

"IN THE BELLY OF THE FAT MAN"

FADE IN:

EXT. LOS ANGELES HARBOR - NIGHT

A large freighter is anchored under a full moon. MEN work in well-choreographed movements to get the cargo aboard the ship as quickly as possible. Two cranes maneuver heavy wooden crates from the dock to the ship.

Despite all this activity, it is deathly quiet.

TWO GUARDS stand at the end of the pier. Both Chinese men are large and intimidating, and carry guns in shoulder holsters worn over sleeveless undershirts that show off their huge muscles and colorful tatoos.

The guards turn to the sound of footsteps. The approaching SILHOUETTE strides confidently towards them, and they instinctively reach for their guns.

The visitor passes under a light and this reveals his face. Both guards quickly remove their hands from their weapons and take a step back.

TOMMY (V. O.)

I despise Los Angeles, but now and then, I get involved in something that makes living there tolerable.

TOMMY OHNO, 31, is tall and lean with intense eyes that immediately find your weaknesses. His handsome, but scarred face hints at stories that his mouth will never tell.

The guards nod at Tommy, avoid eye contact, and allow him to walk past their post and towards the freighter.

INT. HARBOR MASTER'S OFFICE - NIGHT

CHENG and YU look up from their manifests when Tommy enters. They are extremely well dressed and look like they belong in a board room on Park Avenue rather than in a grimy shack a few feet from the Pacific Ocean.

CHENG

Greetings, Tommy Ohno.

Cheng and Yu offer friendly smiles, but Tommy's mouth remains locked in a scowl.

TOMMY

Gentlemen.

(he nods a greeting)

I appreciate your contacting me
about your last minute cargo.

Tommy places two thick stacks of hundred dollar bills on the desk in front of his hosts.

CHENG

We assume this man thought that
your boss' lack of respect for our
organization would guarantee his
safe passage.

(to Yu)

What did his employer call us?

YU

Inbred, slanty-eyed slopes.

The Chinese men look to Tommy for a reaction, but Tommy's face remains frozen.

TOMMY

It's comforting that you can put
your feelings aside long enough to
take his money.

Cheng and Yu tuck away the money in the inside pockets of their jackets, thereby revealing the guns that are holstered just beneath their hearts.

CHENG

He's in the crew quarters, and I
must warn you: he's hired a couple
of hard core Mainlanders to make
sure he gets to China.

TOMMY

Just a couple?

Tommy finally smiles. Cocky. Confident.

INT. FREIGHTER'S CREW QUARTERS - NIGHT

Tommy strides down the narrow hall. TWO BODYGUARDS stand in front of the door at the end of the hall.

TOMMY (V. O.)
 Some people call me a bounty
 hunter. I think of myself as an
 idiot wrangler.

The bodyguards look at Tommy, clearly confused by the presence of a Caucasian in this part of the ship.

TOMMY
 (in Cantonese)
 There's been a change. The man is
 coming with me.
 (the men are confused)
 Hurry. The captain is preparing to
 set sail.

BODYGUARD
 (in Cantonese)
 We don't open this door until the
 ship leaves American waters.

TOMMY
 Fine. Let's do it the hard way.

Tommy punches the first man in the throat, and the man clutches at his neck as he gasps for air.

The second bodyguard comes at Tommy, heavy Kung Fu style.

Tommy bobs and weaves to avoid the flying fists and feet of fury. He then connects with a right hook to the man's nose. As the man staggers, Tommy runs at him, slamming his head into the steel door of the cabin.

The first man finally catches his breath, but Tommy drives an elbow into his nose and sends him sprawling to the floor.

Tommy stands over both men, checking for signs of movement, but detecting none. He takes a deep breath. Once he has centered himself, he tries the handle to the cabin.

The handle turns. Tommy opens the door and enters.

INT. CREW CABIN - CONTINUOUS

VICTOR ZAMBINI stares up at Tommy from the tiny bed with obvious fear in his eyes.

ZAMBINI
 Oh no!

INT. ITALIAN RESTAURANT - DAY

Red checkered table cloths. Bad paintings of Italian landmarks hang slightly crooked on the wall. Frank Sinatra plays over an ancient sound system.

Only the table furthest from the door is occupied.

TOMMY (V.O.)

I work for Joey Twopennyopera, a transplanted New Yorker who shares my hatred for this city, but loves taking its money.

Tommy sits at the table with GEORGIE, 35, an enormous man in a designer sweat suit, and JOEY TWOPENNYOPERA, 45, a man with thick eyeglasses and a fancy suit with the tie undone and a napkin shoved into his collar.

JOEY

(Brooklyn accent)

So the bastard tried to sail to the land of the rising chink inside a freighter full of stolen cars?

The WAITER appears, places a large bowl of spaghetti in front on Joey, and then quickly disappears.

Georgie reaches under the table and produces a leather satchel that looks like an old doctor's bag.

Joey smells the pasta.

JOEY

Basil. Black pepper.

Georgie pulls the appropriate spice bottles from the bag and hands them to Joey.

JOEY

You want to know what that asshole did that I sent you after him?

Joey adds the spices to his pasta.

TOMMY

If you want to tell.

JOEY

He tried to welch on fifty grand worth of bad pony bets. I sent one of the regular boys after him, and this prick shot him.

Joey shakes his head in disgust as he spins his spoon in the spaghetti and takes a giant mouthful.

TOMMY

Now I understand why you asked me to get involved.

Joey slams his spoon down on the table, and takes a large sip from his glass of red wine.

JOEY

Why can't they make pasta in California? Swear to Christ, if I didn't run this town, I'd be on the next plane back to New York to spend the rest of my life going from restaurant to restaurant in Little Italy.

(to Georgie)

Give me the garlic.

Georgie pulls a clove of fresh garlic from the satchel along with a tiny knife and cutting board.

TOMMY

You have something else?

Joey nimbly slices the garlic and then slides the sliced garlic off of the cutting board and into his bowl of pasta.

JOEY

You know that detective?

TOMMY

The one who couldn't pick a winner if only one team were playing?

Joey nods and puts a spoonful of spaghetti into his mouth.

JOEY

(with mouth full)

I'm giving him a chance to wipe his slate. Go to his office, and he'll give you the details.

(Tommy gets up)

Not yet. Georgie has to call him first. I don't want him to see you coming and go ape shit that I sent you to collect.

EXT. DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - DAY

Tommy walks through a sea of people who are too obsessed with themselves and their cell phone conversations to notice him.

Tommy looks at them all with disgust as he enters an office building.

INT. LUDDIE'S OFFICE - DAY

Tommy raps on the semi-opened door that has the words "PRIVATE DETECTI" painted on it.

LUDDIE (O.S.)

Come in.

Tommy taps the door with his foot so that it swings open all the way. He checks for surprises before he enters.

Sunlight beats through the uneven louver blinds that cover the windows behind a beat-up iron desk. There are two unmatched chairs in front of the desk and a plastic covered couch pushed against the far wall.

LUDDIE

I'd recommend one of the chairs.
The plastic on the couch gets real sticky on sunny days.

LUDDIE SHAARPE is in his late forties, tall and skinny, with wild hair and a wrinkled brown suit that's been out of style for at least a decade.

TOMMY

I'm Tommy Ohno.

LUDDIE

Yeah, I know.

Luddie smiles nervously, and when he does, his big eyes seem like they are going to pop out of their sockets.

TOMMY

Are you Luddie?

LUDDIE

Christ! Where are my manners?

Luddie comes out from behind the desk and offers his hand. His pants are too short and reveal white sweat socks worn with his scuffed black loafers.

TOMMY

What kind of name is that?

Tommy sits without shaking Luddie's hand. Luddie scampers back behind his desk.

LUDDIE

Short for Ludwig. My mom thought if she named me after Beethoven, I'd become a concert pianist.

TOMMY

She must be proud of how things turned out then.

Tommy scans the office. The only other items in the room are two filing cabinets and a dead potted plant.

LUDDIE

Did Joey explain the situation?

TOMMY

He said you'd do that.

LUDDIE

He did tell you that if I did this, he'd wipe out my debt, right?

Luddie drums his fingers nervously on the desk. Tommy just stares back at him with his same poker face.

TOMMY

Just get to the job, Luddie.

Luddie nods and gives a nervous, eye-popping smile.

LUDDIE

Our client is Roderick Theysen, one of the richest men in Los Angeles. The guy's close to Joey. I don't know how, and I don't want to know, but he had something stolen, and he doesn't trust anyone but Joey to help him get it back.

Tommy scowls as he shifts in his uncomfortable chair, and Luddie throws up his hands like this isn't his idea.

LUDDIE

I know. You find people, not things, but Theysen needs the thing back pronto with as little publicity as possible.

TOMMY

Why don't you find it?

Luddie laughs and drums his fingers on the desk again.

LUDDIE

I'm better at losing things.
Usually money, and most likely at a
sporting event.

(a weak smile)

I'm just the front. If the press
gets wind of this, the Theysens can
honestly tell them that my firm,
and not LA's most infamous mobster,
is handling the investigation.

Tommy stares across at the poorly dressed, wild haired, bug-eyed man, and finally shows him a smile.

TOMMY

Imagine the field day the press
corps would have with a handsome
devil like you.

LUDDIE

It's crossed my mind. I think it's
in everyone's best interest if you
keep this investigation very quiet.

TOMMY

Where do I start?

LUDDIE

Go here.

(hands him a slip of
paper)

Theysen's daughter will fill you in
on the details.

TOMMY

His daughter?

Luddie shrugs as Tommy looks at the paper. Tommy rolls his eyes when he realizes where he's going.