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Details emerge in alleged plot to extort family of Claire's founder

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Palm Beach Sheriff's Office

Camille Brown

The former housekeeper's daughter threatened to disgrace the family by spilling embarrassing secrets — unless they paid her \$3 million.

Instead of counting money, Camille Brown, 31, is sitting in a jail cell, facing extortion charges.

Police say Brown attempted to blackmail a prominent Broward County family, saying she would release to the media more than 50 letters penned by the family matriarch and allegedly containing sensitive personal information.

Brown, of Plantation, made the threats in a Sept. 25 email to Bonnie Schaefer, daughter of Rowland Schaefer, founder Claire's Stores, Inc., the Pembroke Pines-based chain of jewelry and fashion accessory shops, according to a probable cause affidavit filed by Florida Department of Law Enforcement agent James O. Born.

Brown appeared before Palm Beach Circuit Judge Joseph Marx Wednesday morning for an arraignment hearing. She did not enter a plea.

Marx set Brown's bail at \$200,000, and she remained in custody at Palm Beach County's main jail as of late Wednesday.

Guy Fronstin, Brown's defense attorney, suggested in an email to The Miami Herald that police may have acted inappropriately in arresting his client.

"Our firm intends to follow-up on numerous issues with law enforcement," Fronstin wrote, "that once revealed will shed a very different light on the allegations against her."

According to the police report, Brown first contacted Bonnie Schaefer via email, and identified herself as the daughter of Coleen Parkes, a recently released housekeeper for Rowland and Sylvia Schaefer, who live in Hollywood.

In the email, Brown stated that she was in possession of personal letters written by Sylvia Schaefer, the 89-year-old family matriarch, and she made accusations regarding personal family issues, Born wrote in the report.

"Now Bonnie, how would you feel about the world knowing about the darker side of 'The Incredible Rowland Shafer'?" the email reads.

Brown then threatened to release the letters to media and disgrace the family, the police report states.

The email, according to Born's report, continues: "Promptly respond with a show of commitment to protecting your family's name and the reputation of your father. Otherwise, the letters will go to the highest bidder — CNN, Time, Forbes, etc., etc. Attached are samples of some of your mother's 50-plus letters for your convenience, they make for excellent reading."

At Born's behest, Bonnie Schaefer replied to Brown's email and asked for a phone number where a family representative could contact her and handle the matter.

Brown provided a phone number that Born then matched with her name, according to the police report, and Brown's driver license listed the same address as Parkes', the former housekeeper for the Schaefers.

Born reported that he went undercover as the family representative, and arranged to meet Brown in the lobby of a Boynton Beach hotel twice in October to negotiate a settlement.

At the first meeting, on Oct. 2, Brown arrived driving a green Toyota registered to her mother, according to the police report.

She demanded "fair market value" for return of the letters and a pledge not to disclose the information, Born wrote.

When Born asked how much money she wanted, Brown reportedly pulled a yellow index card from her purse with the phrase "\$3 million" written on it.

Born reported that he tried to negotiate a lower price, but Brown refused and started to leave.

Ultimately, the FDLE agent agreed to Brown's demand, and then produced a pre-written agreement stating that she would not disclose the information.

Born reported that he filled in the \$3 million price on the agreement, and that Brown signed the contract and initialed the figure.

Brown also said she wanted the money wired to her account, and produced another yellow index card containing her bank account information, according to the report.

But that first meeting merely set the stage for a sting.

Born reported he arranged a second meeting with Brown for Tuesday at the same hotel, and that he recorded the meeting and stored the documents.

At the second meeting, Born asked Brown for some of Sylvia Schaefer's letters in return for the wire transfer, according to the report.

Once Brown produced the letters, Born reported, he asked her to sign a new contract saying that the transaction was complete.

As Brown left the hotel, she was arrested without incident.

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sun-sentinel.com/news/local/breakingnews/fl-claires-blackmail-case-20130324,0,1208372.story

South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Woman sought \$3 million to hush up 'darker side' of South Florida family that founded Claire's Stores, police say

By Jon Burstein, Sun Sentinel

March 24, 2013

She said she had damaging information about a wealthy South Florida family. The trim man in a blue suit claimed to represent the family.

"What do you feel is fair to get the correspondence back?" he asked. They sat in a hotel lobby, smooth jazz piped in from the speakers above them.

"I feel fair-market value is fair," answered the younger woman, wearing a blouse typically worn by home healthcare workers. She unzipped her purse, pulled out a yellow index card and passed it to him. He looked at the number written on the card.

"I'm sorry. That ... three million dollars?" he asked.

"That's the minimum. That's the minimum," she said.


By the following week, the woman — who authorities say is the daughter of the family's former housekeeper — would be in jail. She would be accused of a blackmail plot that seems scripted for a television drama.

Audiotapes and police records recently obtained by the Sun Sentinel detail how the investigation and arrest went down.

Bonnie Schaefer is hardly a household name, but the company her family built is well known to pre-teen and teenage girls, and their parents. Her father, Rowland Schaefer, founded Claire's, the accessory and jewelry retailer often found in shopping malls. With more than 3,000 stores worldwide, it's where girls can buy Justin Bieber T-shirts and macrame bracelets.

Bonnie Schaefer and her sister, Marla, took over running the company in 2002 after their father had a stroke. Five years later, Claire's sold for \$3.1 billion to a private equity firm. Total value of the family's holdings: more than \$239 million, according to published reports.

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The sale didn't affect where the parents — Rowland, 96, and Sylvia, 89 — lived. They stayed in the same Hollywood home they had been in for years.

And for about 15 of those years, their housekeeper was the same woman — Coleen Parkes, according to police reports.

But the Schaefer family's attorney wrote in court documents that Parkes began threatening her co-workers, refusing to do her job and failing to prepare food to meet the Schaefer's medical needs.

She was fired on Sept. 22.

Three days later, an email arrived in Bonnie Schaefer's in-box just before midnight. It came from an email account in the name of Parkes' daughter, police records show.

The subject: "Letters from home."

"My name is Camille Brown," the message began. "I hope this e-mail finds you in the best of spirits."

The writer accused Rowland Schaefer of mistreating Parkes and of threatening the housekeeper to maintain her silence.

Conditions on the job got so bad that Brown accompanied her mother to work for two weeks, according to the email. During that time, Sylvia Schaefer gave Brown letters she wrote detailing family secrets, the email states.

The email went on to offer glimpses of what allegedly are in Sylvia Schaefer's letters. The Sun Sentinel is not publishing those deeply personal accusations, which the newspaper could not verify. The family's lawyer said neither he nor the family will be discussing the case.

The letter writer claimed that Forbes often would come home crying from the Schaefer's house.

"I have watched my mother cry as she comes home from working in your family's home and your family didn't even have the decency to terminate her with dignity. I have retired my mother in a foreign country so that she can live out the rest of her life with the peace that she deserves. Now Bonnie, how would you feel about the world knowing about the darker side of 'The Incredible Rowland Shaefer' [sic]."

The message warned that details of the family's personal life would be spilled to the media, unless they acted:

"The original copies of the letters I own are in a safety deposit box with instructions in the hands of my attorney to make them public in the event of my untimely demise. I often wondered why your mother gave these documents to me. God works in mysterious ways. Promptly respond with a show of commitment to protecting your family's name and the reputation of your father. Otherwise the letters will go to the highest bidder — CNN, Time, Forbes, etc. etc. Attached are samples of some of your mother's 50 plus letters for your convenience. They make for excellent reading."

Bonnie Schaefer answered three days later, police records show.

"Ms. Brown,

I have received your message. I am in North Carolina and ask that in my absence you coordinate the transaction with my attorney. Any transaction between us would have to involve all of mother's letters/diaries and not just a few. I will also require assurances that you have not already disclosed this to the media. Please send me a phone number where he may contact you as soon as he can.

Bonnie Schaefer"

A few days later, Brown, 32, received a call from James O'Neal, according to police records. O'Neal said he represented Bonnie Schaefer. He arranged to meet Brown on Oct. 2 at 1 p.m., in the lobby of the Hampton Inn & Suites in Boynton Beach.

"It would be easier if Ms. Schaefer were down here, but she's not coming back over here for a month and she doesn't want to be involved," he said on the phone. "And I don't blame her. This is the kind of stuff we handle all the time, not for her, but for other people."

The conversation was being recorded by O'Neal.

If someone searches the name "James O'Neal" in Google, the second result that comes up is a website dedicated to an author who writes futuristic police thrillers under the pen name "James O' Neal."

That author is James O. Born, a Florida crime writer who consulted on the short-lived television drama "Karen Sisco" about a female U.S. Marshal.

Born has excellent credentials for writing crime novels: He is a special agent with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

It turned out that Bonnie Schaefer had wasted little time alerting authorities to the threatening e-mail.

Born wore a wire to the hotel meeting, recording the conversation. After the woman in the caretaker's blouse presented the \$3 million figure, he said it was too much. She got up to leave.

"Ma'am, can we discuss this at all?" he asked.

"That's the minimum. I can go higher, but nothing lower," she said.

"Let me ask you this — could we do this in installments?" he asked.

"That's a possibility," she said.

Born eventually agreed to wire the money and had her sign a confidentiality agreement. He asked her where he could wire the money.

That's when she reached into her purse and pulled out a second yellow index card bearing the name "Camille Brown" and bank account and routing numbers, according to FDLE reports.

A phone call the next week set up a final meeting at the Hampton Inn. The woman agreed to bring a third of the letters if the Schaefer family would wire \$1 million, with the rest of the money coming in 30 days, according to the audiotape of the conversation.

The woman came into the lobby with a stack of the letters and handed them to the undercover agent, who was wearing a wire again. The conversation was recorded.

"Those are the originals," she said. "I have copies for my records."

"OK, we're going to insist there are no copies," the undercover agent said.

"You'll get copies of everything along with the other originals upon final," she said.

The undercover agent pretended to call a bank official to wire the money. He also asked her to sign a second agreement.

"For the total payment of \$3,000,000 in US currency demanded by Camille Brown, all efforts to coerce, control, blackmail or extort the Schaefer family or any associated businesses will end and not be resumed," it said. The woman signed.

When she left the lobby, she found three FDLE agents waiting to arrest her. She declined to talk with the agents after she was read her constitutional rights.

"Just take me to where you are going to take me," she said, according to police reports.

Brown was taken to the Palm Beach County Jail and booked. She has pleaded not guilty to an extortion charge.

She's now living with her mother in Plantation while free on a \$75,000 bond. Court records indicate she is a school curriculum coordinator, but do not detail where she works.

Brown declined to comment last week to a reporter about the case.

Her attorney, Guy Fronstin, said she wants her day in court to clear her name.

"From our perspective, Ms. Brown is not guilty," Fronstin said. "We are going to be defending her case in court and proving it was a misunderstanding and clearly not a situation of bribery, blackmail or extortion."

He declined to elaborate about her possible defenses.

There is still the matter of what happened to the other letters.

The Schaefer family's attorney, William N. Shepherd, filed a lawsuit last month against Brown and her mother to get them back.

"Instead of making arrangements for the immediate return of the property, plaintiff [Bonnie Schaefer] has information and belief that the defendants [Brown and Parkes] seek to return the property only if final resolution of Ms. Brown's criminal litigation results in a probation sentence," Shepherd wrote.

"The value of the property cannot be numerically quantified."

Brown is scheduled to go to trial June 24 in Palm Beach County Circuit Court. If convicted, she could face up to 15 years in prison.

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