

ONE HIT WONDER

A Jake Diamond Short Story

By

J. L. Abramo

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Down and Out Books, LLC
3959 Van Dyke Rd, Ste. 265
Lutz, FL 33558

Visit our web site at www.DownAndOutBooks.com

J. L. Abramo is the author of *Catching Water in a Net*, *Clutching at Straws* and *Counting to Infinity*, featuring San Francisco private investigator Jake Diamond and published by Down and Out Books. Abramo is a member of the Mystery Writers of America and the Screen Actors Guild. His next book, *Gravesend*, will be available in Spring 2012.

I found myself alone.

The telephone on my desk had beckoned four times.

I was waiting for Darlene Roman to pick up the call. My able assistant was much better at offering salutations, and Darlene had a knack for making it sound as if she were transferring the caller to someone important. On top of that, I might have reminded her, answering calls was one of the things she was being paid to do. But then Darlene might have reminded me that the last time we brought in enough business to earn her a decent pay check, we were still pounding telegraph keys.

I finally realized that I was alone. I grabbed the telephone receiver, guessing that Darlene had ducked out for a quick drink. A carrot smoothie at the health food bar across Columbus Avenue.

I was trying to decide which of the standard greetings I would use; "Diamond Investigation, Jake Diamond speaking" or "You have reached the offices of Diamond Investigation, please leave a detailed message. We will return your call as soon as possible, beep."

Before I could utter either, the caller spoke.

"Do it tonight. You know the address; the studio is on the second floor above the market. The last class lets out at ten. By the time all of the students leave and she gets into her street clothing, it could be close to eleven. She always makes a stop at the newsstand, out toward Jersey Street, for a newspaper, and then she goes to her car. The car will be parked behind the school that I mentioned. It should be the only vehicle back

there, and it will be dark. Make it look like a mugging, and make fucking certain that she's killed. You'll get the other twenty-five grand when the job is done."

I might have told him that he had the wrong number, but the line went dead.

I tried remembering how to get the caller back, how to find out who had dialed our office thinking he had reached his hired assassin of choice. I punched star 80, nothing happened. It was the only number that came to mind, then I realized that I was thinking of a Bob Fosse film.

A woman had been marked for death. I had six hours to find her. Somewhere in San Francisco.

"It's in Noe Valley, Jake," Darlene said confidently, examining the wall map of the city, "Jersey is between 24th and 25th and only runs between Douglass and Dolores."

"We're looking for a studio of some kind. Art class?"

"Could be anything," said Darlene, "ceramics, acting, dance, photography."

"Second floor above a market," I said, "north or south of Jersey Street."

"It could be Douglass, Diamond, Castro, Noe, Sanchez, Church or Dolores," Darlene said, rapidly listing street names.

"That'll narrow it down."

"C'mon, Jake. Stop whining. Excuse me for being melodramatic, but a woman's life is at stake."

"The hit-man didn't get the instructions, Darlene."

"We don't know that, Jake. Maybe the man who called realized his error. And the woman needs to be warned, one way or the other. Sooner or later the guy is going to get her killed," Darlene said, "he must be determined if he's putting up fifty thousand dollars."

"Why don't we just call the police?"

"Think about it, Jake. By the time the SFPD gets into gear, this woman will be pushing up daisies. And that's if they even take you seriously."

"Pushing up daisies?"

"Give me a little slack, Jake. It's almost five, we have to do something."

"Give Vinnie Strings a call, and Joey Russo. Ask them if they can get over here, as soon as possible; we'll split up the area between the four of us and hit the streets."

"I can't help feeling it, Jake, but this is really exhilarating."

"Just what I needed on a Friday afternoon," I said.

We gathered around Darlene's desk, looking down at the Castro District map she had printed off the Internet. Don't ask me how that's done. Joey Russo was out somewhere doing business. His wife Angela sent their son-in-law, Sonny the Chin, in his place.

We decided we would comb the area between Douglass and Dolores Street, from Alvarado to Clipper. We each selected a quadrant, choosing the intersection of Noe and 24th Street as the starting point.

Darlene, Vinnie, Sonny and I climbed into my Toyota and headed for Noe and 24th. Once there, we would all go out into our sectors on foot and come back together after two hours. If any of us found the studio, it would leave two more hours to decide on a plan of action before class let out at ten.

We avoided considering the possibility that the place wouldn't be found.

I took the southwestern quadrant, nine square blocks. There were small markets everywhere, and newsstands up and down from Jersey Street. I walked into each of them, and other businesses along the way, asking about local studios and public schools. A number of visual and performing arts studios were identified, but none which sat directly above a deli or market. The nearest schools were the James Lick Middle School on the north side of 25th off Castro and the After 6 School opposite, but there were others within the boundaries of our hunt.

Undaunted, I plodded on, grabbing a slice of sausage pizza on Douglass Street for sustenance. I could picture Darlene working on a falafel sandwich as she walked Castro. Vinnie would be searching for a double bacon cheeseburger, and Sonny the Chin would be enjoying a moveable feast that his mother-in-law had brown-bagged for him.

I glanced at my Timex. Nearly half past seven and no luck.

I could only hope the others were having more success, and hope the marinara sauce that had dripped from my slice would one day be purged from the front of my vintage City College of New York sweatshirt.

The last place I entered was a wine shop close to the corner of Castro and Jersey. The owner was from the Bronx and, in spite of the sauce stain, he admired my shirt. He

was a fellow City College graduate, who still couldn't get over the 1951 basketball scandal.

He couldn't help with the matter at hand, but he was eager to reminisce and tried his best to sell me a bottle of Cabernet. It was almost eight, so I had to drag myself away. In an attempt to be polite, I handed him one of my business cards.

I spotted Sonny and Darlene when I turned back onto 24th Street. Vinnie was crossing Noe from the east. We crowded together against the strong wind that had come up from the Bay. To passersby, we might have looked as if we were planning to knock off the wine store I had just come out of.

When all of the reports were in, we were huddled at the spot where we had begun with little to show for our efforts.

"What now?" I asked.

"C'mon, Jake, we need a quarterback," said Darlene, "we're running out of time."

"Okay," I said, winging it. "Vinnie take the Toyota; drop Darlene off at the Vallejo Street police station. Try to find Lieutenant Lopez, Darlene; try to convince her that we need help. If she can at least send a few squad cars to cruise the neighborhood, it might scare the guy off. Lopez likes you, maybe she'll bite."

"And if she's not there?" asked Darlene.

"Then look for Sergeant Johnson, but don't mention my name," I said. "Vinnie, you go back to the office and wait there. Maybe, by some miracle, this guy will call again by

mistake. I'm going to stick around down here. Call me on my cell phone if either of you has any good news."

"What can I do, Jake," Sonny asked.

"Call your mother-in-law, Sonny, and ask her to say a novena."

Sonny stayed behind with me. We covered the search area again, circling the blocks as we moved out from the center. We were hoping that we might spot student types arriving for some sort of class. We took opposite sides of each street, checking the doorways to every flat that sat above a market or delicatessen, reading the names on door buzzers for anything that might offer a clue.

Darlene rang my cell phone. She had spoken with Lopez and had sweet talked the Lieutenant into sending the troops out. Lopez said she could only spare two cruisers, but she would have them roll through the area until eleven. Darlene wanted to come back and join us in the search. I told her that I would rather she to go back to the office to check on Vinnie.

It was nearly nine-thirty. Sonny insisted we take a short break for coffee. He suggested that at ten we could go out again, splitting up this time, to look for students letting out.

We sat at the counter of a coffee shop near where we had started. Sonny finally broke the silence.

"Is this your first contract hit?" he asked.

"Very first," I said, playing along.

"The first is always the toughest," Sonny said.

I gave Sonny a hard look.

"You're joking, right?"

"Yes, Jake, I'm joking. What's on your mind?"

"I'm thinking about the phone call. How I stood there listening to this motherfucker in awe. I heard him through without interrupting. Maybe if I'd opened my fucking mouth I could have done something."

The counterman came over to refill our cups.

Sonny took a five-dollar bill from his wallet and placed it on the counter.

"Look, Jake. There's a good chance that the guy never realized that he called the wrong number, in which case the woman should be safe tonight. If you had cut him short, he would probably have set it up with the real assassin. And you wouldn't have heard enough of the details to get us at least this close to the woman. There's still a chance we may find her, it's almost ten, let's go."

We both rose and moved toward the exit.

"It was strange. After I listened to the guy, I felt as if I had actually accepted the contract," I said.

"In a way you have," Sonny said.

We split up outside the coffee shop. The streets were Friday-night busy. Thirty minutes flew by. I saw a squad car moving slowly up Castro Street; it didn't make me feel much better. I pulled out my cell phone to report in with Darlene. I turned it on and it rang immediately.

"Hell, Jake, I've been calling for more than an hour."

"I must have turned the phone off without thinking, what's up?"

"Some guy from a wine store called, said he had some information about a dance class on Noe Street."

The wine store was less than a block away. I quickly thanked Darlene and ran back to the shop.

I skipped the formalities.

"Tell me about the dance class," I said.

"A very nice woman stopped in just before nine, for a bottle of Merlot. I'd never seen her before so I tried to make a little conversation. She was in a hurry. She said that she was a dance instructor, working out of a studio on Noe, and had to get to class. I thought she might be the woman you were looking for."

"Where on Noe?" I asked.

"Right around the corner, between Jersey and 25th."

I ran out.

I looked up and down the street for any sign. It was much quieter here than on Castro. It was ten thirty-five. Finally I spotted it, a small shoe store in the middle of the block. Above the door was a painted sign, displaying the name of the shop.

The Market.

I had no way of reaching Sonny. I debated whether I should simply walk over and try finding my way up into the studio when a woman came out. She was in her mid-twenties and very attractive. I watched as she moved toward Jersey Street. She stopped into the

newsstand and came out with a newspaper under her arm. I followed a safe distance behind as she turned the corner at Jersey, going south.

I looked around to check if anyone else was following. I dug into my jacket pocket and I took hold of the butt of my .38. I had taken it from my desk when we were waiting for Vinnie and Sonny to show up at the office. The woman crossed to the opposite side of Jersey Street and reached into her purse.

Suddenly she was unlocking the door of an automobile parked on the street. The street was comparatively quiet, but it was fairly well lit and there were a good number of pedestrians. I rushed over to the car as she was climbing in. She quickly closed the door, locked it and started the engine. I stood looking at her through the car window. I must have appeared either harmless or pathetic, because she rolled down her window and spoke.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Do you teach a dance class over on Noe?"

"That would be Mrs. Landers; she probably came out of the building right after me. I'm one of her students. Is there something wrong?"

"Where does she park her car?" I asked.

"Over on 25th, behind the Middle School."

Then I was running back toward 25th and Castro Street, my hand deep inside my pocket, still clutching the grip of the thirty-eight.

I caught sight of a woman walking into the driveway alongside the school building. I took off after her. I had unconsciously pulled my hand from my pocket. I held my arm at

my side, weapon in hand. I came into the small parking area behind the school. It was unlit. The woman was moving to the solitary BMW parked there.

I heard a sound from the opposite side of the car and I raised my arm.

"Mrs. Landers," I called.

She stopped and turned. She looked at my extended arm and then into my eyes.

"Are you going to shoot me?" she asked.

"No," I said, moving quickly toward the car.

"Jake," a voice called from behind the BMW, "it's Sonny."

I saw Sonny's arms come up over the roof and then he stood.

"I called Darlene and spoke with the wine store guy," said Sonny, "followed this woman from the studio and came in from the back in case anyone was waiting."

"Would someone please tell me what's going on?" Mrs. Landers said.

Then we all turned toward the flashing lights and siren of the police cruiser coming up the driveway.

It was nearly midnight. We were sitting outside of Lopez's office at the Vallejo Street Police Station, waiting for the Lieutenant to finish with Sarah Landers.

Lopez had not seemed very happy about having to be there at that hour.

Lopez came out with Landers, asked the woman to take a seat in the hallway and then ushered me and Sonny into her office.

"Sit," she said.

"What do you know, Lieutenant?" I asked.

"Not much," Lopez said, "the woman is a bit eccentric. She's loaded with money; made a bundle dancing on Broadway and in movies. Retired, moved out here, and teaches dance for the love of it, and she can't imagine why anyone would want her killed."

"That kind of thing takes a lot of imagination," Sonny said, "does she have a husband?"

"It was my first thought. She's a widow," said Lopez. "I asked her who she supposed might benefit from her death, she wouldn't even consider it."

"So, what now?" I asked. "Whoever has it in for her is going to try again."

"Not much I can do, Diamond," Lopez said, "I can put a tail on her for a few days, tops. Maybe the guy will call you back, ask you how you fucked it up."

"Cute."

"I have an idea," Sonny said, "but I doubt that either of you will like it."

"Go ahead," said Lopez with little passion.

Sonny was right. We weren't crazy about his idea. For lack of better one, we decided to give it a shot.

Lopez led me and Sonny out of her office and then she escorted Sarah Landers back in.

The call from Lopez woke me before eight the next morning. So much for sleeping in late on a Saturday.

Lieutenant Lopez had come down hard on Sarah Landers the second go around. She learned that the woman had one child, a son who stood to inherit everything. Lopez told me that she scared the crap out of the woman with talk of obstruction of justice. Lopez warned Landers that if she tried reaching her son, who was now formally a suspect in a conspiracy to commit homicide, she risked imprisonment. Landers was told not to answer her home telephone.

It was a colossal bluff, Lopez figuring Sarah Landers could not reach a lawyer before nine on a Saturday morning for consultation. The Lieutenant had a uniformed officer drive Landers to her home and stay outside the house; the BMW remained where it had been parked in the school lot.

Lopez then called the son, reporting that a late model BMW had been discovered abandoned behind a school building. There was no sign of its owner, who had been identified by the vehicle registration as Sarah Landers. The woman could not be reached at her home address. The car would be held at the city auto impound until someone came to claim it.

"Did he sound mildly concerned?' I asked.

"He gave it a good try, he asked if there was anything that he could do," said Lopez. "I asked him to phone me as soon as he heard from his mother, and I said we would phone him if we heard anything. Got a pencil?"

"Go ahead," I said.

I jotted down the son's number.

"I'm at my office, Diamond. I'll be hunched over my telephone waiting for your call."

"Don't hurt yourself, Lieutenant" I said, and ended the connection.

When the dial tone came back, I punched in the number that Lopez had given me.

After three rings a man answered.

"Time to settle up," I said.

"What the fuck happened, they didn't find her body?"

"They will, eventually, I took her for a little ride. Do you have the cash?"

"Yes."

"Meet me in an hour. The Home Plate on Lombard, I'll be at the counter. Don't be fucking late."

"How will I know you?" he asked.

I was very glad to hear that he had to ask.

"I'll wear a fucking carnation," I said, "I'll know you. Don't make me fucking wait."

I hung up. I called Lopez.

I sat at the counter of the Home Plate Diner drinking coffee and glancing out the front window waiting for Daniel Landers to arrive.

Before long, a car pulled up and double-parked across the street. I watched as he climbed out from the passenger side, carrying a large brown envelope. A woman behind the wheel rolled down her window to say something to him as he started to cross. I

recognized the driver; I had followed her from the dance studio to her car the night before.

Landers walked in and I waved him over. He sat at the stool beside me. He placed the envelope on the countertop without looking at my eyes. I asked if he needed a receipt and he shuddered. He was about to get up when Lopez walked in. It was the first time I had seen her out of a business suit. She looked good.

"Daniel Landers," she said, slapping handcuffs on him in the blink of an eye, "you are under arrest on suspicion of conspiracy in an attempt to commit murder. You have the right to remain silent, I hope you do. You have the right to an attorney; I would not recommend using your mother's attorney. If you cannot afford a lawyer, we'll see what we can do."

"Lopez," I said, as Landers stood frozen in disbelief, "there's a gal in the Pontiac across the street who you may want to talk with."

Lopez took out her two-way radio and called Sergeant Johnson. She told him to pick up the woman in the Pontiac before we came out. I saw Johnson's unmarked Ford pull up beside the other car less than a minute later.

Dan Landers confessed the moment they got him over to Vallejo Street. He claimed that it was her idea, the girl in the Pontiac. He'd met her a few months earlier when he picked his mother up from the studio, one of Sarah Lander's dance students. They began

to see a lot of each other and before too long she was filling Dan's head with visions of a rosy and financially secure future for the two of them.

Daniel Lander's had no idea who the hired gun was. He had dropped word here and there that he was looking for one and someone contacted him. Landers had deposited the first twenty-five thousand at a drop the previous Sunday night, a trash barrel at the corner of California and Van Ness. The only phone number Landers had was the number for my office, Daniel had apparently written it down incorrectly. Without the contract killer it would be a tough case to prosecute, but the experience would certainly discourage Landers from trying anything like it again and perhaps give his mother reason to reconsider the provisions of her last will and testament.

And that was that.

Or so I thought.

Five days later, late Thursday night, I arrived at my apartment from a pinochle game at the Pacific Heights home of a fellow PI. As I pushed the key into the door lock, I felt what could only be the barrel of a handgun pressed up against the back of my head.

"Don't fucking turn around," the voice said.

"Not a chance," I said.

"Word has it that you cost me twenty-five grand, Mr. Diamond, and that really fucking upsets me."

"It wasn't my intention," I said.

"Nevertheless."

"Look at it this way; you *made* twenty-five thousand without having to kill an innocent woman."

"In my business, Diamond," he said, "that is little consolation. If you ever try pulling something like that again, intended or not, you will find yourself at the top of my fucking list. Contract work is getting difficult to come by these days, and I won't have someone pinching any of the few jobs that still trickle my way."

"Don't worry, it was my first and last hit," I said.

I felt the gun barrel move away from my head.

I finally found the courage to turn around.

I found myself alone.

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