

CONOR WOODMAN

**THE SCAM
HUNTER**

**UNDERCOVER WITH THE WORLD'S MOST
EXTREME SCAMS, CRIMINALS AND GANGS**

SAMPLE CHAPTERS



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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CONTENTS

Prologue	1
1 Crystal Clear	5
2 The Artist	37
3 Welcome to Mollywood	67
4 Oh Danny Boy	107
5 Cannabis Cam	135
6 Santa Muerte	157
7 Tariq from Hebron	183
8 Johnny and Mariella	213
9 Shaky Ground	245
Epilogue	265
Acknowledgements	279
About the Author	281

PROLOGUE

TONY SOPRANO. WHAT a guy. For eight years the world fell in love with the titular character from the hit HBO show and his gang of ill-doing friends. My brother was so seduced that he once confessed to me that he went through a phase of dealing with stressful situations by first asking himself, ‘What would Tony do?’ He’s a doctor.

Criminal/gangster stories are one of the most enduring and popular genres in fiction. Whether in literature or TV and film, we are fascinated by characters who engage in nefarious deeds. Increasingly, plots glorify the rise and fall of a criminal, gang, murderer or thief and dwell on their personal power struggles with rivals or the law. Fictional criminals are portrayed on the surface as materialistic, street-smart, immoral, megalomaniacal and even self-destructive, but at the same time we are asked to believe that underneath they’re also able to express sensitivity and gentleness.

But is this anything like the reality?

Four years ago I began making documentary films about crime, first for the National Geographic channel and then for ITV and the BBC. In all, I’ve made around

THE SCAM HUNTER

thirty films about criminals of all shapes and sizes all over the world. I'm talking about the thieves, the drug dealers, the kidnappers, the rapists, the conmen, the counterfeiter and the smugglers who earn their money by operating on the wrong side of the law.

I wanted to know not just who these people were but to find out what they were about. What made them tick. Does crime really pay? Do they do it for the money or is there something else that motivates them? And how does a person sleep at night when they have taken from another with seemingly little concern for their well-being? How does the real criminal stack up against the one on HBO?

I travelled between the world's greatest cities on the hunt for the latest crimes and the criminals behind them. I particularly targeted the kind of crimes that you and I, or any tourist or business traveller, could fall foul of, and I was determined always not to dwell on the petty criminals for too long but rather to follow the chain of command as high as I could.

Today it may sometimes seem as though all crime has gone 'online' and that the most dangerous criminals are lurking in our email inbox but my experiences suggested that this is far from the case. My travels all too often resulted in me coming face to face with some extremely dangerous and unpleasant individuals who very much operate in the 'real' world.

PROLOGUE

There's often an assumption that criminals are somehow less intelligent than the wider public but my experiences suggest quite the opposite. The one thing most of the criminals I've met have in common is confidence. Whether this confidence is in their talent or their guile or simply their strength, many of these people are in no doubt that they are good at what they do. But that strength of character makes for a very good interviewee. My previous book *Unfair Trade* looked at how Big Business exploits workers around the world and also how, by banging an ethical label on their products, it simultaneously fooled us all into thinking they weren't. I'm curious about rip-offs. In order to research my films and this book the way I wanted to, I had to learn to be the rip-off merchant's best friend.

If you have ever wondered about criminal behaviour too, then the chances are that you are one of the millions of people who have been a victim of a crime, or who know someone close to you who has been, because it is people like you and me that they target. These men – and they nearly are always men – seek out people like us because we have money. If you're looking for something to take away, this book could be read as a manual for how to protect yourself from them.

This was a difficult book to write. Many of the films I have made over the years about criminals were done

THE SCAM HUNTER

with the help of cameramen and producers who shared the burden of the work. I have to thank them for supporting me on this journey. Films are unfortunately by nature very time-limited and often we must pick only the best soundbite to represent an individual. But I have revisited the interviews I conducted with these fascinating characters and I'm happy that here I can afford them much more time to tell their stories. In the cold light of day, the stark brutality of their words has forced me to think of them again and wonder if they are still out there. I often call these predators sharks for that is how I see them: cold-blooded, calculating, circling around, waiting for the first sign of weakness to launch an attack. I want you to know where they lurk and how to spot them. The thought that you now are reading this does at least give me some comfort. With any luck, you'll pay heed, and that makes one fewer person I need to worry about.

CRYSTAL CLEAR

‘Happy Mardi Gras, sweetie’

LIKE MANY TOURIST towns, New Orleans, or Nawlins as the locals know it, enjoys basking in its former glory. Although during Mardi Gras it doesn't so much bask as strip off, douse itself in oil, pour a cocktail and sprawl out naked under the hot glaring sun of its former glory. During the world's largest street parade, Nawlins is a suntanned, drunken, naturist of a town.

As with most drunks, Nawlins also has a few aliases, presumably for when other towns come looking for their money. It is variously known as the Big Easy, the City that Care Forgot, the birthplace of jazz or even the most northerly city in the Caribbean. Call it what you want, there is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. The city was once the largest slave trading port on the planet, which may explain now why it has a unique demographic of 60 per cent black and 30 per cent white inhabitants.

With the bottom having finally dropped out of the slavery market, New Orleans reinvented itself as a rival

for Las Vegas as the USA's number one Sin City. Tourism is now by far the city's largest industry. Despite being ravaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, over 10 million visitors flock here every year, over a million of whom come for one week in February to get down and dirty, real dirty.

The celebrations for Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday if you prefer to *parler anglais*, begin to build over a four-week period beginning on the Feast of the Epiphany. In the last week, the party reaches a crescendo when parades and floats ride along the main thoroughfare, St Charles Street to Bourbon Street, the notorious centre of the downtown district known as the French Quarter.

I've arrived in New Orleans in the middle of the chaos. It's a week before Mardi Gras and the party is beginning to warm up. The locals tell me that every night from now on will be crazier than the one before until the craziest night of them all on Fat Tuesday.

I'm pretty sure that with a million tourists in town, I'm going to find it easy to get in trouble. Which is exactly what I'm here for. I imagine the street hustlers of the south see Mardi Gras the same way lions see the great migration of the Serengeti: feeding time.

There's one line of trouble in particular that I've read about on the margins of the press. Unsurprisingly, this being Nawlins n'all, it goes by a few different names. Some call it Cajun Bingo, most know it as the Razzle

Dazzle but the details are pretty sketchy. I know that it involves high-stakes gambling and that in the last twenty-five years it's only come to light in the media once – after a bust in 2004.

Rumours have it that the game is played in kiosks along the carnival route, others have it in back rooms in the French Quarter. Some say its dealers use a rigged board on which punters place bets. Many say the rules involve dice or marbles thrown onto the board and the rules broadly follow that of an American Football game where a player rolls to gain yards. But it's in the conversion of the dice score into yards that the scam comes in: it involves deciphering an unfathomably complicated conversion chart. A good dealer can easily exploit the mental arithmetic required so as to bamboozle a player into believing he is going to win right up to the point where he loses. Punters have reportedly lost tens of thousands of dollars in a single night.

The operators of the ring, which got busted in 2004, were paying strippers and bouncers to identify drunken targets, known as marks. They were paying them to introduce potential marks to the game they were running in a back room behind a store on Bourbon Street.

After a string of complaints by victims, the Louisiana State Police and FBI began investigating the address on Bourbon Street. Undercover state troopers, posing as marks, infiltrated the game and eventually produced

evidence suggesting it was being ‘protected’ by New Orleans police department officers.

The two perpetrators running the game were arrested and convicted. The shop owner was Mitchell Schwartz, a ninety-three-year-old serial conman and classic old-school ‘wise guy’, with a rap sheet that stretched back to 1930. His accomplice was Terrence ‘Scotty’ Border, a well-known ‘carny’ with fifteen aliases, five Social Security numbers and convictions in at least seven states. Scotty had grown up touring the South with his family’s carnival before he settled in New Orleans.

Schwartz died on the day of sentencing having pleaded guilty. Border was sentenced to thirty-six months’ probation on the federal conspiracy charge and a further eight months in prison for racketeering and illegal possession of drugs.

Four officers were suspended from duty and never returned. Efforts to track them down have all turned up nothing. One source told me that I’d never find them: ‘They’ve left the state. You might as well write them off as dead.’

Since then there has been no coverage of the Razzle in the press or the Internet. Although rumours circulate about its continued existence.

I decide to start my search in the heart of the Quarter. It’s early on Friday morning the weekend before Mardi Gras

but already the bars along Bourbon Street are pumping out music and cocktails. The hand grenade is the drink of choice here. It's so called because it's served in a green grenade-shaped cup. Although I suspect the real reason for the name is the effect it has inside your brain after you've drunk one. The exact ingredients are a closely guarded secret, which lends itself to accusations that it's made from petrol and napalm. They say a 'good one' should be served over ice, taste of melon and contain gin, rum and vodka. Either way, the sight of so many of them at this time of the morning is beginning to turn my stomach a little.

Just off Bourbon is Jackson Square; a pedestrianised area perched on the edge of the Quarter, just a stone's throw from the Mississippi. The cobbled paving stones around its north side line a busy thoroughfare for tourists, the perfect spot for street hustlers to pick off their prey. I'm on the lookout for an 'in' with some of the sketchier folk in town and I suspect some of the best connections come from those who peddle their scams out in the open. The street hustlers on Jackson Square immediately catch my eye – they are practitioners of the dark arts.

I make my way along the black railings that separate the gardens from the path, checking out the colourful signs that display the names of the individuals sat behind them. Some of their names are as colourful as the signs: Madame Clara, Zorba the Gypsy, Mistress

Mariam. Each one seems to look up mysteriously as I pass by while drawing me in with a variety of offers. 'Hey, Handsome,' says Mariam as I look down her list of services: tarot, palm, aura and even crystal ball. 'Care for a reading?'

I take a seat opposite her at a small camping table. On top of the tie-dyed purple tablecloth there are several packs of tarot cards, a variety of different coloured crystals and a large crystal ball. Mariam is an unusual-looking woman. She has all the elements needed to be conventionally pretty – large blue eyes, thick long dark hair, and an exotic olive complexion – and yet, she is not pretty. Her eyes are shrouded by a heavy monobrow, her teeth have rotted away in a manner that suggests she may have an unhealthy appetite for methyl amphetamine and under the tan are pockmarks in her skin that betray a less than salubrious past. When she addresses me, I notice that Mariam speaks with a distinct lisp, which sounds like the rasp of a snake.

She runs through the sales pitch, pointing out all the ways in which she can gaze into my future. I decide to plump for a tarot reading. An old roommate of mine at college used to read tarot as a bit of a party trick and I always quite enjoyed the showmanship of the display. 'Pick a deck,' she says, laying out the various creepy-looking sets of cards in front of me. 'The cards you pick are very important. Go with your instinct.'

Mariam begins to deal the cards I've chosen into four quadrants. She explains they describe past love, present love, future love and future life. I don't need a fortune-teller to tell me my past love life is a disaster area and my present one isn't looking much better. Anyone could see from the lack of a wedding ring on my finger that I'm at best unmarried, at worst divorced. But it's when she reaches the point of describing my future that I sit up and listen.

Mariam sees a strong woman in my future. She is the woman I will marry. Can she tell me anything about her? 'She has a successful career,' says Mariam. 'And children, she already has children.'

Wow, that's a really specific prediction. I used to go out with a woman who had children and it was such a car crash that I vowed never to attempt anything like it again. But Mariam has channelled the power of the occult and she seems pretty certain of it. Furthermore, she says I'm going to live to ninety, have two kids of my own and make enough but not a lot of money. I'll take that. Mariam's made me feel pretty good about my future and I'm happy to hand over the twenty-five dollars she asks for. Actually, she asked for a donation of between twenty-five and a hundred dollars, which means twenty-five in my book. But presumably she already knew that.

Next up is Zorba, who explains to me that he is fifth-generation gypsy and then warns me that the married

woman with whom I am having an affair (I'm not) is trouble. Zorba seems genuinely concerned for me while he explains that this woman's husband can do me some serious harm if he finds out about us. He then predicts that I'll live to over a hundred years old and have three children. He must be confident that I'll take his advice and avoid the jealous husband.

Two more readings with New Orleans's tarot community give me life up to eighty and then eighty-five, no children and then four children, a long and happy marriage and then two divorces. By the time I finish, I'm beginning to realise that every now and again I do hear things that ring a little true. A little selective listening and you could believe whatever you wanted to.

I hear from three different readers that I am destined to do a lot of travelling in the near future, a couple tell me that my family is unsettled by the illness of a close family member (also true) and all of them are certain that I am going to be very busy with work over the next twelve months, which as I look at my upcoming work schedule right now can be corroborated in clear black and white.

Couldn't all of these 'predictions' just as easily be astute observations? I have an English accent and am therefore a traveller. It's not a stretch to guess that I might be travelling again before too long. The fact that I'm travelling and the way I'm dressed might give away

that I am not poor. Add to that my age and that I'm not married and you could deduce that I might be busy with work. The sick relative I struggle a little more to find explanation for, but maybe it's a calculated percentage guess. Maybe most of us have a sick relative somewhere at any particular time.

As I'm handing over another twenty-five dollars, I'm suddenly grabbed from behind. A strong firm grasp. An unknown hand has taken hold of my shoulder and is pulling me away. My first reaction is that I'm being attacked so I struggle to try to move away but the grip is so tight that I can do nothing to stop myself being dragged around the corner. Once I stop struggling and allow myself to find my feet, I find that I'm standing opposite a man aged perhaps fifty with a tinge of grey in his hair. He is shorter than me and as he turns to face me, I am struck by the state of his nose. It has obviously been broken several times and has a huge scar that looks like it was split open and then stitched back together using a needle and twine – and probably by himself without the use of a mirror. This guy is a fighter and he is angry.

We are now alone, out of sight of the tarot readers and other tourists. He begins to interrogate me as to why I have had four readings in the space of an hour. Nobody does that, he points out. I must have a reason. Who am I? he demands. I evaluate the situation. Despite being twenty years older than me, this guy looks like he could

easily kill me. He's been watching me and there's no denying that I've already blown my cover. I can't think of any reason to lie to him so I gamble that I may flush something out by coming clean.

I reveal to him why I'm here – I'm in Nawlins for Mardi Gras and I'm investigating some of the scams and hustles that visitors might fall prey to while they're in town. The man's eyes narrow as he takes it all in. Then his face transforms from anger to curiosity, back to anger and eventually settles on outright rage. He lurches forward to grab me again but I step back. He continues to come towards me shouting the whole time while I continue to back away. 'This is my sandpit.' He spits at me. 'You little monkey. You don't piss in my sandpit. Understand?' This is not going according to plan. I open my arms wide and plaintively explain that I mean him no harm, I'm not with the police, I only want to talk. I pull out all the big guns from my charm arsenal but to no avail. It's time to cut my losses and retreat to safety. I hurry my pace and walk away. Eventually he stops following.

Later that evening I'm out for a walk and decide to try my luck again. There's a guy standing on the corner of Jackson and Decatur in a top hat and tails. He's spinning a coin through his fingers and in front of him is the telltale magician's collapsible green felt table. Up close, I

can see he has one blue and one brown eye. As if he was ever going to take up any other career.

We exchange the usual ‘where are you from’s and ‘is this your first time’s that form part of the hustler vernacular. I give all the right answers to reassure him that I’m an ordinary Joe just begging to be taken for a ride, which seems to work because he cranks up the routine and begins to spin my head around like a whirling dervish with a few coin tricks. Before I know it, the coin is coming out of every orifice and the magician is grinning like a cat with a mouse that has given up trying to get away.

I’m happy that he’s having fun but something tells me that this magician has a few more tricks up his sleeve so I ask him if it isn’t time we made this a little ‘interesting’? His smile drops instantly and his eyes begin to scan nervously up and down the street before he returns his gaze and fixes it again on mine. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he says, calm again, forcing the smile back up onto his face. He’s going to make me beg?

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Let’s play some cards.’

Most street magicians the world over have a version of the Three-Card Monte. Many use cards in a game called Find the Queen, others use matchstick boxes and a ball and call it Find the Pea, but the premise is the same: three choices, pick the right one and you win double your stake, pick either of the other two and you lose. In the right hands, you always lose.

The magician produces a deck of cards from stage left and with a deft hand he fans the pack out before selecting a queen and two numbered cards. He flips them face up onto the felt for my benefit. He then turns them over again and then slowly but surely he begins to switch them over and over. He's not doing it particularly quickly, quickly enough to make me pay attention but not so quick as to lose me. With a final flourish he drops the last card down. It should be easy to pick out the queen. All things being equal, the two numbered cards are on the outside. I pull out ten dollars from my wallet and drop it on the middle card. Of course I'm not surprised when he reveals I've selected badly – Six of Clubs. The queen is on his left-hand side. But I am surprised when he hands me back my ten dollars. 'A demonstration only,' he says firmly.

Any man who gives back his ill-gotten gains is a man I instantly trust. It doesn't happen to me very often. The magician and I introduce ourselves. Xan tells me he has been working the streets of Nawlins for several years. Before that, that he was a dealer at the casino and sometimes even moonlighted at private games for high-rollers blowing through town. The organisers of those games would often enlist magic men to deal the cards in a way that, let's say, 'favoured' the house. 'Things got pretty heavy there,' he says. That's why he went back to the street – safer. Safer than ending up in the river anyhow.

This is exactly the kind of break I've been looking for. A way into the higher-stakes stuff and possibly even the Razzle. I ask Xan if he's ever heard of the Razzle Dazzle. But then everything changes.

Xan begins to fold up his table quickly. He's shaking his head and he's broken off all eye contact. 'Man,' he says in a deflated voice like I've just claimed to be the father of his kids. 'You don't even want to be asking about that around here. That's just bad news.'

I place my hand on the table to try to stop him leaving. 'Just one more game,' I implore. 'Then I promise I'll leave and you won't see me again.'

Xan shakes his head again and places his upturned top hat on the table while he rubs his ruffled brow. He looks at me quizzically as if to ask 'Why am I helping you?' I drop a folded fifty-dollar note into the hat to help him out with that. 'A demonstration only,' I say. He leaves the fifty in the hat and replaces it on his head. He begins to talk again as he shuffles the cards and asks me to take one and look at it. I do that. Ace of Clubs.

'Listen,' he says, 'I like you but you gotta know that game's bad news. I heard stories about guys having guns put to their heads until they play long enough to lose and worse.'

'What could be worse?'

'Nobody knows how many people are buried in that river, my friend. Take my advice: find another game.'

And with that, Xan shakes my hand, folds the table under his arm and disappears into the shadows of Jackson Square. I head back towards Bourbon Street to get a drink. It's been a long day, I've found some evidence that the Razzle still exists but I'm no closer to tracking down an actual game and besides, I've got nothing but sick relatives and stepchildren to look forward to when I get home.

As I'm walking back towards the Quarter, I reach into my pocket for my phone to check my messages. But the phone isn't the only thing that comes out of my pocket. Fluttering down to the ground is a blue playing card. I pick it up and turn it over – it's the Ace of Clubs and written across it are the words: 'Blue Note Bar. Tomorrow. 7p.m.'

The Blue Note Bar is a two-room dive just fifty yards off the main drag, which is far enough to mean it's quiet. When I arrive there's a couple of waifs and strays at the bar who look like they've come for a few minutes' respite from the relentless revelry of the Mardi Gras. I order a rum and lime and take a seat. This feels weird. I've been on a couple of blind dates in my life but never set up by a magician.

A tall gangly-looking sort of guy comes and sits next to me at the bar. He's dressed up for the party in a bright blue top hat and red and white striped tails. He's

a regular Uncle Sam. He orders whiskey, loudly, and gets into a conversation with the girl next to him about some ball that's going on across town. I'm so distracted by it that I almost don't notice the stool next to me is taken by another girl. By the look of her, she's alone.

I introduce myself and she tells me her name is Mel. She's an attractive woman, mid-to-late twenties with a tumble of dark curls that match her eyes. I offer to buy her a drink and she asks the bartender for a gin and tonic and two shots of tequila which have barely hit the back of our throats when she asks him to line up another two. That's five drinks. In less than two minutes.

The bar has two large windows that open out directly on to the street. They're framed by wooden shutters that I guess are typical of most of the buildings in the old French Quarter. It's a pleasantly warm evening and Mel and I are on the stools nearest to them. Our conversation flows easily until it is interrupted by the unmistakable sound of gunshots and then the commotion of a crowd on the move. Outside the window, on the street below, people are running, actually fleeing Bourbon Street.

The French Quarter attracts all kinds of lowlife during the Mardi Gras. People from all over the state and beyond come here with one purpose: to get plastered. It's an important ingredient in the chaos that ensues. Add into that mix the USA's penchant for guns and you have a recipe for disaster. Tonight is a case in

point. Mel leans out of the window, her G&T lolling in her right hand while her left points at a young black man standing on the pavement looking back up the street. ‘What’s happening, sweetheart?’ She’s like something out of an old movie. He explains to her that when he heard shots he started running and that the cops were in there pretty *tout suite*. I suggest we go take a look but Mel’s not interested. ‘Someone got shot,’ she says so matter of factly I wonder if she’s even listening to herself. ‘What you gonna see? Either a dead person or a nearly dead person. Ain’t no fun in that.’

I order another couple of drinks. With a polite dip of the head, Mel takes her reloaded G&T and excuses herself for the ladies’ room. I sit and wonder if we shouldn’t take a walk anyhow, just for a change of scene. It doesn’t look as though my date is going to show. It’s already gone 8 p.m.

It’s 8.10 p.m. when I realise Mel’s not coming back.

Uncle Sam turns his attention around to me. ‘You been hustled, my friend.’ He purses his lips together as though the words tasted unpleasant to say. ‘I’m sorry to tell you but this is an old trick during Mardi Gras. How many drinks you buy her anyway?’

‘Four,’ I tell him.

‘Wow. She did well out of you for an hour’s work.’

I can’t disagree. I’ve been charmed out of around twenty-five bucks’ worth of liquor by a woman I’ll likely

CRYSTAL CLEAR

never see again. And no doubt she's on to the next Joe at the next bar somewhere further along Bourbon while I'm left talking to a guy who looks like he just walked out of a cartoon.

My new drinking buddy's name is Chris and he says he grew up right here in Nawlins, which makes him a rare thing in this town during Mardi Gras: a genuine local. I begin to tell him exactly how much fun I'm having. Starting with my adventures in fortune-telling.

'Oh, you met Gypsy John?' he drawls at me. 'He ain't nothing to be frightened of. Well, he is but you just gotta know how to handle him right. What you wanna know from him anyway?'

If you have enjoyed these sample chapters from *The Scan Hunter*, you can buy the book from September and all good retailers.

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