romantic, but I couldn't wait for Valentine's Day! Howard felt the same way; I know he did, but he is too cool to let on how excited he was. He came up with this idea that we would take ourselves out to a fancy dinner on February 14 in the poshest restaurant in Chicago to celebrate the beginning of being rich people. (We didn't call it having dinner on Valentine's Day because that would have been too much like a date, and that ain't how we roll.) He didn't want to drive to Chicago in all this snow and he's afraid to fly, so he suggested that we take Amtrak. Now, I really wanted to just get that ugly old vase out of the safe deposit box and sell it, but after you've waited six years, a few more days didn't matter. Besides, I was looking forward to the celebration. So it's a go for Chicago.

“The plan was to meet at this Amtrak station here in Birmingham at 10:30 a.m. and catch the 10:54 to Chicago. I got here at 10:30 on the dot, dressed to the nines. Yesterday, I bought the baddest suit and overcoat I could find at Somerset Mall 'cause that's where all the good stuff is. Howard didn't get here until about 10 minutes to 11, but he looked as sharp as a tack, too. I have never felt closer to him. Howard walked up to me with his arms opened wide just as we heard the train comin' into the station. I knew he was gonna hug me and it was like my brother and me were at the beginning of a sweet, new life! All of a sudden, everythin' went outta focus and I was spinnin' like a top and movin' in slow motion at the same time! At first, I couldn't get my head around what had happened, but then I got it—Howard had pushed me into the path of the on-comin' train, except I didn't hit the tracks. I was caught between the train and the platform—*am* caught. Well, you can see that for yourself, can't you?

“You're up to speed now, huh? Know what he did then? Howard sorta nodded at me as he walked away; he tipped an imaginary hat at me. Can you believe that shit?!? Anyway, I have seen this on TV before. I know the deal. My body is twisted like a pretzel under the platform and the

train. As soon as the train moves, I'm gonna untwist and bleed out like a stuck pig. I know I'm gonna die."

"Luke. Please. Let me call someone for you. Family, a minister, somebody," pleaded Wright.

"No, that's okay. There's really nobody to call. I'm not gonna scream and cry and carry on. I know this is it for me. I know the one person in the world I trusted has killed me. I know my brother has betrayed me. But I know one more thing, too, and that's why I wanted you here, Mr. Prosecutor. I know that you can get that lying, schemin' son of a bitch for murder, no matter how long it takes you to find him, 'cause I know that 767.24 says there's no S.O.L for murder."