

UNLIMITED

By Kit Reed

NOT EVERYBODY KNOWS IT yet, but sooner or later everybody needs our services. That is, everybody who matters. Sooner or later they come to us.

We are the best at what we do. R [6 Star] Unlimited, a subsidiary of Velvet Martinet Enterprises. My company. But you know this, or you would not be here.

We take only A list clients and we get top dollar. You can read this in the hang of our cool suits — laid-back ensembles in pewter and silver, the walking year's wages that we go out in when we do business. Think relaxed cut, think designer items several notches up the food chain from Armani. Top of the line RayBans. The boots alone! Every hair shining. It doesn't matter what you're doing as long as you look drop-dead gorgeous doing it.

Take the lobby here in R [6 Star] Unlimited. Elegant. Gleaming. Testimony to our success. Success pays the rent and I can tell you, we have a one hundred percent success rate.

See the malachite reception desk and the glistening parquet of our outer lobby, the silk Persian rugs with a corner flipped back so you can count the thousand-knots-per-inch until one of our assistants bothers to come and take your history. Get a load of our carpeted walls and the tinted one-way glass that juts over Wilshire Boulevard and Little Santa Monica. The glass for obvious reasons, the carpeting to muffle the screaming, something we never discuss at these preliminary meetings. We are at the apex here! Note the Brancusi fountain and the malachite steps you mount to remind our receptionist that you are still waiting.

Once you have cleared the outer lobby, observe the lush kidskin sofa in the Gauguin room where you sit and stew, waiting for me to clear ten minutes for this interview.

Success? You bet. Our assistants alone! Quick and clever in their chic black dresses, the best they can manage on what we pay them. Phi Betes from the Ivies, these girls killed and died to get here and they're every one of them a size six, okay? And if the pay scale seems mean to you and fourteen-hour days excessive, remember that every one of them aims through craft and diligence to become one of us.

The upper echelon. Note that we are all women here. It's a policy decision. Tact and efficiency. Finesse.

Further signs: my office! Instead of a desk, we face each other over my bronze coffee table. Chinese, dug out of some tomb in the year one thousand, don't ask. Then there's the art: Naum Gabo, a treasure in plexi and monofilament. A tiny

Rothko. A Bacon, and if the torn jaws gape as if the victim is being flayed alive and screaming as we sit here— well, we'll get to that. A Pollock. A Degas. Double-rubbed black lacquer on the walls and silver floors; see our logo inlaid in gold, which is why you are wearing complimentary terrycloth booties over your Guccis.

Yes I know you are a major player. If you were anything less, you couldn't afford me.

Now regard me. Velvet Martinet, the captain of our industry.

It's okay to look. You have, after all, been cleared by Security. After Accounting. We've accepted your nonrefundable deposit, Krugerrands as per the preliminary agreement. Naturally we had the items in question authenticated and the dollar amount pegged to the market value at the close of that day's trading. And your net worth and growth potential evaluated before our receptionist could even think about making an appointment for you. The balance? We know you're good for it.

Otherwise you would not be sitting here.

Meet my eyes! This is when I look deep into you and see whether I trust you. I am the last barrier. All that stands between you and the service you so badly want from us.

If I clamp your hands to the table hard enough to scare you, tough. When I take hold, there's no man strong enough to free himself. Don't look away! Not if you want this. I said, meet my eyes!

Do not be frightened by what you see. It's what you're paying for. Hold still! Quit hyperventilating. It'll be over in a minute.

This is essential. The moment in which I make sure. Sure you won't panic, sure you are good for it. Sure you won't back down or attack me, sure you're not from some agency bent on breaking me.

More. Rapport. We must establish rapport before we can even begin to talk about your problem.

Now.

You can speak. Be assured that if we proceed your down payment and today's billable hours will be credited to your balance, which as you know comes due immediately upon signing.

Time to lay your problem on the table. Don't worry. The room's been swept

and secured. Our people have been over it twice since I met with the last client. It's safe for you to say it out loud. It's even okay for you to call me Velvet.

Oh yes, and for client protection, our cameras are recording this transaction.

Um, Ah. The client sits with his head between his knees. This is so hard! The humiliation. The desire, fib. Ah! Before we start, could I ask you a couple of questions?

Meanwhile, elsewhere: In deepest Brentwood just north of Sunset, producer/developer Whitney Ryder is waked by a phone bleating. He swims in his empty bed, groping for the damn thing. Got to stop that noise! It is late afternoon. Daphne's been gone since Sunday — no biggie — and he's snorted and popped a few things in the interim, not because he's bummed, exactly, just to ride the wave until he hears from Bobby that the big deal is completed.

It is not exactly nice to be awake right now. The larger circumstances of Ryder's life have begun sliding into place like massive stones on rollers moving in to seal some pharaoh's tomb.

Pawing through yellow satin sheets, he hits a lump. "Gotcha!" He snaps like a seal catching a fish and pops talk with his thumb, shouting, "Ryder!"

"It's me," Bobby says. "You don't have to yell."

It's Bobby. "I was asleep!"

"While Rome is fucking burning," Bobby says. Bobby finished U.C.L.A. before he moved up from the mail room to become Ryder's assistant. He's right in there with the classical allusions. It's one of the reasons Ryder keeps him around. "We've lost the deal." "Fill me in."

"Drove my Chew to the levee but the levee was dry." Never one to say a thing just once, Bobby says, "I called our money but our money isn't returning our calls."

"They — what?"

"I'm telling you, somebody got to them."

"Our money?" Betrayed, Ryder howls, "Somebody got to our money?"

"Somebody got to our money." Bobby rides on. "They backed off and Maxamar waltzed in and scooped up the property."

"Maxamar! Bastard, bastard!" Ryder growls. "Getchell!"

“You don’t know it was Getchell,” Bobby says.

“My best friend! It’s gotta be.” Yes there is a rat loose in the infrastructure. Gnawing at his vitals. Ryder snaps, “Who the hell else could it be?”

“He wished you success,” Bobby says like a good assistant.

“Yeah, right,” Ryder says bitterly. “Right before he walked.” He’s pissed at Getchell; best buds since fourth grade in Ocala, coming up together under the Florida sun, two little kids with big ambitions. Move west, make it big in L.A. Together. Three days before the key meeting, his sandbox pally Duane Getchell takes his marbles and walks. “Eight bucks gets you 160 K it was Getchell.”

“He sent flowers.”

“Flowers,” Ryder snorts. “Horseshoe or funeral wreath?” Dead is just as dead. He feels creditors gnawing away to that old grade-school refrain, “Oh heck, oh heck, it’s up to my neck...”

Bobby strikes a note halfway between hard and gentle. “Look at it this way, he’s not the only one out there...” who hates you.

“Whoever it is...” Ryder is wired by this time, wide-jawed and furious, wacked out on adrenaline and crosshatching the bedroom like a retriever bagging flies. “The bastard is going to pay.”

“Who?”

Ryder says through clenched teeth, “Whoever’s behind Maxamar.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“And pay big time — what did you say?”

Bobby mumbles something Ryder can’t quite grasp.

“What did you say?”

“...sure it’s a bastard,” Bobby mutters, frff, “um...Daphne.”

“Daphne would never do a thing like that to me. I think she still loves me.” Ryder shakes the flip-phone angrily. “I told you, quit mum bling.”

Bobby mumbles, marginally louder. “Egil Hoover.”

“My broker?”

“Well,” Bobby mumbles, “Daphne is still married to him.”

“Oh, Egil. Egil’s a bastard, but he isn’t vindictive.”

“That’s what you think,” Bobby says.

“Then think harder!”

Bobby is trying to find a way to break bad news. Out of his fuzzy silence comes the worst. “Could be our money screwing us.”

“Just because our money isn’t returning our calls, that doesn’t mean we’re being screwed by our money.”

Bobby mumbles a little louder.

Some days Ryder hates Bobby. He growls, “I said, what? What did you say?”

Oh, desperate man, Bobby just keeps mumbling, but loud enough so Ryder either will or won’t be able to catch what he is pitching.

“Fuck that shit,” Ryder shouts, even though he’s not exactly sure what Bobby’s telling him. By this time Ryder has shouldered the phone in and out of the shower without getting it wet; he’s combed his hair and he’s shaving with his sweet little electric. In another minute he’ll have to unglue his ear from Bobby long enough to wriggle into the Gap T-shirt and the Armani. Once he is armored, he has to go forth and slay multitudes. Reaching for his Calvin briefs, he starts with the day’s instructions. Pickups. Folders to be pulled for the next meeting. Calls to be arranged so there may even be a next meeting.

Bobby says into the brief silence that falls as his boss ducks into the T-shirt, “Anything else?”

Ryder ticks off ten items for Bobby’s phone list — the small private investors they have to squeeze just to keep going until their money kicks in — and right before he pops Bobby out of existence and clicks the phone shut he says, “Find out who’s screwing us. Get on it!”

Which leaves Whitney Ryder alone and silent on a peak in Brentwood. In full armor, he stands in the darkened room with the round bed slippery with satin sheets and redolent of Daphne. And broods. The big project up in flames, Daphne gone. Ryder has thirty clays to pay up on the house or get out and ten days to cover certain key investments. Stones rolling in to seal the pharaoh’s tomb.

It is so fucking inevitable.

Doom creeping up, followed by ruin. And all he can fix on is finding out who gave the first stone a kick and started it moving.

Surprised by grief, Ryder belches words: what Bobby was trying to tell him that he didn't want to catch but knows he's going to have to deal with. Our money, he thinks.

We don't even know who our money is.

Questions. Questions! What gives you the right to ask questions?

I just thought maybe the deposit. Urn. Ah. Entitled me to a further explanation. Miserable, the client shifts in the deep sofa. This is so hard! Putting it in words. The rage. The humiliation. I mean, before I tell you my problem.

The need.

Woman like me, you think I don't know where you're coming from? Honey, this is Velvet. You're sitting here, and you think I don't already know your problem?

Your problem. Your problem. I know more than you do about your little problem. Where it comes from and who did it to you. What you're feeling. Who to get for this. How. I probably even know exactly what you want done to him. The perp that ruined your life. The exquisite torture you want prepared for him.

And count on it, we here at R [6 Star] Unlimited know precisely how to make our solution beautiful and specific. A work of art that you will treasure forever, preserved in memory. Tapes if you want, transcripts. Stills. Laminated front page of the L.A. Times with an account of it. The whole magilla. Which is, of course, what you are really paying for.

As described in the preliminary, this job's complex, but doable. You can count on our discretion.

But you have reservations, and since you're on our A list, I'll indulge you. Let you in on the A. B. and C. of a few of our major successes. Rest assured, when we do your job, nobody but the target knows who hit him. And, of course, our client, which is why you are paying top dollar. When our targets fall, believe me the world hears about it, but only our clients know how exquisitely it came about or that your victim — yes, let's just come out and say it g your victim — knows the why. And who to thank for this beautiful feat of ruination.

Take the studio chief, you know his name. His exec gets hell from the guy because he's quit the studio for something better. Exec quits, right; chief gives him his blessing, right, but all around the poor exec, new partners bail and sure deals start collapsing. Right, the chief is out to get him. So the exec calls us.

You know what happened, it was in all the papers. Bingo-bango, studio's top bankable stars, things start happening to them. Car wreck, to say nothing of the fire. Forget reconstructive surgery, there goes half the chief's stable, and on the first day of principal photography. His biggest star goes schizzy, our work—now that you know, you've got to admit that one was especially creative. And untraceable. His three stars that bail to undergo sex change operations and five years of deep therapy, to say nothing of the mudslides that took out the hundred million's worth of stuff they'd built for Kostner's Iliad plus Odyssey: Aeneid Days, your complete Troy plus Crete plus various trinkets like the genuine life-sized sandstone face of Abu Cymbal on the back lot annex: director says: accept no substitutes, spare no expense," you can imagine. You think it's easy to take out Troy with a mudslide in the dry season?

So that was one.

And that fat presidential wannabe — white hair, bestseller, holier than us until, sprong, he goes bats on TV and in one speech alienates and loses the votes of the entire moral majority. That was our work. Can't give you any more details because we are pledged to protect the identity of our clients, but you begin to get the scope of our operation?

Not to mention the recent demise of a head of state who shall remain nameless for reasons which I can't share with you even though your own peculiar situation here guarantees your perpetual silence in this sensitive matter.

And you will note that this isn't a punishment-fits-the-crime situation, it is bigger than that. And subtler.

We take large steps.

So. The thing. What you want from us?

You will get from us. It's guaranteed.

That's kind of what I'm afraid of. This isn't a big thing, it's a little thing. At least I think it is.

BIG THING? Little thing? Rest assured, we tailor our services to fit the client. I myself originated the program, I and my friend Serena. You think we started big? No way. We started small. All the best things in this town start small, that's the beauty of L.A., you can come in on the rails and ride out in a white stretch with built-in

swimming pool.

We weren't always what you see before you. Plush Velvet Martinet Enterprises. Not by a long stretch. Just two nice girls fresh from Fall River, move west to make it in the biz; Serena's an actress, and I...I thought I was writing the script that would kill the world, mega-budget, mega-stars, pickup in ten figures. But for the time being we were only clerks in Bullocks' at the Beverly Center. Serena made buyer, on her way to the top as a manager, and I was selling fucking bras while I worked on my idea -the one I developed with this cute guy I actually thought was really in love with me.

Then things happened. Little things. Like a clerk in Serena's department gets jumped to department chief, and doesn't she feel shitty. So we deal with the problem. After the accident, Serena's promoted to section manager. Then a friend has a knockdown dragout with a customer and you know how things are, word gets around, and she comes to us. Serena and I deal with the problem, but by that time we are both bored of Bullock's and we set up a small office on Third Street, right next to the bridal shop? You know the comer. And one thing leads to another. Woman standing by the parking meter outside Celine's, fighting with a suit in wraparound Raybans until the guy's car pulls up, the suit gets in the back and zooms off and his girl is left standing there crying. Serena sidles out and next thing she knows, bingo-bango, she's in our office. As it turns out she's a Mafia princess. We were brilliant.

Because let me tell you, okay, the guy in the suit is a lying, two-timing bastard, and if there's one thing we here at R Unlimited know, it's how to deal with slimy, scum-sucking, two-timing bottom feeders that lie and take your...

But we were talking about you.

Meanwhile, elsewhere: Whitney Ryder has flipped his plastic onto the waiter's tray at Spago. He and his foreign business contacts have just finished dinner — the early seating. It's so early that nobody who is anybody has even thought of arriving, but for the first time in the decade he's been eating here, Ryder has failed to get a window seat. Their table is behind the stairs and entirely too close to the kitchen. Instead of admiring twilight exhaust fumes above Sunset, his Danish guests are gaping like gummy fish in a Jell-O aquarium.

It is testimony to Ryder's precarious position that the only contacts he has left right now are from countries so far away that the news of his imminent demise has not reached them. Annoyingly, the waiter returns and after a murmured exchange leaves with Ryder's other plastic. Across from Ryder, his Danish investors sit, regarding him with unblinking eyes that seem to crack and dry as they wait and go on waiting. Would they please, just please excuse themselves and go upstairs to the bathroom? The waiter returns from the register, embarrassed. He grimaces at Ryder. There is a long silence. A looong silence. Finally one of the Danes reaches across

the table, slipping something into Ryder's hand. Five crisp hundreds. It is humiliating!

It is both logical and terrible that when he goes to the ATM for valet parking money the LCD tells Ryder that in both savings and checking departments, he is functionally a dead man.

WE'VE BEEN SITTING HERE for a long time. A very long time. Do you realize that you've exceeded your deposit in billable hours and we haven't broached the matter of your problem?

No, we haven't. I'd like to tell you everything, but I'm just not quite comfortable.

Oh, don't get all shy on me. We're supposed to be doing business here, and every minute we sit here not laying our cards on the table is costing you another hundred. That's six K an hour, which at the rate we're going is going to be a lot of K if you decide not to go through with the operation. In for a penny, in for the whole deal, so you might as well cut to the chase and let it all hang out for me so we can get started.

You're lucky I cleared my calendar tonight. Otherwise I'd be on my way out the door right now for drinks with my colleagues at the Peninsula before dinner at a place so exclusive that even you have never heard of it. Snuff show at the interval, living party favors, yes it is hot —this week, at least. If I were you I'd get on with this, because every minute we sit here not laying open the spine of this critter is costing you, so I'll tell you a couple of things and then you'd better get ready to tell me a couple of things.

I know how it feels to get stuck sitting on an embarrassing problem. Slide this way, slide that, you're still stuck on a ridge and the damn thing is cutting into you. And don't by any stretch think you're the first person to walk in here with an embarrassing problem.

Or the only person sitting here who's ever had one. I could tell you things...

Okay, okay, I could tell you. Serena? Right, she isn't on the masthead, you noticed, so that's one story. There we were in our little shop on Third, me and my first partner; we could barely pay the rent but we were beginning to, you know, get a leg up on the business? A world of people out there, and most of them are hurting. Serena and I did pretty well nickel-and-diming, but no way was I going to spend the rest of my life nickel-and-diming. Remember I was developing this script with my boyfriend, he was going to get us a meeting and if we could only get a meeting we could sell it on the basis of the pitch alone, or that's what he told me.

But I forgot to mention the best job that ever came out of R Unlimited.

We're all too young to remember The Godfather, but it's on TV a lot and there is this scene in The Godfather? Guy crosses the Don. Wakes up with blood in the bed, reaches down by his feet and there is this severed head, his prize racehorse! And they slipped it in there so quiet and smooth that he slept through the night without even knowing that they put this thing in his bed or even feeling it.

Compared to those guys, we here on Wilshire at Little Santa Monica work like ice cream on velvet. If Saddam Hussein has that funny walk and keeps his elbows tight to his sides today, if every time he sees a rose or hears somebody humming a certain tune his breath stops, it's because of a little job we did. No no, I can't name the client. I can't even give you the details. I can only tell you if Velvet Martin Enterprises tops the pops in the Fortune Five Hundred, we have earned it.

Serena? I told you! Gone. Left the company. Right, Serena.

I'm sorry, I can't tell you that. What I can tell you, I can only say that by the time I was done with her, Serena wasn't going to be poaching on anybody else's boyfriend, not then, not ever, and she knew what had happened to her and where it was coming from and there's not one damn thing she can do about it, shit, the bitch can't even prove it. My boyfriend. And if I...

Sit down! Am I scaring you? Man; that's what you're paying for! You better believe you're lucky to be sitting here. You'd better thank your damn stars that you're knee to knee with a professional with enough guts and fire to scare the crap out of you. And that you can afford it.

All right, all right, I know? But would you please lighten up a little?

Meanwhile, elsewhere: It's odd. Now that he's alone in the house again, now that he's downloading the contents of his bulging Filofax on the Bedemeier table, now that he's moving scraps of paper from pile to pile, Whitney Ryder is, not depressed exactly, but thoughtful. On the road to enlightenment. At the moment his train of thought is stalled at a stop midway between suspicion and certainty.

His hands crosshatch the buried wood surface. Whole fucking desk stops being his as of the first. Without having to be told he's finished, Ryder knows he is finished in this town. Still he can't stop moving piles of things to other piles. Sorting. Discarding. This, from Getchell. Nothing, or nothing much.

This from Egil Hoover, forget it.

This, from his money, but he still doesn't know who in hell his money is, much less where were they when his operation went into overcall. All he's got is this phone number printed on a featureless card, that's all, and forget about trying it, they've stopped returning his calls.

When all is said and done, he is left with three items. This, from Maxamar. Note: find out tmw. who bought Maxamar. And, crumpled almost to extinction, a note scrawled on the back of a grocery receipt. Bobby's hand. And on the back of a Visa receipt, Ryder company plastic, this other note. Daphne. Daphne's illegible smudge crosshatched with the handwriting he knows by heart, Daphne and...

They've cleaned him out.

Son of a bitch! Cleaned him out and scared off his money and now he knows that the two of them are sitting there, wherever there is, sitting there laughing at him, the fucking, fucking...

"I gave you the keys to the store. I took you fucking shopping at fucking Armani and now..." He stands up and howls. "Bobby!"

Everything in him solidifies: Whitney Ryder goes cold and hard. He is resolved. Son of a bitch.

Fixed on what he will do to them.

Ms. Martinet, you've been extremely patient. You've told me everything except how you do what you do. But you haven't given me a clue as to how you do it. You...

That's the beauty of our operation. Until you state your problem, that remains to be seen. Our madness always fits the method. Sorry, I don't mean to make light of this.

But I was telling you about me. Remember, this is my business and I am the master of my business. Serena, you know about, but the boyfriend, the man I was writing the picture with t okay, you saw it. My baby, my picture! Big budget, major studio, big time gross exceeding the net and my name nowhere on it, not in the credits, not in the ads, me nowhere near the bank when the fucker that stole my fucking script waltzed in and took the front money and the pickup plus points, believe it! My boyfriend! And me on the outside, like fucking Lazarus. He and Serena pulled my beautiful, make-me-famous property out from under me and sold it like a Persian rug and I... What?

Oh, I took care of Serena.

Him? You don't want to know. Suffice it to say that I've been bidding my time. Wait. My light's blinking. Call I'm expecting.

Oh, Stephanie. Yes. Put him through to my assistant. Get him here and when you get him here... Make him wait.

But I was telling you about me. I bide my time. I am the master of this game and all related operations, and you will note that in spite of my own concerns you have my complete attention.

Nothing that happens here happens accidentally. The boyfriend. My scheme — now you will see precisely how good I am at what I do.

He'll be here — wait a minute, the display on this Itchy and Scratchy watch is hard to read — in about three minutes.

Oh, Stephanie. He is? Fine. He can wait until I'm finished with this client. Then he can wait a little longer. When you think he's about to walk, you can buzz him in.

So he's coming in here, he'll be walking in that door some time after I finish taking your particulars and we have the complimentary champagne to seal our arrangement. He'll come in that door well after I open this one and you leave by the Privileged exit. Right, as a preferred customer, you get primo treatment.

Oh, him?. Listen, if he's here tonight it's in spite of the fact that he's got zero deposit and no hope of a down payment. Ail he's got is the hunger. But I assure you, I will see him.

Pissed, he's going to be, desperate and begging for our services; hooked on his own story and so choked up that he'll sob it out before he even focuses on me. Panting for revenge, you dig? Hung up on the unanswered question.

Not the why, okay. The who. Who was his money, that drew him out on that limb and then pulled it out from under him. And me?

I'm going to look him in the eye and in the second that falls between eye contact and resignation, he will see everything.

He goes, You. And I go:

If you have to ask, you can't afford me.

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By Kit Reed

Kit Reed's recent books include her collection *Weird Women, Wired Women*, and her latest "Kit Craig" thriller *Some Safe Place*. A new collection entitled *Seven for the Apocalypse* is in the works. She says this story arose from a brief flirtation she had with Hollywood, when agents were returning her calls from moving cars and people bought her drinks at the Peninsula Hotel on Little Santa Monica, in the shadow of CAA. All that power, she thought—what if someone unleashed it on a

different sort of cause?