

Indiscreet

A Timothy Jarrett Mystery

Mack Thornton

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Books in the Timothy Jarrett mystery series

Wounds So Deep

Indiscreet

Mack Thornton

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CHAPTER 1

“Will the witness please stand and raise his right hand?”

I did.

“State your name for the court.”

“Timothy Jarrett.”

“Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

“I do.”

“You may be seated.”

I settled into the creaky straight back wooden chair mounted upon the raised wooden platform. Supposedly that was so that the witness could be seated and yet remain at eye level with the attorneys. But the judge still sat higher than the rest. The top of his bench came to just about an inch above my nose, so I had to turn and tilt my head back to reply whenever he addressed me.

The Honorable Scott Duncan seemed a tad young to me to be a District Judge; mid forties was my

guess, though he could have been older than that. I didn't get a real good look at him as I craned my neck back to peer over the edge of his big wooden bench like an eight year old summoned to the principal's office.

The courtroom seemed to be a little dark to me, even though two large chandeliers hung directly over the center of the room and the spectator gallery. Numerous electrified wall sconces illuminated upward along the two side walls, and yet there still retained a gloomy and foreboding atmosphere in the place. Perhaps that was the original intention. It certainly wouldn't be proper to have a bright and cheery ambiance about when sentencing a multiple murderer to the gallows.

A wooden railing ran across the front of the witness box about chest high. It appeared very shiny and smooth, most likely from years of court cases and countless lawyers resting their palms and elbows on it while grilling eye witnesses and weeping defendants. I, of course, assumed a non-threatening posture – sitting up straight with my hands clasped in my lap. I didn't want to give the attorneys any impression of being hostile toward the defendant. There were plenty of others in that courtroom who were hostile enough, most of them in the law-enforcement or judicial sector.

I surmised that the court trial of Ricky Muscelli could take a while. Although my part in it was small, as a witness I knew one could wait hours or even days before being called to the stand. And yet, this was a fairly open and shut case of armed robbery. Murder trials could take several weeks or even longer. I

expected this particular trial to be over in a few days. The wheels of justice can move fairly quickly when it comes to putting a thug with criminal ties in the hoosegow. Ricky was looking at some real jail time, though he may plea down to a suspended sentence if he ratted on his family gangster members. Slim chance of that.

After waiting over a week to be called to the witness stand, I finally got my day in court. Good thing I didn't have any hot projects on my agenda that needed to be tended to. Such was the life of a private investigator. You could never rely on having any steady business or a guaranteed income. There were times when I got two or three cases in a day and other times I wouldn't have a single item all week. I often filled in the gaps between cases by investigating claims filed with local insurance companies. Whenever I felt a lull in my case load, I'd ask my secretary Julie Marsh to call up some insurance firms and offer my assistance in checking out some of their more dubious claims. Their own adjusters would usually go through the formalities of setting up an appointment with the customer before paying them a visit and not surprisingly finding exactly what they expected – a kayak fell on my leg, I have a rash that keeps me from working, an alligator bit me on the behind.

I, on the other hand, tended to be a bit sneakier. I would often pose as a door-to-door salesman, gleaning the real scoop from the lady of the house or a nosey neighbor. Or I would pretend to be an actual claims adjuster, popping in unexpectedly to catch the doubted client unawares.

The insurance companies usually gave me the more outlandish or higher-ticket claims to investigate in order to make it worthwhile for them to justify my fairly modest fee. I didn't mind. Some of those nutty cases actually helped add a little spice and variety to my otherwise routine profession.

Not to say that I didn't glean my share of screwy assignments on my own. One of my more recent cases proved to be quite an interesting one. I didn't know whether to classify it under missing persons or mistaken identity. Come to think of it, I don't believe I had a case file for questionable infidelity as yet.

Ralph Forrest was a husband in his early thirties who suspected his wife was having an affair and wanted to employ me to help dispel his fears. Either that or have me find evidence to support his suspicions. Apparently his bride of nearly ten years recently started making mysterious trips alone at night, usually on a Friday or Saturday evening for several hours without offering any explanation of her whereabouts. Ralph thought maybe she just wanted to get away from their 4 and 7 year old daughters for a spell. But when her disappearances started to become more frequent, the worried husband feared that she was seeing another man. Forrest found my name listed in the telephone directory and set up an appointment through my secretary Julie Marsh last Friday morning. He figured his wife might be going out again that night and hired me to tail her.

I invited the man to come down to my office. When husbands or wives employed me to check up on their spouses, I found it a good practice to have them meet me in a place away from home. That way

there's no chance the target might walk in on us or eavesdrop on our plans. It also gave me the opportunity to meet the client on neutral territory. People tended to behave differently while entertaining guests. I wanted to see for myself how the client behaved alone. Usually when adultery is suspected, the problem begins in the home or with their mate. Sometimes loving a person just isn't enough. A spouse may resort to an adulterous affair only when they no longer received the attention or affection they need from their married partner. No matter how much they may love their spouse, people often turn to outsiders to fill that much needed void in their lives.

Meeting Ralph Forrest on my own terms could provide the reason for his wife's disappearances without him even realizing it.

Forrest arrived a few minutes before four o'clock. My secretary Julie showed him into my office and left us alone, closing the door behind her. The man crossed to my desk and offered his hand. "Ralph Forrest," he announced somewhat pensively.

I rose from my desk chair and accepted his shake. It wasn't too firm or too limp. A normal grip, though his palm was slightly damp. Probably from sheer nervousness. Heck, it probably wasn't every day that the man hired a private investigator, let alone one to check up on his wife.

"Timothy Jarrett. Please, have a seat."

"Thanks." The man sat in one of the wooden chairs in front of my desk. He was a slender man wearing a nice charcoal gray suit, white shirt and dark blue tie. The suit was at least two years old and his shoes had some scuffmarks on them. Didn't exactly

strike me as the compulsively neat type. His black hair was cut short, no moustache or beard. A fairly handsome fellow.

I was looking for some reason why his wife might become interested in another man. Sometimes when men were overly organized or fastidious in manner it could lead their wives to distraction or insanity. But Forrest had a natural pleasantness to his demeanor, was good looking, and didn't appear to be egotistical or overbearing.

“What is it that you do for a living?” I asked.

“I'm the bookkeeper for a tool and die plant on the East side of town.”

“And how long have you been there?”

“Four and a half years.”

“Do you often work late? Put in long hours away from your family?”

“No. I'm usually home before six every evening.”

The man wrinkled his brow and returned a puzzled expression. “Why so much interest in me? I thought you were supposed to be checking up on my wife.”

“Most women have a reason for the things they do. Not always, but usually. If Mrs. Forrest – “

“Linda.”

“If Linda is indeed seeing another man, I want to try to get a fix on the reasoning behind it. Catching her in the act may stop her this time, but unless we discover the real reasons behind her actions, she's likely to try it again in the future.”

“So you think the problem lies with me?”

“I don't think so. I happen to consider myself a fairly good judge of character and I believe you to be earnest and sincere in your desire to find what your

wife is up to. It isn't a matter of ego or trying to control her. You seem genuinely concerned for the woman."

"I love her, and it's tearing me up not knowing what she's been up to. I hate being suspicious of her, but I can't help myself."

"I understand."

"I would follow her myself," he added, "but I'm afraid she might spot me and change her meeting times and locations."

"See won't spot me," I said.

"Also, I was afraid of what I might find," he continued. "I guess it would feel less of a shock coming from someone else rather than seeing it for myself."

"I understand," I nodded. "Today is Friday, and if she keeps to her regular schedule she'll be making a rendezvous this evening. I'll follow her if she goes out tonight and learn what she's been doing."

Forrest thanked me and left, leaving me to believe that it could very well be a long night for yours truly.

The man said his wife usually left the house around half-past eight, after the girls were tucked in bed. I arrived at their neighborhood around seven just to be sure I wouldn't miss her. I parked about four houses away under the shadow of a huge oak tree and waited. If Linda Forrest suspected something was up and canceled her plans or tried to slip out another exit, I might find myself sitting under that oak tree for a very long time.

Stakeouts were usually tiresome and boring exercises. You always had to keep an eye open so as not to miss your quarry. I tried to catch a quick nap at

my desk that afternoon so I'd be refreshed and awake just in case Mrs. Forrest took her sweet time in leaving the house. I also brought along the day's newspaper to keep my mind occupied. There was nothing of note in the news, and even the sports reviews proved only mildly interesting.

Just as expected, at 8:30 on the dot I noticed a tall willowy brunette emerge from their front door and climb into the family sedan. It wasn't completely dark out yet so I got a pretty good look at the car as she pulled from the driveway and headed my way. I studied the woman's countenance as she passed me. She was a handsome lady of about 27 or so, slender face and dark eyes. Still very pretty for a housewife with two kids. I turned the car around in the street and motored after her. She headed downtown and I followed at a discreet distance to make sure she didn't spot a tail. Not that she would – I was much too sneaky and experienced for that.

Linda Forrest turned off the main drag and steered into the parking lot of a cabaret on Lowell Drive.

Café DuCat.

I pulled into the lot after her. The woman drove around the side of the building and parked in the back. Made sense. It's always a safe bet to keep a low profile when arranging a clandestine rendezvous. I parked a few cars away and watched her enter the building through the service door.

Curious.

I decided to try the less than stealthy approach and go in through the front of the establishment.

Café DuCat was a quaint little place, dimly lit with large pictures of Parisian cabarets on the walls.

About thirty or more patrons populated the small round tables in the main room. There was a bar running along the left wall. I crossed over and hopped up onto a wooden barstool. A petite young blonde appeared behind the counter wearing a long sleeve white shirt, black slacks and bow tie. “Can I get you something?” she smiled prettily, setting a paper napkin before me.

“Not just yet,” I replied, my eyes scanning the darkened room. “I’m waiting for someone.”

“Well, let me know when you’re ready.” She wandered off to tend to another customer.

I didn’t spot Mrs. Forrest anywhere. Two other girls wearing white shirts and bowties were off attending customers at the tables. Neither of them looked to be my charge. I was sure I saw the woman enter through the service door, though I’d be surprised if she took to sneaking out of the house at night just to wait on tables.

There was a soft spotlight on a man tinkling the ivories on a white baby grand piano in the far corner of the room. He was just finishing up his rendition of a vaguely familiar show tune – Cole Porter was my guess. The audience applauded unenthusiastically. Another man wearing a gray suit jacket and no tie stepped up to a microphone stand at the end of the piano. “And now, ladies and gentlemen,” he announced proudly. “Please give a warm *Café DuCat* welcome to the fabulous Miss Dallas Monroe!”

He stepped aside and a woman appeared from behind the pleated curtain. Well, well – if it wasn’t the elusive Mrs. Linda Forrest, A.K.A. Dallas Monroe herself. She wore a clingy ankle-length red sequin

gown, sleeveless with a deep scooping neckline and thin spaghetti straps over her bare shoulders. Very nice. As the applause died down, the piano man played a few opening bars and she began to sing.

*You made me love you -
I didn't want to do it,
I didn't want to do it -*

Also very nice. A beautiful contralto voice with a hint of tremolo. At least, that was what my uneducated musical ear could discern. This girl could definitely carry a tune as well as being easy on the eyes. What I couldn't figure out was why she wanted to keep this talent a secret from her husband?

I nodded to my petite blonde behind the bar. "I think I'll have that drink after all."

Miss Monroe crooned and exquisite rendition of *Moon River* and finished the set with *Pennies from Heaven*. Sensational. Her gestures and facial expression relayed that she truly loved performing for an audience. And the audience truly enjoyed her entertaining them. The lady bowed her head to the genuinely enthusiastic applause and exited the stage through the pleated curtain.

She emerged from behind the stage as the piano man played another vaguely familiar show tune. Miss Monroe crossed the room over my way and stopped at the bar a few seats down from me. "Vodka Collins, Connie," she instructed the young barmaid, resting her forearms on the counter.

"That was absolutely sensational," I said sincerely.

The woman turned to me and smiled warmly.
“Thank you.”

“Why I can’t seem to figure out,” I pondered, sliding from my stool and moving to her side, “is why you don’t let your husband know you’re singing here.”

Miss Dallas Monroe wrinkled her brow with a puzzled expression. “I don’t understand.”

“Your husband Ralph came to see me this morning,” I explained quietly. “He’s worried about you.”

The woman’s face suddenly went pale. “Who are you?” she gasped, her eyes wide.

“A private investigator. Your husband was concerned about your mysterious comings and goings late at night. He was afraid you might be seeing another man.”

The singer collapsed onto a barstool. I took the seat next to her. “I would never think about cheating on Ralph,” she whimpered in a tiny voice.

“Ralph was worried about you. Your clandestine activities were giving him cause for concern.”

“I can see how he could see it that way. I guess I just never expected things to get so crazy. I wasn’t thinking about Ralph and the girls. I never wanted to hurt them or make them worry about me.”

“But why didn’t you tell Ralph about your singing here at night?”

Miss Monroe looked at me with a pained expression. “Because he would think I was unhappy with our marriage.”

“Are you?”

“No! I love Ralph and our two darling little girls. I love my life with them and would never do anything to hurt them.” She expelled her breath in a deep dejected sigh and looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. “But I also love singing too. I was going to make a career out of it when I was a younger woman. But then I met Ralph and got married and then the girls came along. I guess my life sorta got put on hold, you know? One morning I woke up and realized my dream was slipping away from me. I guess the desire to perform overtook me, and I had to find out if I could still carry a tune after all those years. I just needed to know if I could still sing.”

“You have an incredible voice,” I stated sincerely.

She looked at me with a wan smile. “Thank you.”

“So why didn’t you tell Ralph?”

“I was afraid he would think I was unhappy with him . . . with the life we had made together. I wouldn’t give up my life with him for anything, but I wasn’t ready to give up on my dream again either. Not just yet.”

“He needs to find out about this double life you’re leading,” I stated soberly. “Sooner or later, it’s going to come between you two.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“I’m not sure which would be less painful – hearing about it from me or from you.” I pondered my options for a moment. “Were you planning on singing here again tomorrow night?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Here’s what you’re going to do. Tomorrow is Saturday. You tell Ralph you want to come clean about what you’ve been doing at night

these past few weeks. But you want it to be a surprise. A good surprise, but you have to show him in person. Bring the girls along, too. I'm sure they'd get a kick out of seeing their mother perform like a real star in front of a live audience."

"I don't know," she hedged.

"What is Ralph's favorite song?"

"*Come Rain or Come Shine*," she smiled warmly. "They played it at our wedding."

"Perfect," I nodded. "Sing that. What husband can resist hearing his lovely wife singing their wedding song?"

The woman brightened. "I suppose you're right. I guess I couldn't keep this a secret forever."

"And you shouldn't. That's what marriage is all about – sharing the good things as well as the troubles. And in my humble opinion, I would say this is one of the good things."

"But what about you?" she asked. "What will you tell Ralph?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "I'll just say I followed you downtown, and I thought I caught up with you, but you turned out to be another woman."

Linda laughed. "Clever."

"I have my moments."

"But won't you still need to be paid for your efforts?"

"I'll tell you what – how's about you sing *Melancholy Baby* for me tonight and we'll call it even."

Miss Forrest/Monroe brightened. "*Melancholy Baby* coming right up!" She placed her hand on top

of mine. “Thank you for being so understanding, Mister – ?”

“Jarrett,” I said. “But you can call me Tim.”

She nodded. “I’ll do what you say. Hopefully Ralph and the kids will understand.”

“There’s nothing wrong with pursuing your dream. Just don’t let it blind you to all the great things you already have.” Dallas smiled and squeezed my hand. She slid from the barstool and picked up her drink. “One more thing,” I added. “That dress looks absolutely sensational on you.”

The lady beamed brightly. “Thank you, Tim.”

“No . . . thank *you*.”

She crossed to the piano player and whispered my request in his ear. The man nodded and continued playing *Can’t Stop Lovin’ Dat Man* from *Porgy and Bess*.

Tim, I smiled. Hearing that come from the lips of a lovely woman was payment enough.

And so they lived happily ever after.

At least, I liked to think so.

I wanted to believe that some of the work I did resulted in a positive outcome and not just uncovering the lies, deception and destruction people inflicted upon one another. The Forrest’s had a real chance of making it through this rough patch of road. Dallas Monroe could continue her singing career and Ralph Forrest would have the peace of mind knowing his wife wasn’t seeing other men. They both appeared to be caring and loving people. Maybe their little girls would grow up with their mother’s conviction to follow their dreams and heart’s desire.

Hey, anything was possible.

And I preferred to make up my own happy endings.

The Prosecuting Attorney asked me, “Is the man you have described to the jury present in this courtroom?”

“Yes.”

“Will you please identify him for the jury?”

I pointed to the well-dressed young man wearing a gray suit and steel blue tie sitting calmly at the defendant’s table. “There he is,” I said.

Chief Prosecutor Charles Addison turned to the panel of four men and eight women on my left. “Let the record show,” he said to the court reporter while facing the jury, “that the witness has identified Richard Thomas Muscelli as the man he claims to have planned and executed a daring robbery attempt upon the Brinks Company armored vehicle on the evening of March 19th of this year.”

Everyone in the jury turned their attention to Ricky Muscelli, who met their gaze with a sneer of hatred and contempt. Ricky was always that way – a conceited little thug who thought he was the next John Dillinger or Baby Face Nelson. It was only natural, coming from a family of criminals, starting with his Grandpa Joe *the Moose* Muscelli.

Joe “The Moose” Muscelli was a supposedly retired gangster from the prohibition days. His two sons, Andrew and Anthony, took over the family business, though Joe preferred to stay involved to a limited degree. Joe was a slim, elderly man with wisps of white hair who limped slowly aided by a straight black cane with an ivory handle. His hip was

shattered by a stray bullet during a shootout with his hooch-peddling rival Shorty Simpkins in one of Joe's speakeasies back in the roaring twenties, leaving the man with a permanent limp. Shorty got the worst of it – his cadaver carted off to the morgue with a huge chunk of bar mirror protruding from his chest.

Since those days, Moose delegated much of the family business to his two sons, though it wasn't beneath the old man to prove he still ran things by sending a message to rival gangs. Occasionally you might hear of one of Joe's competitors getting gunned down outside his place of business or perhaps disappearing altogether, most likely off the East River Bridge sporting fifty feet of heavy chains and a couple of cement blocks. The police would spend little time investigating these crimes because, well, one less gangster wasn't exactly bad news. Ricky's uncle Anthony ran the quiet side of the family business – gambling, prostitution and running numbers, while his late father Andrew previously handled the tough stuff like racketeering, bootlegging and protection.

Joe's eldest son Andrew Muscelli met his untimely demise about a year earlier when he and his wife and their bodyguard were gunned down in a Sicilian restaurant gangland style by a rival syndicate. The Moose was understandably upset by the whole ordeal, taking his grief out on the rival mobsters with such fury that there wasn't enough left of them to fill a small casket.

Andrew left behind a single son, Ricky. Joe took the hot-headed teenager under his wing and tried to raise him as best he could. Unfortunately, the kid had

no sense for business and the desire to outshine other members of his grand pappy's organization proved to be much too strong. Ricky was a reckless impetuous teen with a chip on his shoulder out to establish himself in the criminal world.

Little Ricky naturally thought he'd pick up the family operation where his father left off. But the old mobster Joe thought the kid was too young and raw to handle those types of operations. He was right. Ricky was brazen, undisciplined, cocky and just plain stupid – a bad combination in a career as a criminal. So the boy set out to prove himself to Grandpa Joe by attempting to knock over a Brink's armored truck. That would get the old man's attention and the respect he deserved. Unfortunately for Ricky, the caper was poorly planned and he also broadcast his little scheme to everyone in Delaney's Pool Hall two days before the heist. Not exactly brilliant by any means. As luck would have it, I happened to be within earshot of the whole plan that night, staking out the seedy little bar as a possible connection to a stolen car chop-shop ring.

I decided to make a telephone call to the bank and the Brink's company, offering my information and services (for a small fee, of course) to avert the impending felonious assault. Both parties were quite happy to accept my assistance and rewarded me generously when the band of criminals was foiled in the act.

Police Lieutenant Bill Rutland was on hand at the scene to take the credit for catching the ruffians red-handed and without firing a shot. Quite a feather in his cap as well as the accolades from the top brass for

apprehending another of the nefarious family's criminal members. I was called upon at the legal proceedings as a witness, stating for the record what I overheard that night at the pool hall and fingering Ricky as the mastermind of the group and orchestrator of the crime. Ricky Muscelli was caught dead to rights in the act of first-degree armed robbery, but it was my testimony that named him as the head of the gang.

And placed me on the top of the list of Muscelli Family enemies.

I noticed that "Moose" Muscelli was conspicuously absent from these proceedings, even though some weeks earlier he had warned me against testifying against his grandson. It surprised the police and my informants that Joe hadn't simply bumped me off to keep me silent. I had to admit it surprised me quite a bit as well. But Joe and I had developed an understanding between us. A form of respect, if you will. He respected me because I was an honest businessman and I respected the fact that he had the power to extinguish a life with the snap of his fingers. In any case, it raised my level of respect and awe within the law enforcement community and didn't hurt my self-esteem any.

It didn't surprise me that Moose kept away from these court proceedings, even though Ricky was his only grandson. A man in Joe's field of work tended to avoid places of legal prosecution and persecution whenever possible. And I felt fairly confident that Bill Rutland had plenty of plain-clothes officers scattered about the premises on the off-chance that

Ricky's Old Grandpa Joe might actually try to slip into his ward's trial undetected.

“The witness may step down.”

I picked up my brown fedora from the young blonde hatcheck girl and tipped her two bits. Not because she was pretty – which she was – but because I felt sorry for anyone who had to stand in a closet all day watching other people's outerwear.

I stepped outside into the bright sunshine and paused at the top of the courthouse steps to take in a deep breath of cool breeze. It was mid-afternoon and I didn't feel like going back to the office. My young and capable secretary Julie Marsh could manage quite well in my absence and I was sure that any business that arose while I was away at court could certainly wait until morning.

June 21st – the first day of summer.

It didn't feel like summer yet. The days were still mild and the nights cool. Just the way I liked it. I didn't much care for hot weather. Come to think of it, I wasn't too keen on cold weather either.

Springtime was my favorite time of year. The grass was starting to turn green again and flowers would soon begin to sprout and bloom. And it wasn't so hot that you'd work up a sweat just strolling down the sidewalk to the corner drugstore.

Wintertime in the cold insensitive city left you feeling bleak and empty. Everything seemed to take on a gray hue from the sky to the trees and the buildings. Even the inhabitants of our teeming

metropolis developed a discernable lack of color, a washed out pallor as they huddled into themselves and scurried along the icy sidewalk or hibernated in their cozy homes at night. Winter reminded me too much of death . . . pale, unfeeling and cold.

And then there was summer. Scorching, sweltering, unbearable heat as you ducked from shade to shadow seeking out tiny pockets of relief and praying for a cool refreshing breeze. Even ogling the young ladies with their bare gams beneath loose skirts and those skimpy tops lost its flavor as you sweated and baked in the miserable heat.

And autumn? Merely a foreboding that another cold depressing winter lay just around the corner.

Nope. Spring was officially over and summer had begun, leaving us those long, hot, sticky days to look forward to.

But for the time being, it was still spring-like and mild. My favorite time of year.

And I had the afternoon all to myself.

I decided to motor over to *Houlihan's Pub* for a beer. Maybe I would find my friend Rita there. Rita was an aging prostitute in her late thirties, a little past her prime but still with a handsome face, fair figure and a number of regulars as clients. She and I got along rather well and I felt that a smiling face would certainly be a welcome sight after spending all day in a dreary courtroom testifying against one of the Muscelli's.

That woman was one of my best friends. You wouldn't know it, but I didn't have an over-abundance of friends to speak of, though it surely couldn't be due to my magnetic personality.

Admittedly, I could be a tad rough around the edges and perhaps a bit curt at times when I had to bust a thug in the chops for stealing a lady's purse or cold-cock some creep with the butt of my .38 revolver for kidnapping a rich family's child for ransom. But for the most part I was a fairly decent chap and an honest fellow. And I was truthful to a fault, partly because I was a horrible liar.

No sirree, a lack of friends couldn't be because of *moi*.

My great lack of close companions was most likely due to the unusual occupation I held. People tended not to get too familiar with guys who made a living from digging into their private affairs or peeping through keyholes and windows to rattle the bones of the family skeletons they kept hidden in their dark closets. Maybe folks wondered if they might become my next quarry and whether every secret they told me in confidence would be aired in public and used against them.

Rita had nothing to fear from me. She bared herself quite literally and had no secrets to conceal. Not that I would ever betray her trust. Or belittle her because of the questionable profession she was in. I met a number of streetwalking ladies as a beat cop and also as a P.I. probing the city's underbelly in search of clues on a case. Most of them performed their hired task with either clinical detachment or dispassionate indifference, going through the moves to get the job over as quickly as possible. But Rita was different. She actually liked her chosen career. She enjoyed being with people and always had a positive outlook towards life. In many ways I wished

I could share her optimism and zest for living. Maybe that's why I maintained such a long-lasting relationship with the woman. I thought that if I was exposed to her cheerful disposition long enough, some of it might penetrate my dour attitude toward my job, the city, and those sneaky, conniving underhanded scoundrels who lived in it.

Filthy vermin like Little Ricky and the rest of the Muscelli tribe.

Spending the afternoon in a courtroom having a relation of our city's most ruthless and notorious gangsters staring at you with vehemence and hatred could lower anyone's spirits down a notch or two.

Even though it was a perfect spring day and I was finally away from that depressing courtroom environment, I still felt I needed a bit of friendly conversation to help cheer me up. And a beer or two would help to put the world in proper perspective.

Rita wasn't at the bar when I arrived, so I ordered a draught of Schlitz and hopped onto a stool at the end of the counter by the radio where a boxing match was being broadcast.

What a pleasant way to spend an afternoon. All that was missing was some female company.

"Is this seat taken?"

I glanced over my shoulder to find a young, slender and extremely handsome redheaded lady standing at my side. I didn't flinch. I suspected this fair maiden wasn't interested in flirting with me. Not that I didn't attract my share of comely ladies with my gruff exterior and underlying sensitivity. Or my unkempt, disheveled appearance that brought out the maternal instincts in them. I just figured it was still

too early in the day for a lady to be seeking male companionship, and from the looks of this delicious doll, I doubted she had any trouble attracting guys whenever she desired.

I shrugged a shoulder with indifference. “Help yourself.”

The redhead slid her fine physique onto the stool next to mine and signaled the bartender for a vodka gimlet. I sat and listened to the fight on the radio, ignoring my nearby companion. No sense wasting energy pursuing an unattainable goal. When her drink arrived, the lady took a sip and twirled the glass on the countertop with her slender fingers. “I saw you in court today,” she quietly commented to no one in particular.

Just as I suspected. A darned reporter. I assumed this dame was not interested in any hanky-panky with yours truly, though I hoped that the possibility did exist, however remote. No, this girl wanted a scoop on the trial and followed me to the tavern for an exclusive interview.

I nodded to my beer. “Uh huh.” I hated underhandedness, especially when it came from pretty ladies. If the girl wanted something from me, why not just come right out and ask? No need to play silly games if you didn’t have to. *Sheesh*. A little honesty would be refreshing.

“Took a lot of guts to testify against Ricky Muscelli like you did.”

“Uh huh.” My brain was flipping through the catalog of reporters in the city. I doubted she was from any television or radio station. The gal would have boldly announced herself from the start and

invited me down to the studio for that night's news broadcast. And, though the name Muscelli still drew the interest of the general public, a petty criminal like Ricky was hardly worth national attention. No, she had to work for a local paper, possibly the *Daily Gazette*.

"Must have been pretty frightening, seeing that gangster sitting only a few feet away at the defendant's table, glaring at you as you told the jury how you devised a plan to catch him in the act."

"Uh huh."

Definitely not with the *Times*. My buddy Kevin Keyes would have told me if there was a real looker working with him at the paper. Very few women escaped his watchful eye or avoided his persistent hounding for a date. Nope, had to be the *Gazette*, recently transferred to the city beat from . . . *hmmm* . . . the fashion section, perhaps? Too young and personable for the society pages, too good looking to cover business. Yep. Fashion section, for sure.

"Where are my manners?" she giggled, offering her hand. "I'm Vicki."

I turning to her and accepted her shake. "Better known as Miss Victoria Paige from the *Daily Gazette*, recently transferred to the city beat from the fashion section."

Miss Paige offered a wide smile. "Wow! I'm truly impressed!"

I shrugged and returned to my beer. "I'm a detective. It's what I do."

"I meant what I said before," she continued. "It took a lot of courage to sit in the witness box and point out one of the city's most notorious gangsters."

“I wouldn’t call him that to his face,” I grunted, trying to catch the boxing altercation on the radio. “Printing that in your paper just might just buy yourself an unmarked grave along some lonely country lane.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about that sort of thing.”

I nodded to my beer, somehow feeling this conversation was far from over.

“I’d like to do an article on you,” she stated, sliding her delicate duff a little closer. “Local hero stands up to the mob – “

“I’m no hero,” I interrupted. “And I would prefer to maintain a certain level of anonymity for business purposes.” Adorable as this doll may be, she was nothing more than a news hound – the kind of reporter that runs roughshod over people’s lives just to get a scoop. The kind of reporter I tried my hardest to avoid, and this eager little lady was beginning to get on my nerves.

Miss Paige leaned forward and rested her elbow on the bar, probably trying another tact by shifting my attention to her nicely contoured bosom. The effect was marginal.

Okay – a teensy bit more than marginal.

“I can’t seem to figure you out, Mister Jarrett.”

“Call me Tim,” I replied dryly. “Since you prefer that I be on a first name basis with you.”

All right, I admit – slightly above marginal.

Vicki smiled warmly, most likely thinking she had hooked herself tomorrow’s headline. “What makes a man like you stand up against the Muscelli family? Either you have a death wish – “

I drained the last of my beer. “Maybe.”

“ – Or very brave – “

I signaled the barkeep for another draught. “Let’s not forget just plain nuts.”

“ – Or maybe you had something on the Muscelli’s,” she said. I sat silent as the bartender set another beer before me and accepted the two bits along with my empty mug. The woman was fishing, and I wasn’t going to bite. “Word on the street is that Joe Muscelli paid you a visit some weeks back. Maybe he offered you something to be on their side. Money? Maybe a job?”

I reeled on her, facing the woman for the first time, my eyes cold and hard as granite. All the color drained from her face and she looked as though she expected me to pummel the life out of her. Perhaps I just might.

“First of all,” I growled, my voice in a low, menacing tone, “I was testifying *against* the Muscelli family, which meant I wasn’t on their payroll.” Miss Paige seemed to shrink a few inches in her seat. I spent years perfecting my menacing look. It came in pretty handy as an interrogation tool. “And secondly,” I continued, rising to my feet and looming over her. “The Moose warned me to stay away from the trial – to make myself scarce, not to buy me off. The only reason I’m still vertical is because I give the man a certain amount of respect, something you may eventually care to learn if you ever want to make it in the big leagues.” I picked up my beer and turned away. “Now if you’ll excuse me, this interview is officially over.”

CHAPTER 2

I carried my mug to a small table along a far wall between the men's and ladies' restrooms. I was in a foul mood. No boxing match to listen to on the radio, no Rita the optimistic prostitute to have a laugh with. Even my beer had lost its flavor. All because of some gung-ho blood-sucking newshound.

A few minutes later, Miss Victoria Paige appeared at my elbow, her chin on her chest and her hands holding her clutch purse in front of her. "I'm sorry," she said meekly in a soft, quiet voice. "You were right. I am new to this beat, and sometimes I come across a little too strong in my enthusiasm for a story. I didn't mean to insinuate – "

"Forget it."

She stood silently at my side. "Truce?" she asked timidly, offering a thin smile.

I sighed and nodded to the chair across from me. The lady sat. I turned and raised my hand to signal the bartender to fix the lady another cocktail.

"I meant what I said before," she said quietly, all the phony pretentiousness gone from her voice. "You really are brave for speaking out against the Muscelli family."

“I’m no hero,” I grunted. “Sometimes bravery is doing what you know is right, regardless of the consequences.”

Miss Paige smiled warmly. “That’s quite profound.”

“Thank you.” I took a swig of my beer and rose to my feet. “I’ll be right back.” I crossed to the bar and dropped a dollar on the counter for her drink, catching the latest boxing exchange before returning to our table.

“And a real gentleman as well,” she smiled sweetly.

“I have my moments.”

“So how long have you been a detective?” she asked. I paused and regarded the woman coolly. Vicki winced and held up her palm defensively. “Sorry. Bad habit. As you said, this interview is officially over.” She took a sip of her drink and set it aside, leaning forward and crossing her forearms on the table. “So tell me, mister detective – how did you know I worked for the Gazette and from the fashion section, no less? Surely you don’t keep up with the latest hemlines and hat styles?”

I took a swallow from my beer. “Honestly?”

“Please.”

“My secretary picks up the Daily Gazette from time to time for the crossword puzzle. I get to read the paper when she’s done with it and skim through the society page to pick up the latest dirt on the city’s Who’s Who. Your section is often on the page opposite. I noticed your byline quite regularly with an accompanying photo now and then. When you introduced yourself as Vicki, I suspected you were

one in the same. How many years on that beat? Three?”

“Four,” she groaned. “And a half. Don’t remind me. I had it up to here with high collars, wide lapels and shrinking hemlines. I needed a change of venue, and when the city desk had a vacancy, I leaped at the opportunity to try something different. I just didn’t realize how cutthroat and competitive this business was until I got into it. Whew! It’s almost like real work trying to put together an interesting article about crime and punishment in this city.”

“It’s not all cocktail parties and fashion shows.”

“You got that right. And the criminals are not as classy.”

“Welcome to the wonderful world of investigative journalism.”

Vicki offered a wry smile. “Since you know the ins and outs of the darker side of this town, how’s about you drop me a tidbit from time to time?”

“I don’t work that way.”

“Rumor has it you feed Kevin Keyes at the *Times* a lead now and then.”

“Kevin and I go way back.”

“How far back?”

“A ways.”

“I can make it worth your while.”

“I’m not that desperate for cash.”

The woman offered a wry smile. “Maybe we can take it out in trade?”

I chuckled and sipped my beer. “Well, I have to admit, you definitely negotiate better than he does.”

Miss Paige grinned seductively and wiggled her eyebrows. “I’ll bet I do a few other things better than he does too.”

I returned a small smile. “I’m sure you do.”

“I’ll bet being a private detective is probably a whole lot more exciting than a being a local newspaper reporter.”

“Though it doesn’t have nearly the glamour.”

“Take yesterday, for example,” she sighed, plucking an ice cube from her glass and sucking it in her puckered lips. “I almost had a genuine story, but it fell flat – literally.” I watched her suck on the ice, finding the display surprisingly arousing. “That famous painter, Randall Rhodes? You heard of him?”

I forced myself to focus on her words, not her lips. “Yeah.”

“Well, rumor had it, he was about to release his personal memoirs about his life and sexual escapades. Really steamy stuff, so I’m told. Anyway, just before he was to publicly announce the release of the manuscript to his publisher, the big dunce takes a swan dive down a flight of stairs and kills himself.”

“Tough break,” I grunted, not intending the pun.

Vicki popped what was left of the ice cube into her mouth and crunched it with her teeth. “Funny. What could have been the front page scandal story of the year turned out to be a whole lot of nothing.”

“So you come down to the courthouse hoping to catch something newsworthy about the Muscelli trial.”

“What can I say? It was a slow news day.”

“And you followed me here, hoping to catch an exclusive.”

“I was desperate,” she sighed dolefully. “Turned out to be a whole lot more nothing.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

Vicki laughed and slapped my arm. “I didn’t mean you, silly!”

“You could always type up my ‘I’m no hero’ speech.”

“Thanks a bunch,” she snorted. “I’ll bet my editor would be thrilled.”

“I never said the city beat would be a stroll in the park.”

“Come to think of it, you haven’t said much of anything at all.”

“True.”

“What I need is an edge over my competitors. Take you, for example.”

“Don’t drag me into this competition.”

“All I’m saying is; men like you who work in dangerous professions like yours usually have an edge.”

“Or are just plain lucky.”

Victoria smiled. “Do you consider yourself lucky?”

“Well, there’s lucky and then there’s plain old dumb luck.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Lucky people live a charmed life. They usually find themselves in the right place at the right time. Dumb luck can happen to anyone at anytime. There’s no rhyme or reason to it.”

“Like finding yourself in a pool hall where Ricky Muscelli was shooting his mouth off about robbing an armored truck.”

“Exactly.”

“I happen to think people make their own luck.” Miss Paige opened her purse and began rummaging inside. “But it never hurts to hedge your bets.” She drew out a key with a piece of purple fur dangling from a short gold chain.

“What is it?”

“My house key.”

“And that is supposed to bring you good luck?”

“Not that, silly!” she laughed. “This is my lucky rabbit’s foot.”

I frowned at the furry dangling talisman.

“Doesn’t sound too lucky to me. First of all, the rabbit stepped into purple paint, and then he lost his foot.”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t so lucky for him,” she chuckled. “But it’s supposed to bring good luck to me.”

“You can always hope.” I sipped my beer. “So, did you know him well?”

“Who?”

“That painter, Rhodes.”

“Well, yes and no. I met him a few times at cocktail parties and gala events. I usually got invited to those things because it never hurts celebrities to receive good press. Also, having one more attractive young woman among their many guests didn’t hurt appearances any, if I must say so myself.”

“You may say so because I wholeheartedly believe it . . . the part about you being an attractive woman I mean.”

“You’re sweet. Anyway, Randall Rhodes sometimes showed up at those soirees partly because it’s considered quite chic to invite artist types to parties, especially ones who are regarded as being on the very edge of social morality.”

“How so?”

“He only painted nude women.”

“Ah,” I nodded sagely.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Vicki grinned playfully. “You’re thinking Rhodes captured my likeness on canvas in the buff.”

“Actually, I wasn’t thinking that at all, but now I am.”

“Naughty boy!”

“Was that a part of your ‘yes and no’?”

Vicki laughed. “That was definitely part of the ‘no’!”

“A tremendous loss for the art world.”

“You’re fantasizing about me again.”

“Sorry. Bad habit. Please continue.”

“Well, Randall and I bumped into each other one evening at a fund raiser for some cause I can’t remember now. My, he was so handsome and charming! I could see why women wanted to take their clothes off for him.” She stopped and looked at me, her face blushing slightly. “To pose . . . for a portrait, I mean. After all, he was a very talented man.”

“I’ll bet.”

My companion awkwardly cleared her throat. “Yes, well . . . I told him I wanted to interview him for the paper and he agreed. He said to come up to his studio some time and he would show me his etchings.”

I guffawed out loud. “You mean that line actually works?”

Miss Paige chuckled a little. “No it didn’t, Mister Smarty Pants. I never got the chance to visit his studio.”

I nodded soberly and sipped my beer. “So did you ever do it with him?”

Vicki’s eyes grew wide in shock. “What!”

“Did you ever get to interview him?”

The woman struggled to regain her composure and cover her embarrassment. “Oh! Yes . . . yes I did. We went to a very nice restaurant and had dinner and drinks and I got what I wanted.”

I nodded and chuckled under my breath. “I didn’t mean to get you all flustered.”

“You didn’t . . . I’m not. You just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“I find that surprising. I doubt that doesn’t happen very often.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You strike me as a woman who is very confident and self-assured. I image you would have to be that way to travel within the circles of High Society like you do. Plus you’re a seasoned reporter, so I bet you see and hear a lot more intimate details than most people are privy to.”

“You’re right about that. Having to deal with rich and influential people every day, it was rare that I’d

be caught with my guard down. Maybe I just feel out of my element working the city beat instead of the high fashion column. Meeting and talking to common people like you brings me down to a level much lower than I'm used to."

"I tend to have that effect on people."

Victoria laughed and placed her hand on my sleeve atop the table. "No! Not you personally, silly! I meant talking with policemen and lawyers and judges and convicted criminals and such. It gets to be kind of scary at times."

The woman kept her hand on my sleeve. I didn't want her to move it.

"I know I come across a little too aggressive at times," she stated candidly, her eyes averted to her hand on my arm. "I just want to make it so badly in this new job of mine."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Vicki smiled and slowly moved her fingers down my arm to touch my hand. "Thanks, Jarrett, for being so nice to me. When I used to write the fashion column, people would greet me warmly and were happy that I came to talk with them. Now people lock their doors and hide behind their desks when they hear me coming. I guess I'm not quite used to getting the cold shoulder treatment."

"I won't hide from you," I stated sincerely. "But you won't get an interview out of me either."

Vicki smiled and gave my hand a squeeze. "Fair enough."

Dinah Shore's voice began to pour from the jukebox.

I love you . . .

For sentimental reasons . . .

Vicki took a gulp of her drink and stood up.

“Let’s dance.”

“I don’t dance,” I grunted.

“Then just stand in one spot with me and sway,” she retorted. The lady grabbed my elbow with both hands and dragged me to my feet. “C’mon, you big lug! Let’s go!” Victoria pulled me to a small section of the floor where we could dance. She took my left hand in her right and snatched my hat off my head with her other hand. “No hats while we’re dancing,” she chastised, holding it to my back.

“Dancing?” I frowned. “I thought we were just supposed to be standing and swaying.”

She grinned and said, “Shut up and hold me.”

We stood in one place and swayed in time to the music. I was a good four inches taller than her, even with her heeled shoes.

Vicki peered up into my eyes and smiled warmly.

“You’re not married, are you, Jarrett?”

“Call me Tim.”

The woman chuckled silently. “I’ll take that as a no.” She sighed and rested her head against my chest. “You know, we have a lot in common,” she murmured. “Our jobs are about all the life we have.”

“Well, you know what they say,” I mused. “All work and no play . . .”

Vicki looked up at me and smiled demurely.

“Who says I don’t play?”

We held each other and swayed, even after the music ended. I gazed down into her eyes. She was

amazingly beautiful – for a reporter. “Do you have any plans for the evening?” I asked.

Vicki sighed dolefully and broke our embrace. “I have to get back to the office and try to be clever enough to come up with a story for tomorrow’s paper.” She plopped my hat back onto my head. “No thanks to you.”

“You can’t say you didn’t try.”

“Would you at least care to escort me to my office, big boy?”

“I can give you a lift if you like,” I offered, following her to our table. “My car is parked outside.”

She drained her glass and picked up her purse. “It’s only six or seven blocks and such a lovely evening. Why don’t we just hoof it?”

“All right.”

Victoria turned to me and gripped my lapels in her fists, pulling my face down to kiss me fiercely on the lips. I was too surprised to react, or even enjoy it.

Well, okay . . . maybe I did enjoy it a little.

“I just had to do that,” she grinned playfully, gazing up into my eyes. “I never kissed a detective before.”

“I never met a reporter who wanted to kiss me before.”

The woman laughed and patted my cheek with her palm. “Imagine your reward if you gave me a real juicy scoop!”

I grinned with amusement. “Now there’s an incentive.”

Vicki returned a demure smile. “And I can definitely negotiate better than Kevin Keyes.”

It was indeed a nice evening as we strolled leisurely along the sidewalk with Vicki's arm laced through my elbow. The traffic had died down to a trickle and the sky was fading to a bright yellowish orange. The city was different at twilight – soft and gentle and quiet, not harsh and cruel like in the daylight and quite often late at night as well.

We stopped on the steps of the Daily Gazette newspaper building. “See ‘ya ‘round, big fellah,” she grinned, not offering a parting smooch. Darn it. I supposed I deserved that for not providing her with an exclusive.

“See ya’.”

I watched her enter the building, then dolefully turned toward the long lonely walk back to my car. I had nothing better to do than go home, though the prospect of meeting my landlady Mrs. Nesbitt with beer on my breath was none too appealing. The old crone didn't approve of me much after I had a few pints of ale. Then again, she didn't approve of me much when I was sober, either. I thought I might motor over to my office and tap into the bottle of rye I kept stashed in the bottom drawer of my desk. Maybe catch the last of the boxing match on Julie's small brown Philco desktop radio.

I hummed a Tommy Dorsey tune as I strolled back to my bar. I couldn't recall the title and wasn't all too sure of the words, but the melody had a nice lilt to it. The perfect tune for a walk along the sidewalk on a lovely not-too-hot evening on the first day of summer.

Old Betsy was right where I left her. I wasn't surprised. My big black 1946 Buick 4-door Roadmaster sedan was a little worse for wear. With all the dents and scratches and a few bullet holes, she wasn't exactly a prime candidate for auto theft.

I don't remember why I called her Old Betsy. Come to think of it, I don't recall ever knowing anyone named Betsy. Must have been a throwback to my old army days where guys often named machines after women – Betsy, Rosie, Betty Sue, Mary Lou. Especially when their operation was smooth and beautiful.

Old Betsy was still reliable, even though she was showing signs of age.

Automobiles were often used as status symbols, and my car pretty much summed up my station in life. I didn't care. As a private investigator, one needed to maintain a low profile, a talent in which I was fairly adept. Betsy helped me fit into that persona. One might stick out like a sore thumb to be seen driving a Cadillac or Rolls Royce down the dirty back alleys and around the seedy dives I often frequented while working on a case. And I would feel a tad nervous leaving a brand new automobile parked outside some of the more questionable establishments I visited. It might be in less than perfect condition when I returned, or on its way to some auto chop shop for disassembly and distribution.

No, Betsy suited me just fine. I didn't need any fancy wheels to impress the ladies or my clients. And she was faithful and reliable in any kind of weather.

Old Betsy – the only dame that never let me down.

I recalled the words Miss Paige expounded to me earlier as I slid behind the wheel and choked the engine to life.

Our jobs are about all the life we have.

I sighed softly. She wasn't too far off the mark.

I drove the darkening city streets to my office and took the back stairway up to the second floor. Since I had a tendency of coming and going at all hours of the day, I often found it more convenient and less conspicuous if I came and left by way of the rear staircase.

The sign on my office door read *Timothy Jarrett – Discreet Inquiries*. It still gave me cause to laugh after two years in the business. I had been known to be about as discreet as a bull in a china shop. But I was getting better, mostly due to the efforts of my young and very capable secretary Miss Marsh. She kept me in line as best she could and prevented me from putting my foot in my mouth from time to time as well.

I snapped on the light to the anteroom where Julie kept her desk; organized and immaculate, a good image to project to the general public. At least, that was the perception they had until they entered my cluttered and disorganized sanctum. Hey, a private investigator cannot be bothered with such trifles as order and cleanliness. Besides, I had plenty of that during my stint in the army, thank you very much. Now I could be a slob as much as I wanted. I was my own boss and could live the way I liked, much to the chagrin of my intrepid young secretary. So, one Saturday a month I spent organizing my papers,

newspaper clippings and photographs into some semblance of order. It kept Julie happy and helped keep me from wading knee-deep in the clutter.

I entered my office, refraining from hanging my hat on the wall hook. I didn't know how long I would be there, and sometimes I'd simply fall asleep at my desk in my favorite leather reclining armchair with my feet up on the blotter and the brim of my brown fedora lowered over my eyes.

I switched on my desk lamp to find two yellow pieces of paper resting in the center of my desk. Telephone messages from my secretary. I sat and picked up the first one – a reminder about a dental appointment for Thursday afternoon. I tossed it aside. Scrap paper number two relayed that a woman identifying herself as Mrs. H called at about 3:15 that afternoon. She would like for me to call her back any time day or night at the number listed below. It wasn't unusual to get messages like that. Clients preferred a certain level of anonymity when dealing with a private investigator. Go figure. And me with "Discreet Inquiries" on my shingle.

I glanced at my wristwatch. 6:40. Not too late to call. I picked up the telephone receiver and dialed the number.

A woman picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

"I'd like to speak with Mrs. H, Please."

There was a brief pause. "Who is calling?"

"Timothy Jarrett."

Another brief pause. "I cannot speak with you just now. May I come to your office tonight?"

"Sure."

"About 7:30?"

“All right.”

Another pause. “Will you be alone?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“You can even come up the back staircase, if you prefer.”

“Yes. I will. Thank you.” She rang off.

Interesting, I mused as I replaced the receiver onto the cradle. The mysterious Mrs. H sounded quite anxious to employ my services. Smelled like another hot case for Timothy Jarrett, Private Eye. Perhaps it was a good thing that I wasn't spending my evening in the company of a lovely redheaded reporter after all.

Well, maybe not such good a thing.

I hefted myself out of my comfy reclining desk chair and crossed to my small personal bathroom. That was one of the things I insisted upon when I selected the location of my office. A bathroom came in handy when I needed a quick shave or to spruce up after a particularly rough night. It also doubled as a darkroom when I need to develop some photographs in a hurry. I rinsed a glass tumbler in the sink and crossed back to my desk, pulling the bottle of rye whiskey from the bottom right hand drawer. I splashed two fingers of booze into the glass and plopped back into my desk chair. I turned to the window and raise the blinds to watch the last fading streaks of orange and red sunset behind the tall, darkened buildings.

There was one light in an office in the tall brick building across the way. A young woman with straight blonde hair was working late. I called her

Victoria Lake because of the way her hair hung down over one side of her face just like the movie star.

She glanced up from her desk and looked at me. I raised my glass in a salute, but she didn't smile or acknowledge me, and returned to her work. Strange. It wasn't like her to snub me in such a manner. Normally the girl would at least smile and nod. Something must be troubling her. Or maybe she was lost in thought about something.

Surely, it couldn't have anything to do with me. I had been a perfect gentleman these many months keeping a watchful eye on the comely lady, holding a dutiful vigil as her guardian and protector from afar. As I often maintained odd hours at the office, I would sometimes catch her working late, her lovely countenance softly illuminated by the soft glow of her single desk lamp. I would wonder what her name was, where she lived, what she did for fun in her off hours. Did she like to go to baseball games and slow dance to Guy Lombardo? Did she have a fluffy kitten named Boots or Snowball? Did she have a boyfriend?

These questions and more I asked myself as I observed her toiling away at her solitary desk in the big brick building across the way. Watching and wondering about the lovely lady across the street.

Always from afar.

It was fully dark outside and yet I closed the blinds. Mrs. H preferred to meet privately so I needed to keep my office free from prying eyes. My desktop lamp provided sufficient illumination for our purposes. I left the door between my office and the

anteroom ajar; the only light out there coming from Julie's desk lamp. It felt a little eerie being all alone in the dimly lit rooms. But when clients wanted to meet me at night, they usually insisted on a certain level of secrecy. Also, Mrs. H preferred to remain anonymous. Better to meet me on my own turf than in a place where she might be spotted or identified.

I decided to skim through the morning newspaper as I waited. I had been in court most of the day and didn't get a chance to catch up on all of the important happenings, particularly the sports scores and the funny pages. I also liked to scan the society columns as well, just to keep abreast of all the latest gossip. A lot of my work was linked to or stemmed from scandalous shenanigans, infidelity and high-profile indiscretions.

I had a hunch the mysterious Mrs. H fit into one or more of those categories.

Julie had purchased a copy of that day's *Gazette* and I found myself perusing the headlines looking for any articles written by Victoria Paige. There was a blurb on page four about a convicted rapist who had been denied parole and another short article on page six detailing the case against a couple of police officers suspended for a week for getting a little too rough while breaking up a bar fight. Not exactly hard-hitting investigative journalism.

I turned back to the front page to see if there were any newsworthy items for that day.

Douglas McArthur was still giving President Truman an earful over being dismissed as Supreme Commander in the Far East. Somehow I got the impression that McArthur wasn't a man to let things

go too easily and this messy controversy would undoubtedly linger on for quite a while.

I served under Eisenhower in Europe during World War II, so I never got any details about McArthur as a man or as a leader of men. I imagine he couldn't have risen to the rank of five-star general if he wasn't effective. Maybe he and President Truman merely had a clash of egos much like George Custer and Ulysses S. Grant over how best to win a war. McArthur may have a better overview regarding the recent conflict in Korea, but Truman was still his boss.

There was an article about a big fancy machine called Univac 1 being used by the Census Bureau. It was supposed to give an accurate tally of the current population of the United States. The massive machine filled an entire room. Sounded like nothing more than an expensive bean counter to me. Another little blurb stated there were now thirteen million television sets in the country. That's quite a few. Sounded like a handy little gadget. Perhaps I would have to get around to purchasing one of those devices of my own some day.

The sports section had a couple of interesting gems. Gil Hodges hit homer number twenty plus a base hit in the ninth inning to give the Brooklyn Dodgers a win over the St. Louis Cardinals and Joe Louis defeated Lee Savoid in the sixth round of boxing. I wished I could have heard the broadcast of either of those events. It would have made for a rather pleasant evening.

Of course I had to turn to the funnies to see what mayhem those Katzenjammer Kids had gotten into and catch up on the latest with Alley Oop.

Oh, there's another interesting bit – the film *Rawhide* starring Tyrone Power and Susan Hayward was opening at the Odeon that coming weekend. Perhaps I'd take my waitress companion Millie to see it the next time I got to choose on one of our dates. I knew that she preferred a mushy love story over a western any day of the week, but that's what she got when she allowed me to pick the movie. Hey, at least I wasn't taking her to see a boxing match.

After about twenty minutes, a woman appeared in the outer office. She paused a moment by Julie's desk, then stepped cautiously into my office. "Mister Jarrett?" she asked, more of a statement than a question.

"That's me."

The woman remained a short distance away in the shadows between the two rooms. I could still make out her form somewhat from the partial illumination from the outer office and my desk lamp. She was a slender woman, just over five feet tall wearing a dark skirt and jacket ensemble. A wide-brimmed hat with a dark veil covered her face, but I could see that she had straight blonde hair that fell just above the shoulder. The veil was to either conceal her identity or because the lady was in mourning. Somehow I got the feeling she wasn't a recent widow. Mrs. H stood purposeful and erect and wore an exotic perfume. A quite unusual scent, in fact. My sniffer tended to

catalog such things, and this aroma was definitely a new entry in my odor file.

“I have a situation which requires some assistance,” she stated quietly. “However, your involvement and my identity must remain confidential.”

I nodded, wondering which category her recent dilemma fit into – scandal, infidelity, or indiscretion. “How may I be of service?”

“I am certain you have already heard about the death of the local artist, Randall Rhodes.”

“Yes. He had a fatal accident. Fell down a flight of stairs, I believe.”

“Quite true,” she said. “What may not be known is that he was in the process of writing a book of his memoirs. Mainly his various and numerous intimate liaisons. His sexual conquests, to be precise. I need you to confidentially obtain this book before it is discovered by the public.”

Aha, I thought, nodding once again. *All of the above*. Scandal, infidelity and indiscretion. I would bet that the mysterious Mrs. H might even be one of the afore-mentioned conquests who feared she had become a chapter in a tell-all autobiography and now she needed little old me to retrieve the dirty journal before Mister H and the general public caught wind of it.

“And where might I find this journal?” I asked.

“Most likely in his studio loft. Randall had a suite of rooms upstairs in a building on Arkdale Boulevard, number 1720. I personally cannot be seen around there, and I prefer that you not reveal your true

purpose should you be caught snooping around the place.”

“I’m a pretty good snooper, if I say so myself,” I remarked casually.

“Since Randall’s death was ruled an accident, no one has made the effort of making a thorough examination of his personal effects. It is only a matter of time before the book is discovered. I need you to get to it first.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I am quite confident that you will. I made the effort of checking on you and your investigative methods earlier today. My sources report that, although you may be a bit unorthodox and quite often bordering upon the illegal, you do manage to get results. And you are also credited with being honest and discreet, which is what I require most of all. I cannot have someone recover those memoirs and then potentially blackmail me with the contents.”

The thought occurred to me that the contacts she referred to may include the boys down at the 7th precinct. Lieutenant Bill Rutland and his crew. Mrs. H must be an influential lady indeed to get information out of people in those circles.

“I’ll get on it first thing in the morning, and I’ll call you at that same number as soon as I have anything to report.”

“Very good,” she said, withdrawing an envelope from her purse. The woman stepped closer to my desk and I could discern her face clearly through the dark veil. She was quite a handsome lady; in her late forties, I’d guess. “Here is a deposit of five hundred dollars,” she said as she dropped the envelope on my

desk. "I will pay you another five hundred when you deliver the manuscript to me."

I fought to keep my eyebrows from leaping up. That was a nice hunk of change for me to do a little snooping around. The lady must want that book mighty bad. Either that or this dame was really desperate and had plenty of dough to throw around, enough that Mister H would never notice it missing.

I didn't reach for the money to count it, keeping my hands folded atop my desk blotter. Calm and cool Jarrett, that's me. Eh, just another thousand dollar job. My eyes remained fixed upon her face, studying every feature and filing them away in my brain for later retrieval. This woman had money and influence and was anxious to remain anonymous. That was a scary combination – desperation backed by money and power. A deadly and dangerous brew, especially when a dame was involved. It made me suspect that maybe old Randall's fall wasn't an accident after all. A woman scorned can be an ugly thing.

I figured my best bet was to keep a low profile until I found out who the players were in this dirty little game. Being paid big bucks to investigate the whereabouts of some missing memoirs was one thing, but playing the pawn in a murder cover-up was another.

"We shall not discuss this matter again," she stated unemotionally. "Do not attempt to contact me until our business is concluded. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly."

The woman turned to leave and I caught another whiff of her exotic fragrance. "Nice perfume," I commented.

She stopped and turned her head to me. “It’s French. Very expensive.”

I’ll bet I nodded to myself as she silently disappeared through Julie’s office. Just like the mysterious Missus H – very expensive.