



THE Smoking GUN

**true tales from
Hollywood's screenwriting trenches**

Doug Richardson

The Smoking Gun

I've written about theft before. Both stories and ideas nicked by scumbag producers without consequence. What follows is an epic tale. All true. With multiple endings that, to this day, still leave me and others gob-smacked.

This sordid trip down memory lane begins like most in La-laLand. With a meeting. The sit-down was a “general.” That’s when an agent or manager puts a writer client and a producer together. There’s no particular agenda, only a hope that some kind of creative marriage will sprout and grow into a movie or TV show of some kind.

At the time, the producer in question—let’s call him Mr. Jellyfish—was working for a Brand Name talent management company with a film and television development wing. We met, chatted over who knows what, then Mr. Jellyfish told me of an old French comedy he had the rights to. Based on the story he told, I wasn’t interested in the adaptation. But something in the conversation stirred me to think aloud of an interesting protagonist. Next came the antagonist. Then a the structure of a thriller with three simple acts. Yes. Sometimes it happens that fast. Like manna from God.

Mr. Jellyfish didn’t just love my story, he was stoked to go out and sell it. We shook hands and said our goodbyes. I got my parking validated, climbed into my car and phoned my agent.

“How’d it go?” my agent asked.

“Good, I suppose. And not so good,” I said.

“Let’s start with the good.”

“The good is that I came up with a legal thriller. Great characters. Super castable.”

“And the bad?”

“This producer guy (Mr. Jellyfish). He gives me the heebie jeebies. Somethin’ really sleezy about the dude.”

“Yeah. Know what you mean,” agreed my agent. “But if you came up with the story during the meeting, he’s attached. No getting around it.”

That much I knew. No matter that Mr. Jellyfish had less than zero input into the story I’d spun in his office, industry protocol pretty much cemented him as a producer. Whether I liked it or not, we were stuck with each other.

“How’s this?” I suggested. “What if we pitch this to some mini-studio with strong producers?”

“That might work,” said my agent.

At the time, there were a number of big producers around with piles of development and co-production financing, some of them with Grade A credentials. We called them mini-studios.

With my agent coordinating the pitches, I attended one more “rehearsal” sit-down with Mr. Jellyfish. This is when I was introduced to his friend, Mr. Euro, a fellow producer who I was told owned the rights to that old French comedy.

“I’m confused,” I said politely. “I’m not adapting the French film. I’m here to rehearse the pitch for the legal thriller we talked about.”

“Yes, I know,” said Mr. Jellyfish. “But since I brought you in to talk about the one thing, I think it’s only fair to kiss (Mr. Euro) in as a producer on our other thing.”

Whatever, I thought. Mr. Euro didn’t offer much in the room. And as long as I sold the pitch to one of our targeted mini-studios, I’d feel more confident about the producing package.

I scored at the very first mini-studio I pitched. They bought my legal thriller in the room. The Mini-Studio Mogul shook my hand and promised to get things closed in matter of days. And, true to his word, my deal closed practically overnight. I understood, though, because Mr. Jellyfish worked for those Brand Name talent managers, that the producing agreement might take a little bit longer.

CUT TO: Six weeks later. I get a phone call from Mr. Mini-Studio Mogul.

“Sorry the deal’s taking so long,” he began. “Lotta producers to wrangle. But that’s not my biggest problem.”

“So what is your big problem?” I asked.

“The rights,” he said. “Simple question. Who owns the story you pitched me?”

“Me, myself, and I,” I answered. Yes, it was a glib as all get out. But one hundred percent correct.

“That’s what I thought,” said Mr. Mini-Studio Mogul. “Then why the fuck am I in negotiation for the rights to some stupid French comedy that I’ve never heard of?”

Lordy. Not that again. I tried not to imagine the motives for Mr. Jellyfish’s insistence on including the French film into the deal. But something about the situation seemed pretty damned nefarious.

“I have no clue why,” I answered, my blood pressure elevating like mercury.

I explained the origins of my story to Mr. Mini-Studio Mogul, including my surprise introduction to Mr. Euro. And that was when I was informed Mr. Euro was the rights holder to the French comedy that I was NOT adapting and where Mr. Jellyfish had explained his involvement as a matter of producers scratching each others back.

“Have you ever tried to buy the rights to a French film?” asked Mr. Mini-Studio Mogul. “It’s a nightmare. And for the record, neither of those clowns you came with OWN the rights to anything!”

Another lie. I was already flipping through my notes in search of Mr. Jellyfish’s phone number when Mr. Mini-Studio Mogul summed up:

“So lemme make sure I’ve got this right. You are the sole owner of the story you pitched me. And it’s not based on some stupid old French comedy.”

“I own it. Nobody else. And those clowns you spoke of are only attached because I made the mistake of generating the story during a general meeting.”

“Thanks. Got it. Lemme see if I can sort this out.”

The mogul hung up. Meanwhile, I dialed Mr. Jellyfish.

“Why in Christ are you trying to sell my thriller as an adaptation to that stupid French comedy?” I shouted. “We pitched a legal thriller that has NOTHING WHATSOEVER TO DO with some foreign comedy I’ve never even seen.”

“I know that,” said Mr. Jellyfish. “It’s just that Mr. Euro and I—”

“You assured me that Mr. Euro was just along for the ride. What the hell are you doing?”

“Know what? You’re right. I’m sorry. I fucked this up. Lemme fix it and call you back.”

Hours later, my agent called to tell me Mr. Mini-Studio Mogul was so incensed at Mr. Jellyfish and Mr. Euro and their shady shenanigans that he’d pulled the plug on the deal.

I cursed myself for not trusting my initial instincts to steer clear Mr. Jellyfish. I should’ve kept my writer’s trap firmly shut during the meeting and developed the story inside the safety of my own skull.

“I’m out too,” I told my agent. “I never wanna talk to that prick again.”

“You realize what you’re doing?” he said.

I did, indeed. My pitch couldn’t go forward without Mr. Jellyfish. Nor could Mr. Jellyfish go forth and sell it without me.

My legal thriller was dead.

What followed were the stages of grief. One of which was denial. I sought advice from both my attorney and a mentor friend. Both assured me that, even though I had the right to sell my story without Mr. Jellyfish, those Brand Name Managers for whom he worked were known to be litigious you know whats. So unless I wanted to battle things out in court...

Nearly a year passed. Then came word that Mr. Jellyfish had received his walking papers from those Brand Name Managers. He was on the street and looking for a new job. *Couldn’t happen to a more deserving guy*, I reckoned.

Once again, I revisited my legal thriller. My options in Hollywood were nil so I pitched it as a novel to both my book agent and my publisher. They loved it, but were concerned about my entering such a crowded literary space. We all agreed to marinate on the prospect and bid each other a happy holiday.

It was just after New Year's when I received a call from a fellow writer pal, congratulating me on having sold my legal thriller to a cash-rich independent studio.

"Haven't sold anything," I replied.

"Really?" said my friend. "Coulda sworn I saw the trade announcement. One-liner sounded something like your story. Figured you'd sold it to Mr. Jellyfish for a bunch of dough."

My blood was rising. I'd been on vacation for two weeks and way out of the loop. Still, I checked the back issues of *Variety* and landed on a front-page announcement about a huge spec sale by someone we'll call Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter. The article told the tale of a three-and-a-half page treatment (along with the celebrity screenwriter's services to pen the script) that he'd sold for nearly four million dollars.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the numeral FOUR followed by SIX ZEROES before the decimal point.

And sure enough. There it was in ink on paper. A legal thriller with a one-line description that appeared scarily close to MY legal thriller. And attached as producers, none other than Mr. Jellyfish and Mr. Euro.

Couldn't be mine, I reasoned. It was too pagan. Too obvious and public. The writer of the treatment was the most famous screenwriter on the planet. The odds seemed astronomical that the spec treatment sold for record millions was anything related to my WGA registered tale.

So I cautiously did what most self-respecting screenwriters would do. I phoned my lawyer.

"Listen," said my lawyer. "Let's not pull out the guns yet. You dig up your (WGA) registration and I'll put in a call to the studio and inform them that they might have a problem."

While my attorney attempted to throw a temporary chop-block on the dizzying spec sale, I dove into my funky filing system in search of my proof of copyright.

Then the phone rang. It was Mr. Jellyfish. And he sounded as if he'd just dropped a toaster in the bathtub.

"I'm gonna sue you!" he screamed at me. "You ever hear of a thing called tortuous interference? That's when somebody purposefully fucks with somebody else's contractual dealings."

"I'm not looking to mess up anything," I said.

"I'm gonna sue you until you're nothing!" he continued.

"Calm down," I said. "I don't want a legal hassle. I just wanna make sure that it wasn't my story you and (Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter) sold for four mil."

"It wasn't. Okay? End of argument."

"All I gotta see is the treatment. If it's not close to my registered material I'll be totally happy to stay outta your business."

"That's right. My business!" he screamed. "And just so you know, all I did was show (Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter) the same French film I showed you. Whatever he came up with was on his own."

"You never showed me the film," I corrected. "You gave me a thumbnail sketch of a comedy. I rejected adapting it. What I built was a whole new story that had nothing to do with the stupid French movie. So I'd find it hard to believe that some other screenwriter working with you could magically come up with the same story I invented then legally registered with the Guild."

"You got documents? Well so do I. Me and (Mr. Euro) wrote up our own story."

"Did you register it?" I asked.

"No. But the date on it predates when you and I ever met."

"Listen," I said. "All I need to see is the treatment, okay? Send me what (Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter) sold to the studio. I'll read it and we'll go from there."

"I'll do you one better," said Mr. Jellyfish. "I send you the whole fuckin' file."

“Fine. Great.”

Mr. Jellyfish hung up and, while I was relaying the details of the conversation to both my attorney and agent, my fax machine began to chug, spitting out pages of documents.

I assembled the pile of paper. Shuffled through a variety of memos concerning Mr. Euro and that old French comedy. There was also a strange, poorly sketched outline “written” by Mr. Jellyfish and Mr. Euro, supposedly based on the aforementioned film. The one-page doc reeked of illicitness and was conveniently predated before my ever having met the producing duo. My attorney assured me it would hold no legal water.

Finally, I landed on Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter’s golden treatment. Just as advertised, it was three-and-a-half pages long. Sadly, I didn’t have to read very far. The very first paragraph was nearly identical to my verbal pitch, even using the exact names of the movie stars I’d referenced for the thriller’s protagonist and antagonist. The rest of the treatment followed my story closely, veering away a bit in the second act, but completely aping my work in the finish.

My stomach twisted. This was no small infraction I’d stumbled on. And right in front of me was a document that, stem to stern, had completely ripped off my legally copyrighted property. There would be no pissing this problem away or writing the event off as showbiz collateral. This was going to be a dogfight. That’s because despite the sleazy actions of the two producers, at the center of the action was a top-of-the-list celebrity screenwriter and his very public—not to mention record—multi-million dollar sale of a three-and-a-half page treatment. He would surely defend himself and truly test the legal boundaries of the WGA copyright.

Things were about to get bloody.

I was prepping to redial my lawyer when another document from the fax-pile caught my eye. It was typewritten on two pages of those Brand Name Managers’ letterhead.

The title of the document was called “DOUG’S PITCH.” And below was written, “transcribed from audio recording.”

Jesus, I thought. They’d actually recorded me pitching my legal thriller?

That’s right sport fans. Without my knowledge, Mr. Jellyfish had secretly taped me pitching my own story and somewhere, somehow, some no-name assistant had been assigned the dirty task of transcribing the recording and stuffing it into a file.

Even more shameful was how close the transcription of my verbal pitch tracked with the multi-million-dollar three-point-five-page golden treatment penned by Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter.

Hell, I thought. I don’t even need to dig out my WGA registered legal thriller. It was all here in front of me—on letterhead—in my voice.

The smoking gun.

I dialed both my attorney and agent. Passed on my sterling discovery. My lawyer, practically giddy at the news, asked me to fax him the evidence. My other line rang. I picked it up. Guess who?

“Did you get it?” barked Mr. Jellyfish, still hot but reduced to a low boil.

“I did,” I said. “Thanks.”

“And?”

“And I read Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter’s treatment. I gotta be frank. It’s my story. You guys have a problem.”

“But you also received the document I wrote with (Mr. Euro.) It predates our meeting. Proof it’s not your story.”

“C’mon. We both know you wrote it after the fact and just typed a different date on it—”

“You can’t prove it didn’t predate you!” He was back to screaming again.

“It’s not a legal document,” I argued. “My registered material—”

“Your registered stuff doesn’t mean shit! I going to argue that you stole from me! I’m gonna sue you and when I’m done you’re going to have no fuckin’ career—”

“May I read to you from another document you faxed me? It’s on letterhead and titled ‘Doug’s Pitch... transcribed from audio recording.’”

The phone line went dead silent. Mr. Jellyfish, a man known for his gift of gab, was at an immediate loss for dialogue. So he did what most clowns do when the laughs stop. He hung up and exited stage right.

What followed was a carpet-bombing of phone calls. Hard-nosed negotiating. A studio, their lawyers, and Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter’s super agent all wondering why the hell I was so hellbent on a precept called principle.

“(Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter) had no clue whatsoever that it was somebody else’s story,” argued the super agent. “He was of the understanding that it was (Mr. Jellyfish’s) story to give away.”

“For almost four million dollars?” I asked. “Please.”

“Why you gotta be an asshole about this?” shouted the super agent. “Don’t you know there’s a negotiated deal already in place? And it’s based entirely on my client’s cache. Not your stupid-assed story.”

“I’d watch who you’re calling an asshole,” I cautioned. “That’s my intellectual property that your client was caught selling.”

“And you and I know my client didn’t steal it! Those dirtbag producers did!”

In the end, I had to agree. Hollywood’s a pretty small town. The only black mark on Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter was his arrogant rep. There was nothing on his rap sheet that led me to believe he was a story thief.

“There’s a first time for everybody,” said my lawyer. “Sure you want to let him slide on the thievery deal?”

Once again, I tried to be pragmatic. I had the power to completely torpedo the high profile deal and sully the rep of a big time scribe. But an act that rash would gain me nothing and,

when the dust finally settled, nobody in town would be brave enough to touch me or my legal thriller for fear of a lawsuit or reprisal from Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter and his super agent.

Or I could compromise. Negotiate some kind of bargain.

But could anything I ever worked out of such a mess end up in the same zip code as fair? I found myself hanging on the horns of one helluva dilemma. Blow it all up? Or deal?

My decision was to deal.

Now, for those of you who view this as a weak move, you may want to put a temporary cork in your judgment. Read on and remember that if I used my position to dynamite the deal, it would've meant nobody would ever be able to move forward with my story—including me. That and there were some behind the scenes stakeholders who might see my behavior as intractable. Not quite the rep I was looking to curry in small town with ears the size of Dumbo's.

"What do you think we should ask for?" I queried my lawyer.

"For starters, an immediate cash payment. Then whatever you think is fair."

The nearly four million Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter would be paid included his incredibly expensive writing services, well-earned from having penned a successive string of boffo movies. And, once again, I didn't consider him a thief as much as an ego-centric opportunist who was accustomed to producers visiting him on bent knee, offering up their first born in order to secure his imprimatur.

"What I want," I began, "is everything (Mr. Jellyfish) and (Mr. Euro) will ever make on the movie."

"As in money?" asked my lawyer.

"Every penny. They're the thieves. They shouldn't make a cent on the movie. Not a dime."

"But they still get to produce the movie, right?" he asked. "Credit and all."

Produce? Credit? If I could've denied the bastards the legal right to procreate I might've considered that.

“I suppose I can’t deny them credit.” I said. “I just believe they should never be able to profit from the movie.”

“Agreed,” he said. “You know (Mr. Jellyfish) is going to blow a gasket.”

“Let him.” I said. “Those are my terms.”

Another round of calls began, melting the phone lines with incendiary words and assignments about my character. But I held my ground. Gave my lawyer permission to hit the self-destruct button at any moment he felt was appropriate. Then sometime around 7:00P.M. I recall a messenger arriving at my house with a cashier’s check. I won’t divulge the precise amount. Let’s just say it was enough for a down payment on a waterfront villa on Lake Kiss My Ass.

As for my demand to receive all monies the producing duo would ever earn on the movie, they threw the requisite snit fit. Claimed I was the actual thief upon realizing their distinct lack of leverage.

Meanwhile, I decided that I also wanted a producing credit on the picture. The lowliest. Associate Producer. On screen and in the credit block of all prints and advertisements.

For some reason, the Associate Producer request flipped some kind of hellfire switch in the celebrity screenwriter’s super agent. He phoned me, shouted into the phone, charging me with extortion.

“Extortion?” I asked. “Who was the one who got ripped off?”

“It’s already been established that my client didn’t know the story was yours,” argued the super agent.

“And what does that have to do with anything?”

“My client is still going to write a script. You will be producing nothing. Yet you still want credit?”

Like “producing nothing” had ever stopped anybody in Hollywood from seeking a producing credit; it is the most abused title in cinematic history. Much later—and I’m talking years down the road—when that super agent turned into a movie producer, he received a “produced by” credit on films where he

never stepped on a set, never read the script, nor secured a lick of financing. And years after, when the chance arrived for me to tweak him for his lousy argument, his pithy response was “Fuck you.”

“Here’s why I want a producer credit,” I told the super agent. “Because I invented the legal thriller which your client is getting paid four million to write. Why do I want the Associate Producer credit? Because nobody else will want it and that way I won’t have to share. And why do I want that credit on all prints and ads? Because one day, my children will want to know why my name is on the movie. And that’ll give me the opportunity to tell them a real life morality tale of thievery, bullying, and unchecked arrogance.”

Yeah. It was a mouthful. I still recall that I’d spent the entire phone conversation pacing around our upstairs nursery, surrounded by pastels and tapestries depicting little puffy clouds.

Sometime the next day, I heard the entire deal was in peril. Not because of my demands, but because the cash-rich indie studio who’d made the high profile agreement had unknowingly found themselves trying to purchase the rights to that stupid French comedy on which the story was NEVER based.

Yes. Again.

Somehow, the lines of communication got untangled and the deal points were settled.

As for my demands, everybody pretty much caved and I received what was right. My deal closed. Legal papers were generated for me to sign away the rights to my legal thriller... and I indeed signed.

You would think that would be the end of the tale. I can imagine blog fans racking their brain for recent legal thrillers, wondering which movie I’m writing about. But we’re not there yet.

In the years that followed, I’ve miraculously never had the unpleasant experience of bumping into either Mr. Jellyfish or Mr. Euro. Though my attorney hasn’t been so lucky. At the few

events where they've had social encounters, my lawyer has offered his hand in a gesture of détente. Mr. Jellyfish has yet to reciprocate.

Meanwhile, remember when I said that Hollywood is a small town? One day I'm having a getting-to-know-you lunch with a young development exec who'd been overseeing a couple of my projects. During the meal I decided to amuse him with the smoking gun story. He sat across from me, gob-smacked at nearly every turn. *Sure*, I thought. *It's a helluva tale*. But something in his reaction piqued my curiosity.

"It's a great story. But not that great a story," I told him, sensing he was overreacting.

"No," said the sharp young exec. "That's not it at all. You see, before I worked at my current job, I worked for (Mr. Jellyfish)."

"You're joking."

"Totally serious," he said. "And I think I'm the dude who faxed you the file."

"The file with the smoking gun?"

"Uh huh."

I nearly fell out of my chair as he recounted his side of things. His crazy boss, storming around his condo screaming, "Fax him the fucking file!"

"The whole file?" the former assistant had asked.

"The fucking file!" screamed Mr. Jellyfish. "I said fax it now!"

As I write this, I'm still laughing. As I said earlier, how often does one have a chance to hold an actual smoking gun? Let alone get to meet the unlucky minion who accidentally faxed it to you.

That young development exec has since left the business for saner pastures. But to this very day, we remain the closest of friends.

Fast forward a few years. I'd moved on. But for the story of my cinematic victimization and vindication, I'd heard not a syllable about a forthcoming movie. Then came a call from my new agent.

“Hey,” he said to me. “There’s this project over at (the independent studio). Legal thriller by (Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter). They say he botched it so bad they wanna know if you’d like to take a whack at it.”

“You’re joking,” I said. “Seriously?”

“Seriously what?” he said. “They wanna talk to you about doing a rewrite. Should I send the script over for you to read?”

“Ha ha ha,” I said, thinking I was getting punked. “Really. Stop messing with me.”

“I’m not messing,” he said. “Why would I mess about a writing gig? That’s how I make my money.”

“You seriously don’t know?”

“I seriously don’t know.”

“I’ve never told you?”

“Told me what?” he said, totally confused by my tack. My relationship with this agent was still pretty fresh. I hadn’t yet shared the sordid tale with him.

“So look,” he said. “Are you interested in a meeting or not?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “I’m very interested in meeting. More than you could EVER imagine.”

The moment the celebrity screenwriter’s screenplay arrived at my front door, I tore open the envelope and sat down to pore over what nearly four million dollars had wrought in printer paper and ink. I’d read a few high-dollar screenplays. None had been perfect in my view, but most were pretty darn well crafted. Having also read a number of rewrites of my own work, I expected a relatively similar feel. My characters. My structure. Someone else’s voice, crayoned scenery, and ham-fisted word-play.

What I encountered was none of the above.

Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter’s script contained so little of my thriller story that I wondered what all the hubbub had been about in the first place. I’d read his golden treatment. And it was a nearly paragraph for paragraph ape of my stolen pitch. Why the hell had he departed so completely from the characters, plot and construct?

Then it hit me. In those earlier negotiations for me to take a giant step back into the shadows, the one thing I couldn't sign away was story credit. This is because of a simple WGA tenet (and part of the collective bargaining agreement) that forbids studios and producers from enticing writers to take money in exchange for forgoing the basic right for their name to be forever etched on the picture.

Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter, in his megomaniacal zeal to avoid sharing credit, tossed out most of the stolen story and wrote a radically different movie.

Talk about your bait and switch.

My new agent arranged a meeting with the studio. I marked the date in indelible ink and made certain I showed up on time. If anything, this was going to be entertaining.

"Nice seeing you, Doug," said the studio boss man, shaking my hand like an old friend.

The studio boss and I had worked together some years earlier on another picture. And I'd enjoyed most of the process until the cigar-chomping immigrant decided he didn't want to pay me for the final draft, arguing that the reason he'd stiffed me was because the movie star had screwed him over. I suppose he figured screwings were something to be re-gifted. I fought back and eventually won my paycheck. I wondered if there were going to be some residual hard feelings.

We met over a lacquered conference table tucked in the corner of his massive, art-stuffed office. Along with a pair of de rigueur development execs, we were joined by the boss man's former business partner, a man of equally foreign origins. Though both men grew up on different sides of the planet, after years of financing massive, worldwide hit pictures they'd come to possess nearly the exact same cartoonish Soup-Nazi-meets-Steve-Buscemi accent.

"So, Doug," said the studio boss. "You like the project."

"Oh, I like it very much," I said, grinning widely on the inside.

“Now, you understand the script you read wasn’t the story I bought,” admitted the studio boss. “Did your agents send you the treatment too?”

“They did, yes.”

“So now you know (Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter) totally fucked me on the script.”

“Appears that he did,” I concurred. “Sorry he did that to you.”

“Okay. So you read everything. So tell me why you think you’re the writer to fix my broken movie.”

“You don’t know?” I asked.

“No,” said the boss, glancing to his D-crew as if he hadn’t received an all-important memo.

“I have an extraordinary affection for this story,” I said, squaring myself to keep a straight face. “And I feel really really close to it.”

“So you like it a lot,” added the former partner, attempting to move the conversation along.

“I don’t just like it,” I said. “I love it.”

“I do too,” said the boss. “That’s why I paid that bastard four million to write it.”

I think I must’ve been grinning like Charlie Sheen high on Charlie Sheen because I suddenly felt the stares.

“Seriously,” I said. “You don’t remember?”

The studio boss looked around the table and shrugged, completely at a loss.

“Do you recall when you acquired the treatment?” I asked. “The big deal. Big trade announcement. Then there was this... problem?”

“Okay,” said the boss. “I remember something, now. Some kind of legal thing.”

“The story you bought,” I said. “Something about it having been ripped off from another writer.”

Once again, the studio boss looked to his compatriots for help, but received none.

“I know,” I said. “It was supposed to be a secret. Only the lawyers and the original writer were supposed to have actual knowledge of it.”

“But you do?” asked the studio boss. “You have knowledge of the situation?”

“More knowledge that you can imagine,” I added.

“Because you’re the writer!” burst the former partner as if he was deaf and just formed his first BINGO. “The stolen story was yours!”

“The very same,” I said. “We have a winner.”

“Oh my God,” said the former partner, slapping the table with both his palms. The development duo looked suitably perplexed, completely unaware of the secret deal to conceal the theft of my legal thriller.

I turned to the studio boss, fully expecting a look of astonishment. But I was wrong. Not that he wasn’t surprised at the lottery-like coincidence; the boss man was just that cool, sniping the butt end of a Schwarzenegger-sized stogie and putting flame to it with five practiced puffs of smoke.

“So I guess this means you’re the right guy for the job,” smirked the studio boss.

“Ya think?” I glibly sat back in my seat.

And that was it. Maybe the shortest audition of my writing career. The studio boss stood and shook my hand. Then he laughed and added:

“(Mr. Jellyfish) is not gonna like this one bit.”

And he was so right.

The moment Mr. Jellyfish was informed that I’d landed the gig, he began a series of angry protests, all of which fell upon deaf ears. In addition to my old deal, a new agreement was negotiated that paid me a premium to pen a spanking new script.

Upon my delivery, the screenplay was received with great excitement.

All’s well that ends well?

Not so fast. The once cash-rich independent studio, after financing a sudden succession of big budget bombs, eventually ran out of green, selling the rights to my movie off to another indie company which, soon after, also flipped belly-up in the tough economy. Sadly, the ownership of the property remains murky and the picture has yet to find cast or a director. But I'm hopeful that star-spangled legal thrillers make a comeback to the big screen.

As for the other players? Well, like many in showbiz, Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter has moved from hot to cold. From time to time he shows up on the Hollywood radar. And not long ago, a studio talked to me about taking on a Tv project that Mr. Celebrity Screenwriter had been long attached to. Over a year had gone by without the famed scribe having come up so much as a log line. Clearly having tired of waiting, the studio wanted to move on to someone else. I declined and wished them luck.

Mr. Euro has pretty much turned into a vanishing act. I have absolutely no clue to his career whereabouts nor do I much care.

Then there's infamous Mr. Jellyfish. After unraveling his whole heinous act, I repeated the tale to a major film and tv producer. It turns out he knew Mr. Jellyfish all too well, having once caught the thief with a dirty hand in an entirely different cookie jar. I obviously wasn't the first intended victim. I sincerely doubt I was the last. Despite his lousy rep, Mr. Jellyfish has been able to forge a career, stenciling his name as a producer on no less than ten movies and tv shows in the years since our unfortunate encounter.

If the cream rises to the top, so apparently does the scum.

For those of you who still wonder if I made the right decision in choosing to negotiate a deal instead of blowing up the entire thieving enterprise, I stand by my political decision. The super agent who once repped the celebrity screenwriter eventually left the agency biz and turned to producing. We developed a number of projects together, one of which turned into a hit movie.

So I rest my case.