

But he was not, at this moment nor at any time in the recent past, a student of any sort. So, could he be trusted? This had been thrashed about the room twice already, each time they came to Easter's name on the master list and his face hit the screen. It was a harmless lie, they'd almost decided.

He didn't smoke. The store had a strict nonsmoking rule, but he'd been seen (not photographed) eating a taco in the Food Garden with a co-worker who smoked two cigarettes with her lemonade. Easter didn't seem to mind the smoke. At least he wasn't an antismoking zealot.

The face in the photo was lean and tanned and smiling slightly with lips closed. The white shirt under the red store jacket had a buttonless collar and a tasteful striped tie. He appeared neat, in shape, and the man who took the photo actually spoke with Nicholas as he pretended to shop for an obsolete gadget; said he was articulate, helpful, knowledgeable, a nice young man. His name badge labeled Easter as a Co-Manager, but two others with the same title were spotted in the store at the same time.

The day after the photo was taken, an attractive young female in jeans entered the store, and while browsing near the software actually lit up a cigarette. Nicholas Easter just happened to be the nearest clerk, or Co-Manager, or whatever he was, and he politely approached the woman and asked her to stop smoking. She pretended to be frustrated by this, even insulted, and tried to provoke him. He maintained his tactful manner, explained to her that the store had a strict no-smoking policy. She was welcome to smoke elsewhere. 'Does smoking bother you?' she had asked, taking a puff. 'Not really,' he had answered. 'But it bothers the man who owns this store.' He then asked her once again to stop. She really wanted to purchase a new digital radio, she explained, so would it be possible for him to



fetch an ashtray. Nicholas pulled an empty soft drink can from under the counter, and actually took the cigarette from her and extinguished it. They talked about radios for twenty minutes as she struggled with the selection. She flirted shamelessly, and he warmed to the occasion. After paying for the radio, she left him her phone number. He promised to call.

The episode lasted twenty-four minutes and was captured by a small recorder hidden in her purse. The tape had been played both times while his face had been projected on the wall and studied by the lawyers and their experts. Her written report of the incident was in the file, six typed pages of her observations on everything from his shoes (old Nikes) to his breath (cinnamon gum) to his vocabulary (college level) to the way he handled the cigarette. In her opinion, and she was experienced in such matters, he had never smoked.

They listened to his pleasant tone and his professional sales pitch and his charming chatter, and they liked him. He was bright and he didn't hate tobacco. He didn't fit as their model juror, but he was certainly one to watch. The problem with Easter, potential juror number fifty-six, was that they knew so little about him. Evidently, he had landed on the Gulf Coast less than a year ago, and they had no idea where he came from. His past was a complete mystery. He rented a one-bedroom eight blocks from the Biloxi courthouse – they had photos of the apartment building – and at first worked as a waiter in a casino on the beach. He rose quickly to the rank of blackjack dealer, but quit after two months.

Shortly after Mississippi legalized gambling, a dozen casinos along the Coast sprang forth overnight, and a new wave of prosperity hit hard. Job seekers came from all directions, and so it was safe to assume Nicholas Easter arrived in Biloxi for the same reason as ten