## Chapter 54

## **The Escape Clause**

Albert and Michael studied the contract almost every day for two months. It was the most complicated contract that Michael had ever read, including contracts he had read during college. He was constantly complaining that he couldn't understand what was written. "Isn't there a law that says that contracts are supposed to be understandable by laymen?" He would ask.

Albert would laugh and say, "Yes. Unfortunately, there's a lot of leeway in the definition of 'layman'."

"Well, this 'layman' can't understand a word of this damned contract. It's the most convoluted thing I've ever tried to understand."

Albert laughed again and went back to reading. Finally, something clicked. Albert turned back a couple of pages and reread something. Then, he read it again and then, a third time. After reading the section three times, Albert slowly stood catching Michael's attention.

"Michael," Albert said, "I think I found it."

"What?"

"Go to page 12, section 11, paragraph C, sub-paragraph 4. Read that and tel me what you think."

Michael read it. He read it again. He sat up straight, rubbed his eyes, and read it a third time. An evil smile crossed his face as he said, "You're right, Albert. That's the escape clause." Just as quickly, a look of doubt replaced the smile. "However, as convoluted as this contract is, Mr. Reynard might have a way around that. We need to read this contract even more closely to be sure we can exploit this clause."

"Yeah." Albert said, dejectedly. "As devious as Mr. Reynard is, you're right."

Now, that a straw had been thrown to them, Michael and Albert redoubled their efforts to make sure the clause Albert had discovered could be exploited. Two hours later, it was Michael's turn to slowly stand up after he discovered something.

"Albert," Michael said, "go to page 17, section 15, paragraph A. Read it and tell me I'm not being hopeful."

Albert did as Michael asked but was confused. "Michael, if I'm reading it correctly, it voids what we found earlier."

"Albert, read it slowly."

Albert did so. He shook his head and read it again. Finally, he read it one word at a time. It hit him. The phrase, "all parties" caused a grin to cross his feline muzzle as he looked at Michael. "But, how do we exploit this, Michael?" He asked.

"Believe it or not, by getting Amanda to sign and date this contract and having a lawyer verify that her signature is true and correct and the correct date is included."

"Are you out of your ever-loving human mind, Michael? It's the lack of her signature that we have to use."

"No, trust me, Albert. You aren't thinking like a lawyer. I am."

At this time, Michael noticed movement outside of his office door. He looked up and saw a male side-striped jackal and a female bush dog, both of whom were dressed in 3-piece business suits. He walked to the door and opened it as the jackal was raising his fist to knock on it. "May I help you?" Michael asked.

"Yes. We're looking for Michael Thomson. The receptionist said that this is his office."

"That would be me, Sir. Come in. How may I help you?"

"You're Michael Thomson?"

"I've got not reason to lie about it." Michael laughed.

The jackal laughed and said, "I guess I should have figured that. Thomson is a human name not a humanimal one.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Lawrence Ujeko and this is may associate Madalena Cachorro do Mato."

Madalena shook Michael' hand as she said, "Hello"

"Good morning, Mr. Ujeko, Miss Cachorro do Mato. As you know, I'm Michael Thomson and this," he indicated Albert, 'is Albert Rooikat. How may we help you?"

Mr. Ujeko said, "Actually, Mr. Thomson, we may be able to help you. We're with the National Trade Commission, Contract Division" Each produced an ID card. "Our superiors were informed that you were have a probelm with an arranged marriage contract."

Michael frowned and said, "What kind of problem?" Michael was concerned because only Albert knew about the confusing wording of the contract.

"A Mr. Daniel Fedorenta from SoGa Industries Legal Department sent a copy of the contract to us. After examining it, we came to the conclusion that it violated the single issue section of the Contract Law."

"Single issue? What's the other issue?"

"It would seem that Miss Fuchs' dowry is controlling interest in this company. The second issue in the contract is the hostile takeover of this company."

Michael said, "Why, that no good sonuvabitch."

Miss Cachorro do Mato said, "Be careful, Mr. Thomson. Being a female dog myself, I find that language offensive."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. When I was growing up that phrase was used against anybody who was a low life in our opinion."

"All right, Mr. Thomson."

Mr. Ujeko contined, "The contract also violates the Understandability section of the Contract Law. Mr. Fedorenta said that you were in possession of a copy of that contract. May I ask how you obtained it?"

Albert said, "Careful, Michael."

Michael smiled at Albert but said, "I told Reginald Reynard, III, that I wanted a copy of it because I intended to find the escape clause in the contract."

"So, you aren't a party to the contract?"

"No, sir. Not directly anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm in love with the woman who is a party to the contract."

"Ophelia Fuchs?" Mrs. Cachorro do Mato asked.

Albert couldn't help but to laugh. Michael glared at him as he said, "No ma'am. Her daughter, Amanda."

She said, "Sir, are you aware that Amanda Fuchs hasn't signed the contract?"

"Yes, ma'am. After reading the contract for two months, we discovered that she hadn't signed the contract and it's our escape clause."

"I see. When do you intend to used it?"

"This evening when I go to visit Amanda."

"Where is Miss Fuchs?"

"She's enduring rehabilitation at Piedmont Regional Medical Hospital. She's due to be released from the hospital in a couple of days. I'm going to have everyone associated with the contract there

tonight." Michael smiled as he remembered watching mystery movies in which the detective gathered all the suspects together to reveal who the culprit was.

"Do you mind if we accompany you, Mr. Thomson?"

"No, ma'am. I don't minnd in the least. In fact, the more, the merrier. I'll be heading to the hospital as soon as I get off from work at 1100."

Mr. Ujeko said, "Very good. We'll meet you there around 1130." They left.

I'm sorry for laughing, Michael, but the idea of you and Ophelia Fuchs marrying is just plain ludicrous."

"I know. I almost laughed myself. I glared at you because I didn't want them to think this is a laughing matter."

"Do you think they're really from the National Government?"

"They're IDs looked real enough."

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At 1100, Michael closed his office. As he was leaving, Albert walked up and said, "I wish I could go with you tonight, Michael. I'd love to see the look on old man Reynard's face when you spring your little trap on him. Unfortunately, with Michelle só far along in her pregnancy, I'd rather not leave her alone for any length of time."

"I understand, Albert. Family is more important than revenge. I'll see you later."

"Yeah. Take care."

They had been speaking as they walked. When they exited SoGa Industries, each went to his car and left. Michael had several copies of the contract in as many large envelopes. He had made enough for everyoen he expected to be at Amanda's hospital room including the two NTC agents. About twenty minutes later, he arrived at Piedmont Regional Medical Hospital. Unlike all previous times he'd visited, he parked in front of the hospital. As he was getting out of his car with the bundle of envelopes, he was approached by Mr. Ujeko and Mrs. Cachorro do Mato.

"Hello again," Micheal said, cheerfully.

Mr. Ujeko took a few of the envelopes from Michael and said, "What are these?"

"Copies of the contract."

"You do know that it's illegal to make copies of a private contract. Don't you?"

"Unless the copies are going to be used in a court case."

"What court case?"

"The court case of Fuchs and Thomson vs. Reynard. The case is concerning Reginald Reyard, Senior's deceptive business practices."

"But, this isn't a courthouse; it's a hospital."

"Aren't you two sworn officers of the court?"

"Yes."

"Then, under Humanimal Common Law, you two can act as judges because you are required to know all judicial proceedings and, since you are sworn officers of the National Government, you are required to be unbiased in your prosecution of your duties."

Mr. Ujeko and Mrs. Cachorro do Mato looked at one another and smiled. She said, "It would seem you know a lot about Humanimal law, Mr. Thomson."

Michael smield as he pressed the elevator's call button.

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Just as the elevator doors opened, Jacob Fuchs raced up. Without looking at anyone, he said, "Press 16, please."

Michael said, "Of course, Mr. Fuchs. Why are you só out of breath?"

Just noticing who was on the elevator, Jacob said, "Oh! Hello, Michael. Pray that we aren't too late."

"Too late for what?

"A limousine pulled up to our house about half an hour ago and two gorillas got out, rang our doorbell and talked to Opelia. Before I could react, they had each grabbed one of her arms, took her back to the limousine, got in with her, and the limousine drove off."

"Do you know who kidnapped Mrs. Fuchs and why?"

"Yes. I got to the door just in time to see Reginald Reynard, Senior looking out of the door and smiling. I believe she was taken here but, I'm not sure why."

Mr Ujeko said, "We think we know why, Mr. Fuchs."

Seeming to just notice them, Jacob said, "Who are you and how would you know why?"

"We'll explain shortly, Mr. Fuchs."

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The elevator doors opened on the 16th floor and Jacob raced out without even looking to see if he was being followed. Knowing it had to be important if Mr. Fuchs was hurrying, Michael picked up the pace and was right on Jacob's heels. The two NTC agents were right behind Michael.

They arrived at Amanda's room and could hear her yelling, "No! No! No! I absolutely refuse!"

Mr. Reynard's voice followed saying, "You have not choice, my dear. I have an arranged marriage contract here. Your mother arranged a marriage between you and my grandson five years ago and today is your wedding day."

Ophelia said, "Please, Amanda. It's for your own good. You'll be much happier married to Reginald's grandson than that human."

"You lying bastard! You told Michael that the wedding was planned for one month after I was released from the hospital. I haven't been released yet."

Michael and Jacob walked into the room as Senior smugly said, "If that damned human believed me, it's his own damned fault."

Michael said, "And you can't understand why no one buys your products."

"What are you doing here, *human*!?"

"Ah, nice to see you again, too, Mr. Reynard."

"Would everyone clear out of the room for a few moments?"

"Why would we do that?" Mr. Reynard asked.

"If you want this wedding ceremony to continue with Amanda's cooperation, you'll do as I ask."

"I'm not leaving, *human*. I don't trust you."

"Listen to the pot calling the kettle black. Mr. Reynard, if you'll let me talk to Amanda in private, I can guarantee she won't interfere with the proceedings any longer."

A malicious smile crossed Mr. Reynard's face as he said, "Finally accepting the inevitable, *human*?"

With a smile in his voice, Michael answered, "Yeah. Something like that."

Everyone except the gorillas left. Michael looked at them and said, "Everyone includes you, Alphonse and Ryan."

"Mr. Reynard told us we have to stay, Michael."

Michael raised his voice and said, "Mr. Reynard, if you want me to convince Amanda to cooperate you've got to remove your bodyguards."

Mr. Reynard called out, "All right. You two apes get out of there. We'll have to take a chance he won't try any tricks."

As Alphonse and Rya were leaving, Michael said, "I'm sorry guys but it isn't going to be easy to convince her without you two here. It would be near impossible with you here." They nodded their heads and left.

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Michael looked at Amanda and saw her glaring at him. Then, he saw a look of sdness in her eyes as she said, "You promised me tht you'd find the escape clause."

"Who said I didn't?"

A look of sheer joy could be seen in Amanda's eyes. "Really? You did?"

"I need your full cooperations, Amanda. I'm going to say some things that will make you wonder but, you've got to trust me, no matter what."

"What are you going to say?" Now Amanda was starting to get a little worried.

Leaning as close to her ear as he could, he said, só softly his voice could barely be heard, "I can't tell you. I need your reaction to be completely believable."

"But . . ." She could say no more because Michael placed his fingers on her mouth as he shook his head.

Michael stood up, turned toward the door and said, "All right. She'll cooperate."

Senior was the first back in the room and he looked directly at Michael. As he looked at Michael, he saw Amanda staring daggers at his back. He wasn't certain what was going on but he noticed that, with his head down and without a backward glance, Michael was slowly walking away from Amanda's side.

Senior said, "Now that we have the bride's full cooperation, can we continue?"

A honey badger wearing robes reminiscent of the robes of a Roman Catholic priest stepped to the front of Amanda's bed as Reginald Reynard, III, stepped to her right side. Michael was standing slightly behind and to the "priest's" right. Michael had a small mischievous smile on his face as the badger started the wedding ceremony.

"Friends and family of the couple before me, we have gathered here today to witness their joining in the bonds of matrimony. There are no greater bonds in the Humanimal world than the bonds between a man and a woman who love each other and have expressed a desire to live together as husband and wife for the rest of their lives." Amanda rolled her eyes when she heard this.

"Even though the Humanimal species is less than 20 thousand years old, we have many traditions that are imortant to us and this bond is one of the most important. It was given to us during a time in which we were slaves to the humans and our lives were at their most desperate. The leaders of all the countries of the world understood that, if we had someone that we wished to protect, we would be more willing to do as we were told. As a result, laws were passed all over the world stating that married slaves and the young of those couples could not be broken up and sold. It is for this reason that we hold the bonds of matrimony só dear."

Senior said, "Padre, would you please hurry and get to the vows. I don't want this young woman to change her mind and refuse to cooperate."

Amanda looked fearfully at Michael who ever só slightly nodded his head. While Amanda wasn't certain what it meant, she nodded back.

The priest looked at Senior with a stern look but returned his attention to Amanda and Reginald. "Through the nearly 20 thousand years since our creation by the humans, one thing has endured above all other things. Our desire to come together and create a family bond with one another. The institution of marriage, while shunned by humans at the time of our creation, was one thing that we Humanimals realized was one thing that made us more than animals.

"Here before me today are two young people who have expressed a desire to be wed."

"Here it comes," Michael thought.

"This desire is expressed in the fact that they agreed to an arranged marriage several years ago. However, I am required by tradition to ask this question. Is there anyone here who has good reason or just cause to believe that these two should not be wed. If só, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Michael spoke loudly enough that someone on the ground floor could have heard him. "I object!"

The Padre said, "On what grounds, young man?"

"On the grounds that the arrange marriage contract is invalid."

Senior said, "You have no proof."

"Don't I?" Michael produced an envelope and said, "Here's a copy of the arranged marriage contract that Reginald Reynard, III, had sent to me two months ago at my request."

Senior said, "I don't believe it."

Michael turned to Mr. Ujeko and said, "Mr, Ujeko, would you plese distribute a copy of this contract to each person in this rom?"

After each person, including the Padre, had received a copy of the contract, Senior looked at it and said, "This is a private contract. You have violated the law by having it in your possession. I'll have you arrested and charged with violating the Contract Privacy Law."

"Mr. Weaselton has the document release form that I signed authorizing me to have this copy of the contract."

Mr. Ujeko looked at Senior and said, "You admit that this is your contract?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm sorry. Permit me to introduce partner and myself. I'm Lawrence Ujeko and this is my associate Madalena Cachorro do Mato."

"Is that supposed to impress me?"

"We're with the National Trade Commission, Contract Division. Mr. Thomson informed us of his being in possession of an arranged marriage contract. He also informed us of the fact that he was using said contract in a legal matter involving you, Mr. Reynard. As a result, Mr. Reynard, this is now a court case and my partner and I are the judges. Proceed, Mr. Thomson."

"Thank you, sir. As I stated, the contract is invalid. This is because there are four parties of the contract but, if you'll turn to the last page of the contract, you'l see only three signatures. There is one party who has yet to sign the contract and that party is Amanda Fuchs." Everyone looked and, sure enough, Amanda hadn't signed the contract. "If you will, I'll ask Amanda to sign and date the contract. Mr. Weaselton, if you'll be só kind as to verify that it truly is Amanda Fuchs signing the contract and the she is putting the correct date on it."

"Of course, Michael."

With tears welling up in her eyes, Amanda said, "No! I won't sign this. Michael, I thought you loved me and wanted me to be your wife."

Michael felt his resolve weakening. He had to act and act quickly, even if it angered or hurt Amanda. Slightly growling, he said, "Amanda, please do as I ask."

"But, Michael." She whined. "If I sign it, I'll be forced to marry *him*!" She said as she glared at Reginald.

"Trust me, Amanda."

With the tears in her eyes starting to drop, Amanda signed and dated the contract. When she finished, she handed it to Mr. Weaselton. He looked at the signature and date. Then, a slight smile crossed his face. Handing it back to Amanda, he said, "Amanda, it's 2-17-7124."

Amanda looked at the contract and made the correction.

Michael said, "Thank you, Amanda."

Turning to Senior, Michael said, "The contract is now completed, Mr. Reynard."

The Padre looked at Senior for a moment before he turned back toward Amanda and Reginald but, just as he opened his marriage ceremony book, Michael interrupted again. "However, now that Amanda has signed and dated the contract, which was verified by Mr. Weaselton, I must point out that this contract is still invalid."

Everyone looked at Michael in surprise, except Senior who glared at Michael for several seconds before speaking. "Why is the contract still invalid?"

"I'm glad you asked Mr. Reynard. If everyone will be só kind as to turn to Page 12, Section 11, Paragraph C, Sub-paragraph 4 and follow along as I read that passage. 'This contract shall not be in effect unless it is signed by all parties to the contract prior to the 19th birthday of the youngest party to the contract."

Michael looked at Amanda and asked, "Amanda, how old are you?"

With the tears in her eyes still visible, Amanda replied, "I'm 18, Michael."

"When were you born, Amanda?"

"Michael, you know when I was born."

"I know but, to make this legal, I need you to say it."

Amanda sighed and said, "I was born on the Free Day in 7105."

"And what is today's date?"

"It's 12-17-7123."

Michael turned to Mr. Weaselton and said, "Is that the date Amanda originally put on the contract before you corrected her?"

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"Yes, it is."
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"And you told her the correct date?"

"Yes. I did."

"Which is?"

"2-17-7124."

Returning his attention to Amanda, Michael said, "Amanda, I'm going to ask you again. How old are you?"

Amanda paused and said, "I'm . . ." She thought for a couple of seconds and a smile formed on her lips as she said, "I'm 19. I'm 19! *I'M 19*!!" She started bouncing on the bed.

Michael never smiled because the next thing he said was, "Unfortunately, that doesn't mean anything because, if you'll turn to Page 17, Section 15, Paragraph A and read along with me. 'This contract may be amended if all parties to the contract agree to the amendment.'"

Michael looked at Senior and said, "Mr. Reynard, would you like to amend to contract to read 'before the 20th birthday of the youngest party to the contract'?"

Mr. Reynard practially yelled, "YES!"

Michael smiled and said, "I figured you'd say that but I had to ask.

"Reg..." Reginald growled his displeasure at Michael's continued familiarity with his name causing Michael to smile maliciously. "Reg, would <u>you</u> like to amend the contract to read 'before the 20th birthday of the youngest party to the contract'?"

While Reginald's response wasn't as enthusiastic as Senior's it was obvious he was in favor when he said, "Yes!"

Michael turned his attention to Ophelia. "Mrs. Fuchs, would you like to amend the contract to read 'by the 20th birthday of the youngest party to the contract'?"

Ophelia puased fo a couple of seconds before she said, quietly, "Yes."

Michael said, "Mrs. Fuchs, please say your answer loud enough for the judges to hear."

She looked at Michael, not with her normal anger or hautiness, but with a look akin to sadness, as she said, "Yes."

Senior said, "There! A majority vote. The contract is officially amended. Carry on, Padre!"

Michael cleared his throat and said, "Sorry, Mr. Reynard. Reread the clause. It says *all* parties must agree to the amendment."

Mr. Ujeko and Mrs. Cachorro do Mato nodded in agreement. Mr. Weaselton was also nodding his head.

Michael turned to Amanda and before he could speak she said, "NO! I don't want the contract amended!"

Michael smiled and said, "Now, Amanda, we have to make this legally binding só I have to ask the question. Amanda Fuchs, do you wish to amend the contract to read 'by the 20th birthday of the youngest party to the contract'?"

Amanda glared at Mr. Reynard and said, "NO!"

Michael turned to the NTC agents and said, "We have followed all legal precedences and followed the dictates of the contract. Therefore, I ask you, as judges in this situation, to declare this contract to be offically null and void."

Mr. Ujeko and Mrs. Cachorro do Mato conferred for several seconds before Mr. Ujeko said, "Due the fact that all terms of the contract have not been fulfilled according to the dictates of the contract and in accordance with national contract law, it is the decision of my associate and me that the contract is, effective immediately, canceled. This wedding cannot take place unless Amanda Fuchs and Regiald Reynard, III, desire to marry without the use of the arranged marriage contract. If either is opposed to the marriage, the marriage shall not take place. Also, in accordance with Arranged Marriage Law, I am compelled to ask, Mr. Reginald Reynard, III, do you wish to marry Amanda Fuchs without the confines and allowances of the now null and void arranged marriage contract?"

Reginald said, "Yes, I do."

Mr. Ujeko turned to Amanda and said, "Amanda Fuchs, do you wish to marry Reginald Reynard, III, without the confines and allowances of the now null and void arranged marriage contract?"

Amanda said, "No, I do not."

"Then, in accordance with National Arranged Marriage Law, I declare that this marriage shall not take place under any circumstnaces."

Before another word could be spoken and before anyone could react, Senior had drawn a semiautomatic pistol and was pointing it toward Amanda. He said, "I'm terribly sorry, *human*, but the contract can't be voided because I don't want it voided and what Reginald Francis Reynatd, Senior wants he gets."

Michael started talking in a soothing voice, the kind of voice you would use to talk a child into giving ou a knife the child was playing with but didn't want to give up. As Michael spoke, he was easing closer to Senior attemptig to get within striking distance. "Mr. Reynard," he said, "are you sure this is what you want to do? I mean, Amanda could go through with this weddig and then tomorrow file for divorce on the grounds of duress."

Pointing the pistol at Michael, Senior said, "You shut up! Don't think you can confuse me with your rhetoric! This is all your fault! If you hadn't shown up, I would own SoGa Industries without a question being asked. Don't come any closer, human!" He pointed to pistol at Amanda again. "I brought this just in case you showed up. Do you know what I use this pistol for?"

Michael never took his eyes off of Senior as he answered, "No sir. What do you use it for?"

Mr. Reynard pointed the pistol at Michael again. "I use it to exterminate vermin, human. Do you know what you and all other humans are as far as I'm concerned?"

"Vermin?"

"Damned right. The world would be a far better place if there were no humans on it and I'm going to start the clean up with you."

During this exchange, Michael judged he needed to be about a step or two closer to Senior to prevent him from accidentally shooting Amanda. He'd much rather be the victim rather than risk Amanda. He stood there hoping someone would distract Senior long enough to allow him to make those two steps. He got assistance in three most unlikely places. At almost the same time, Reginald, Ophelia, and Ryan called Senior. During this distraction, Michael took the two steps he needed to get within arm's reach of Senior.

When Senior returned his attention to Michael, Michael already had his hand within an inch of the pistol. Michael grabbed Senior's wrist with one hand and squeezed as hard as he could effectively immobilizing the wrist and hand and weaking the grip as a result. With the other hand, he snatched the pistol from Senior's hand, dropped the clip, and opened the slide ejecting the cartridge in the chamber. After dropping the pistol, Michael, using his height, weight, and strength advantage forced Senior against the nearest wall and held his forearm against Senior's throat.

Michael put his face mere inches away from Senior's face as he growled, "You pointed a loaded pistol at the woman I love, the woman I'm going to marry. I shold kill you right now for that offense but that would prevent you from suffering the consequences for your actions not to mention putting blood on my hands. When I was growing up, I was taught to always forgive those who do me wrong. You, sir, are not worthy of my forgiveness só, I hope you get whatever punishement you deserve."

Mr. Reynard smiled and said, "You know, human, I almost wish you were my son instead of my real son. You've got guts."

Michael turned his head and said, "Mr. Ujeko, get this piece of trash out of here before I do something I'll regret."

Mr, Ujeko produced a pair of handcuffs and said, "Mr. Reginald Francis Reynard, Senior, I am arresting you for the following violations of National Penal Code: The Contract Understandability Act, The Single Issue Contract Act, and The Anti-enslavement Act."

Michael said, "Anti-enslavement Act?"

"Yes, Mr. Thomson. When he attempted to force Miss Fuchs to marry his grandson against her wishes and without the enforcement of the Arranged Marriage Contract, it was an attempt at enslaving her to his grandson. It's a little known part of the law and rarely enforced. The fact that we Humanimals allow arranged marriages does make it difficult to enforce but by refusing to go through with an arrange marriage can cause it to be enforced."

"And since you and Mrs. Cachorro do Mato heard Amanda refuse to marry Reginald, you could enforce it?"

"That's correct, Mr. Thomson. Come along, Mr. Reynard. You have an appointment with a jail cell."

As he was being led away, Senior called to Alphonse and Ryan, "Do something, you stupid apes."

Alphonse said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Reynard, but to interfere with a National Law Enforcement Agent's duties is a felony and I'm not going to go to prison for you."

Senior then turned his attention to Mr. Weaselton, "Weaselton, you're my lawyer. Do something."

"Sorry, Mr. Reynard, I resigned as you lawyer. Remember?"

As Mr. Ujeko and Mrs. Cachorro do Mato led Senior away, he could be heard screaming and cursing the whole way until the elevator doors closed.