

Wounds So Deep

A Timothy Jarrett Mystery

Mack Thornton

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CHAPTER 1

The wretched alarm clock wouldn't shut off. It continued to rattle away face down on the wooden floor, its performance apparently unaffected by the impact of the flying pillow and the four-foot drop from the wooden chest of drawers. I momentarily entertained the notion of fetching my .38 snub nose revolver from the nightstand and firing two slugs into its evil mechanical heart. Too noisy. Besides, that would ultimately have the same effect as an alarm in rousing me from peaceful slumberland. Plus the added bonus of a cloud of acrid cordite smoke mingling with the already stale bedroom aroma was not a pleasant prospect either. There tend to be certain drawbacks with living by yourself. You don't have anyone else to order, "*Shut that cursed thing off!*" That's why I left the infernal contraption on the far dresser – so I'd have to get out of bed and turn the alarm clock off myself. Simple strategy, but effective.

I groaned and sat up in bed, scratching my armpit through the still mostly-white undershirt and smacking the cotton in my mouth. I hated mornings.

Not the whole day, mind you. Just mornings. They have a nasty habit of popping up much too early in the day for my tastes. Especially that getting out of bed part. As a private investigator I had a tendency of working odd hours, so getting the chance to sleep late was a real luxury. Not *that* day. That day began in the morning so it already had one strike against it. It also happened to fall on the second Monday of the month, which was just another day to me but payday for my secretary, Julie. Julie Marsh. Nice kid. She often wavered in playing the roles of employee, sister, girlfriend and mother to me. I didn't mind it, since I no longer had any of the afore-mentioned except for the employee part.

I hoisted my weary six-foot 180-pound frame from the mattress and shuffled over to the annoying timepiece. The cursed thing rattled and clattered at my feet like a wounded snake in its death throes. I gave the piteous wretch a swift kick with my bare foot, sending it hopping and rolling into the living room and under the armchair, nearly busting my big toe. It was worth it. That shut it up.

I pulled on a pair of pants draped across the foot of the bed. That was one of the two rules I still followed after my discharge from the army – never get caught without your pants. Rule two: always keep your gun handy. I followed both disciplines as a daily routine, holidays included. I'm rarely caught without my pants or my gun – two things that have kept me alive and out of trouble in more ways than I can count.

I lumbered into the kitchen and considered brewing some java. Just contemplating the chore was

an effort. I'd probably just head on into the office, peel off a few bills for my very capable young secretary, then fall asleep at my desk. That was one of the main reasons I bought myself one of those nice high back leather desk chairs that leans back. Hard work deserves frequent naps.

No hot cases demanded my urgent attention that day so I could relax and take it easy. My last job concluded two days earlier – the recovery of some missing rare coins. Both the pawnbroker and police were baffled as the items seemingly vanished right from under the owner's nose. The old man had acquired the items on Friday morning and was in the process of appraising them in the back room of his shop when he left to answer the telephone in the front of the store. When he returned the coins were gone – the whole crime taking less than three minutes. The police, of course, offered little help since there was no break-in and no witnesses. Cops are pretty handy to have around during the commitment of a crime but not very helpful after the fact. I was a flatfoot myself once, and in a situation like a post-larceny case all you can do was take notes and pass it on to the investigators. *Always a pleasure to be of service, Mac. Have a pleasant day.*

The investigators took little interest in the pilfering case since no one was physically injured during the commitment of the crime and the missing booty wasn't valued in the millions like some long lost Renoir painting. The disheartened broker rang me up the very next morning to see if I could be of any help. I arrived at the shop shortly before noon and sized up the case pretty quickly. No person could

pass by the storeowner from the front of the shop so the thief must have come and gone through the rear. And since the office door was locked from the inside, the window held the only route available. A quick inspection of the grounds outside revealed the wrapper from a chocolate bar and a cash register's receipt dated the day before. I paid a visit to the drug store on the corner to hopefully glean some useful information regarding the purchase.

A tiny silver bell jingled above my head as I passed through the door to the store. Not that I needed any announcement to my arrival. I was the only customer in the place. It was a quaint little shop with a soda fountain along the wall to my right and shelves of various medicinal and apothecary items to my left. A man in his mid forties wearing a narrow white paper hat and an apron over his white shirt and black bowtie stood behind the shiny metal counter wiping a soda glass. After exchanging pleasantries, I learned that he was the owner of the store. I showed him the scrap of paper from the crime scene. The fellow couldn't tell me anything useful about the sale, but his teenage daughter might remember. Apparently the young lass was working the counter around the time of the pawnshop burglary. The owner called her up to the front of the shop from the storeroom in the back. She was a lovely and slender wisp of a thing with deep dark eyes and a brown ponytail hanging down to the middle of her back. I showed her the register ticket hoping to jostle her memory. The young girl's face lit up when I mentioned the pawnshop as she had a thing going for the owner's teenage son. She informed me that the

boy purchased two chocolate bars that day. Everything fell into place. I returned to the pawn shop and told the broker what I suspected – that his son had waited outside the window for the opportunity to snatch the coins, sneaking in and away during the short time the old man was on the telephone in the front of the store. The pawnbroker immediately confronted and accused his son who shamefully confessed to the transgression.

The M.O.M. principal was one of the first things I learned during my short stint at a police officer – Means, Opportunity and Motive – the least of which is motive. I've discovered that people often have a wide variety of reasons to commit a crime, or then again, no reason whatsoever. That's why cops seldom factor criminal motive as part of their crime-solving equation, relying on more tangible elements such as means and opportunity. A bank robber may have the motive and opportunity to knock over a savings and loan, but if he lacks the means – a gun or a bomb – he might have a tough time of it. Likewise, if someone developed the means and motive to kidnap a famous kid like the Lindbergh baby, having a guardian or nanny constantly watching over the child all day and night may not offer the opportunity he needed to commit the crime. The broker's kid might have had any of a dozen motives – wanting to sell the coins on his own, getting back at his father for some past punishment, or maybe just dazzle the pretty young cashier down the street. Perhaps while pondering the possibility of purloining the rare pieces he happened to glance through the window and see his father leave the room to answer a telephone call.

Suddenly he saw his chance – the momentary diversion creating the opportunity he needed and the open window offering the means. I found that lots of crimes were like that – means and opportunity suddenly arising and supplying an outlet for the motive.

I collected my modest fee from the paw shop owner and left, leaving the aged entrepreneur to decide what course of punishment to levy upon the errant juvenile. The simple mystery proved to be less than taxing on my detecting abilities, leaving my Sabbath free to be a day of rest. I spent a great portion of my leisure time slowly pickling myself with cheap scotch and listening to a double-header on the RCA Victrola.

Going into the office felt almost like taking a small vacation – my home away from home. In fact, my downtown office was even a tad nicer than my real home which was a second story flat in a fairly decent red brick apartment building on the Upper West Side of town. Three rooms if you include the kitchen, and the private compact bathroom makes four. Four luxurious rooms of ample living space, at least they seemed roomy to me as I was the only body filling that space. A smidgen more costly than your typical flophouse or dormitory due to the added privacy ensured by our ever-diligent iron-fisted landlady Mrs. Nesbitt and the availability of individual bathrooms therein. I preferred my own personal space over communal living since my profession had me coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Plus I'd had enough of the shared water closet experience in my army boot camp days

to last me a lifetime. My private rooms were my own – never to be shared by another man or woman, much to the eternal pleasure of the serenity-ensuring crotchety old crone landlady Mrs. Nesbitt. The severe superintendent did not permit any shenanigans on the premises and I applied that edict to my housecleaning habits as well. All that racket of sweeping and dusting can prove to be quite disturbing to the other tenants. So I kept my share of the peace and quiet by indulging as infrequently in those activities as my low health standards would permit.

To the casual observer, my flat seemed somewhat shabby and rundown. That was simply because I successfully managed to make it appear that way. The *lived-in look* as I preferred to call it. Since I didn't entertain much at home, housekeeping fell into the category of something more of a luxury than a necessity. However, once a month I dedicated an entire morning to picking up after myself. That's about all the cleaning one man can endure – both in performing and in dwelling. My ever-intrepid young secretary Julie Marsh had the disturbing habit of always keeping our downtown offices clean with that enigmatic female faculty of giving the place that feminine touch – something my private rooms would never experience. As my mother used to say, "You can write your name in the dust just so long as you don't date it."

My personal furnishings were sparse and cheap. An old sagging couch and a low armchair decorated the front room by the window, the fabric on the arms worn so thin that the stuffing peeked out in several places. It was my preferred area for relaxing. I could

recline on the sofa with a tumbler of cheap scotch in my hand and put my feet up on the arm, or lounge in the sagging chair on a cold winter morning to watch the snowflakes accumulate on the sill. My lodgings were comfortable to me, and as long as I remained their only resident, my opinion regarding their state of disarray was the only one that mattered.

The pan under the icebox dripped into a puddle on the cracked and yellowing eggshell linoleum. I stood and stared stupidly at it for a moment, then turned away with a grunt. I chose to not dump it out, reasoning that the mice in the place might need a cool drink now and then. I'm considerate enough to leave the seat on the commode up for them as well, though they probably liked sipping from the low tray on the kitchen floor even better. One must tend to the needs of one's houseguests.

I never used to be so unmotivated and lethargic. It was most likely a cumulative result of a tour in the army, city living, and the lack of feminine motivation. Military discipline and its obligatory uniformity effectively removed all desire in me to excel in life, and the urban experience has a way of depriving a person of any remaining individuality. Lack of feminine influence in my life made me stop giving a damn about myself altogether. Plus my trade as a private investigator took me into the sewer of the city, forcing me to routinely associate with the vermin and dregs of society. If not for the charm and grace of my young able secretary my business could never relate to a higher social circle than that of prostitutes, bookies and thieves.

I wove my way into the tiny private bathroom and pulled the chain on the overhead bulb. I scratched the stubble on my chin and yawned openly at my disheveled reflection in the chipped mirror over the cracked porcelain basin. I looked terrible. Blame it on the mirror. Dirty and smudged – not at all like yours truly. *Forget about shaving* I mused. Julie had seen me in worse condition numerous times and since it was payday I doubt she'd squawk too loudly over my appalling appearance. I brushed my teeth with a little baking soda on the tip of my finger, pulled on my coat and hat and locked the door behind me as I trudged into the gray pallor of the morning in the cold, disinterested, unfeeling city.

The early morning sky was overcast with an ashy, sooty, smoky gray – the color of gunpowder with a few bright streaks of crimson and deep scarlet woven in between.

Sailor take warning . . .

The air contained a dank, primeval dampness like the musty bowels of a derelict sea vessel. It reminded me of Normandy – and of the war. A lot of things reminded me of the war lately. I recalled the friendships, the bonds, the horror and the death. Me and my best friend Steve Mann both caught the draft and made infantry together. *Manly Mann* we called him, though he wasn't any tougher than the rest of us. Passing smokes and exchanging jokes with the other dogface GI's, we waited nervously huddled packed like sardines in the cramped confines of our tin-can troop carrier, then spilled out of the landing craft to secure the beach. No single person could define hell as clearly as that scene – machine gun fire, shells

bursting and young boys screaming all around us. Steve was about an arm's length to my left when he caught it – his body blown to bits by a direct mortar hit, his blood spraying my face and uniform like the salty spew of a pounding ocean surf. I believe it was at that particular instant that the horrifying reality of our situation suddenly came into finite focus. My mind blocked out all thoughts and emotions but anger, hatred and the unquenchable lust for revenge. I was a man possessed, wanting to single-handedly put a stop to all the senseless slaughter. The full details of my actions were related to me much later – of how I had charged into a Nazi machine gun nest, shooting two German soldiers and bashing a third man's head in with the wooden stock of my rifle. The bullet I caught in my left side aided me in regaining my senses somewhat and I was found kneeling beside the unfeeling body of one of my victims crying like a baby. My hands and face were covered with blood; not the last time that I felt myself saturated with those accursed stains.

It had been years ago and yet, only yesterday. Sometimes it seems that some wounds run so deep that they could never heal completely. Many were the nights that the horror returned fresh and vivid as the days they were a reality. Often at night I would lie awake in a cold sweat or sit up screaming at the top of my lungs, my mind replaying those insuppressible scenes of death and destruction. It was like a horrible film I was forced to watch again and again, one I hadn't paid admission to see or allowed to leave. It left me feeling frustrated and angry,

making me want to throttle somebody for forcing a man to endure such lasting torture.

Thus the explanation of me sleeping alone – and for the scotch.

Me and a few thousand other young boys survived that hell, but it forever changed us. Nobody goes through an experience like that and remain unblemished. Our home and family lives had also changed during our prolonged absence. Women were becoming more self-reliant and independent. Businesses were becoming more industrialized and aggressive. Guys came back from the war to find many of their old jobs phased out, or given to younger, more experienced personnel.

Steve and I had planned on becoming cops before we went in, but when he died that job's appeal for me died along with him. After my European tour with the army, I had my fill of uniforms and death. The military had honed my survival skills and successfully beaten the American ideology of freedom and justice deep into my skull. I wasn't exactly suited for a desk job or selling shoes after my combat training and war experiences, so after spending a nearly two years trying to make it with the local police force I took the fairly easy test and obtained my Private Investigator's license. But, as with the army, nobody goes through life as a Shamus and remains unaltered. The filth of the job clings to you like the sweltering humidity of a hot city summer night. You begin to see yourself and others through different eyes and you no longer try to wash off that damned spot of blood from your hands.

Monday morning – so continues the American Dream of the pursuit of happiness in the unfeeling unsympathetic metropolis.

How is it that everything in the city begins to take on a hue of grayness the longer a person is exposed to it? There is no more black and white – just gray days, gray ethics, gray lives. Sometimes I got the feeling that the city had developed an identity all its own. A reflection of the churning quagmire of emotions from all its inhabitants distilled down to a putrid sludge and pumped back into the flow of humanity as its own unique personality. My little Urbania offered its own interpretations of sorrow, joy, depression and hate. I wondered if all cities had that disposition, or if it was just the way a person in the city began to perceive things after a while.

I crossed the street and walked the block to my car – a 1946 black four-door Buick Roadmaster sedan. Sweet Betsy. Though my car was only five years old, the abuse and misuse I continued to heap upon her far exceeded her age and mileage. The old gal had seen better days. And yet, her rugged road-worn appearance suited me just fine. Flashy new cars were only a symbol of wealth and status anyway, and slobs like me who have no status at all don't need such symbols. Besides, in the line of P.I. work, it's usually a good practice to maintain a low profile. Something I do rather well, thank you very much.

Well, looky there – another scratch. My, my. Probably from the kids playing stickball in the street. Join the club, buddy. Feel free to mingle with the other hundred or so scratches, dents, and occasional

bullet holes. Merely adds to my low status, low profile image.

I was quite certain I could swing a loan from the bank for a new automobile if I wanted one. A brand new 1951 Ford Custom Victoria wasn't all that expensive – less than two thousand bucks. Or maybe a new Nash Rambler two-door hardtop for under \$1400.

Nah – not my style.

I climbed in and choked the engine to life. Good old Betsy – the only dame that never disappointed me.

Traffic into the city seemed a little heavier than normal. I must have caught the tail end of the mad rush of vehicles when every driver hit the streets at once. The crush usually lasted for a couple hours in the morning and then repeated itself again in the evening when everybody climbed behind the wheel and hurried back to their cozy little homes. I glanced at my wristwatch. 8:21. Like I said, it was early for me. I usually worked nights and evenings when it was easier to spy on people being their naughtiest. Sure, many crimes were committed during the normal daylight work-shift hours, but those usually fell into the categories of petty larceny or white-collar crime. I left the pickpockets, muggers and car thieves to the beat cops and the big business crooks to the Feds, leaving me free to concentrate on the really juicy cases involving burglaries, insurance fraud, and unfaithful spouses. I tried to avoid high-profile cases such as murders whenever possible – not that I couldn't handle them by myself. I've solved my

share of suspicious fatalities during my short career as a cop and as a P.I. as well, but found those cases to be messier than most with too much legwork for the fee involved. Give me a simple forgery or armed robbery and I'm in my element.

The frosted glass on my office door read *Timothy Jarrett –Discreet Inquiries*. What a laugh. I'm about as discreet as a wrecking ball in a china shop. Julie Marsh glanced up from working her crossword puzzle in the morning paper as I walked in. "Good morning, Mister Jarrett," she chirped happily. *Mister Jarrett*. The only times the young lass addressed me in such a formal manner was when I had a client in the office or she wanted something. It being payday I guessed the latter. Julie's presence always had a way of lifting my spirits – like an upbeat melody that filtered into my melancholy mood just when I felt the need to hear the blues. And I needed her that morning, the gloom and depression chewing a hole in my gut from the inside out in its desperate struggle to be released. I'm not one for showing my emotions too freely, but Julie's cheerful sweet face and familiar charm nearly always succeeded in curling my frown into a smile. The girl's full lips screamed at me in that bright cherry red lipstick she wore to compliment her candy-apple sleeveless vest over a cream ruffled blouse. Her silky dark brown hair glistened like polished teakwood and she had anointed herself with cologne that made her smell like a bouquet of wildflowers. Julie's one of those people who actually like mornings. I guess every person has their little flaws.

"Hello angel," I grinned genuinely. "You look like a million."

“As long as we’re on the subject of money,” she smirked, not missing a beat. “Do you know what day it is?”

“Your birthday?” I asked as I hung my weathered brown fedora on the wall hook. We played that absurd game every month. Both of us knew precisely what day it was since I made the Herculean effort of coming in early. Sooner or later, though, she’d have to catch on to the fact that I had no earthly idea when her birthday really was. Some detective.

Julie had fresh coffee brewing in the electric percolator. What a doll. Smart looking *and* efficient. I rinsed my favorite stained ceramic coffee mug in the bathroom sink and filled a cup. That was one thing I insisted upon when I chose the location of my office: a private bathroom. Sometimes I’d find myself needing to develop some pictures mighty quick and the water closet doubled as a makeshift darkroom in a pinch.

My inner office was large and comfortable, at least that was the impression it gave. A big picture window on the far wall made the room appear to be much more spacious than it actually was. It afforded a nice view of the city and the sidewalk below. I liked to look down onto the street without being observed and watch humanity scurry about. It helped hone my surveillance abilities watching people shuffling along the sidewalk, going to work for other people. It also gave me a tinge of satisfaction in knowing that I was running my own business and therefore not among the ranks of the scurriers.

The only furniture to clutter my private office was a couple of four-drawer metal filing cabinets, two

armchairs and a big oak desk that took three stout men a good deal of time and energy to hoist up that narrow back staircase. I rarely spent much time concentrating on trivial details such as keeping my desk clean or organizing my papers. Little things like that only served to distract me – at least that’s the story I would use on my secretary. I doubted she was duped for one moment by that weak excuse.

Fortunately for me, Julie’s one of those people who enjoyed straightening up after disorganized slobs like me. I guessed the activity helped sharpen her maternal abilities. A unique young lady with her own unique ways of doing things, Julie Marsh was one of those fastidious individuals who would wait until your back was turned, then take the towels out of the linen closet and refold them the *proper* way. Not that I’d be one to complain. If it weren’t for the indispensable Miss Marsh to do my paperwork and filing, I’d be wading knee-deep in newspaper clippings, photographs and receipts.

I carried the coffee to my desk and dropped heavily into my reclining chair. Julie was already there, holding a check made out to herself in her own handwriting awaiting my signature. She would often sign my name to routine documents and contractual agreements, but never her paycheck. “What’s the matter, angel?” I yawned. “Afraid I’d forget or fall asleep on you?”

“It’s happened before,” she sighed dolefully, rolling her hazel-green eyes to the ceiling. “I’m in a teensy hurry this morning, Tim. I have to run out and pay off some things right away. Be a sport and listen for the phone ‘til I get back?”

“Sure, sure,” I mumbled, signing the check with my ebony fountain pen. Julie snatched it away from me before I could blow on the ink to dry it. “Thanks Timmy!” She smiled gaily and flapped the paper up and down to dry the ink as she left, the girl and my money both waving goodbye. *Timmy* was it now? So much for *Mister Jarrett*.

Julie was a good kid. I hired her on fresh out of high school and in only a few months’ time the young woman had managed to take over all of the office duties. Helped me out of a few tight scrapes, too. A headstrong lass with wisdom and maturity beyond her teenage years, Julie was not only capable and competent at the office but more than a few times tried to extend her feminine influence into my private life. Thanks but no thanks. I had been dragged kicking and clawing down that stony road before and was in no great hurry to explore that dreaded avenue anytime soon. Besides, I was almost ten years her senior and preferred the company of ladies closer to my own generation. Undaunted, the intrepid Miss Marsh continued to try to slip those tender hooks under my skin at every opportunity, using her ample good looks and wily feminine charm. I was tough, though. I could hold out longer than she could, wavering only when she batted those long eyelashes and flashed a little leg. Then I turned to guacamole inside. I never let on, though I suspected she knew it. My motto was; never let ambitious teenage girls get the upper hand on you. Before you know it, the glass on my outer office door would read *Marsh and Jarrett; Discreet Inquiries* – with the smaller print on the name *Jarrett*.

The wretched alarm clock was ringing again. No wait, not the alarm – the telephone. I must have nodded off at my desk. Why was I forever surrounding myself with fiendish contraptions designed to interrupt my slumber? The demonic device responded to my vicious thoughts by shrieking its hellish tone once again. Where in the world was Julie? Oh yeah, running errands. Maybe if I waited long enough she'd return in time to answer the call.

No such luck. It rang a third time and I reluctantly picked up the receiver. "Tim Jarrett."

"Mister Jarrett?" A woman's voice.

"Yes."

"The private investigator?" A young lady's voice.

"That's me."

"I have a problem and I thought I could use your services." Definitely a young woman, but not too young. I placed her in her mid-twenties. Didn't sound all that anxious or distraught, either.

"What kind of problem?" I asked. At this rate it would be late afternoon before I even found out her name.

"Someone has been following me," she explained. "I'd like to see you and make arrangements for your services to find out who."

"When?"

"Today," she said. "I take my lunch around eleven. I can come there, if that's all right with you."

Eleven was fine with me. I would just have to shuffle around my many other appointments to accommodate her. Of course, the fact that she was

my *only* appointment didn't seem worth mentioning. "Okay," I agreed. "See you at eleven, Miss . . .?"

"Wolfe," she said quickly and hung up.

I replaced the receiver onto the cradle and went into the bathroom to shave. That's another reason why I opted for a bathroom at the office. On the off chance that one of my clients should come down to visit me in broad daylight, I might appreciate the chance to make myself somewhat presentable for the occasion. Especially if I were entertaining a female client. I brushed my teeth again, too.

Julie breezed back into my office. Few women breezed as well as the delightful Miss Marsh. I admired the way her knee-length cotton dress swirled around her shapely legs and the way her hair and chest rose and fell in cadence with each stride. Some men prefer to watch a woman approach for those very reasons, but I would rather observe a receding view. That way they can't catch me ogling.

"We need more pencils and telephone notepads," she informed me with her palm held out. It was the young woman's subtle way of saying *Cough up the dough so I can keep your business running smoothly for you*. I handed her a single from my wallet, knowing it was best not to argue over such matters. Julie accepted the bill with a triumphant grin, pirouetted on her dainty toes and breezed back out again. I was beginning to wonder about all the mysterious comings and goings of the young girl. Perhaps I should stop by my office more often.

I almost made it to the bathroom when the telephone rang again. Miss Wolfe calling back to reschedule? I hoped not. I would have to rearrange

my whole day. Then again, at least she was considerate enough to let me know before I went through the effort of shaving. I hated to get all cleaned up for nothing. I lifted the receiver to my ear. “Jarrett.”

“Timmy boy, old buddy, old pal!” My friend Kevin Keyes, a reporter with the *Times* local newspaper. He usually greeted me in that fashion when he wanted something. “In the middle of any red-hot cases?”

“Not as yet.” I couldn’t tell if the man was fishing or merely exchanging pleasantries. Kevin Keyes was my friend and an upright reporter – fair and honest. He avoided the temptations of yellow journalism just to make a name for himself. That’s not to say he wouldn’t go right along with the rest of the pack of news hounds if a good juicy scandal came to light. Kevin just wouldn’t try to create one if it didn’t exist. I guess that’s why I liked him. He and I both dug for the truth, each in our own unique way.

Kevin asked over the wire, “Got any lunch plans?”

“Not yet.”

“Great! How’s about I meet you at Logan’s Diner, say around noonish for a bite. My treat.”

His treat? The fellow definitely wanted something. I glanced at my wristwatch. My client was due at eleven and that meeting probably wouldn’t take an hour. Logan’s Diner was just a short drive away, even during noonday traffic. Plus, the man had piqued my curiosity. I wondered what sort of favor he was eager to lay on me. Probably wanted me to

babysit his latest dame's infant toddler while he took the gal out for a night on the town.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll be there.”

CHAPTER 2

The client arrived a few minutes after eleven. She was what we more *genteel* types refer to as a real eye-popper. A tall, leggy blonde with an hourglass figure and plenty of time to spare up top. Being a trained observer does have its advantages. Things such as perfectly curved female body rarely escaped my attention. *Pardon my detecting, Ma'am; it's my profession.* Unfortunately I was finding it somewhat difficult to keep from being caught overtly observing too conspicuously. Job hazard, I shrugged inwardly. Perhaps I needed to perfect my stealthy surveillance skills a bit more. My eyes were teetering along a fine line between gawking and ogling, and it was through sheer willpower that I kept them from drifting to a level a few inches below her chin. Not that I instantly became a drooling slobbering wretch whenever I encountered a fabulous dame. I just desperately needed something to distract me from my melancholy musings that morning and a blonde bombshell client was just what the doctor ordered.

I stood up like a true gentleman and gestured to one of the straight back wooden chairs in front of my big oak desk. I hoped that my good manners might

be impressive enough for her to give me the time of day as well as her business, though at that point I would have settled for either one. The lady extended her slender hand and introduced herself as Tawni Wolfe.

“Tawni,” I paused, almost as a way to prolong the touch of her soft hand in mine. “Is that a nickname or your real name?” Not that it mattered. I often had clients and informants give me fictitious identities when not choosing to remain completely anonymous.

“Tawni is my real name,” she beamed radiantly. The girl dropped her shapely form into one of the wooden seats. “My parents were a bit eccentric in selecting my name, but were well liked and quite wealthy.”

“That often goes hand in hand,” I commented, settling into my reclining chair. “So how can I help you?”

“As I mentioned on the phone,” she stated soberly, “I believe someone is following me. It’s just a feeling I have, but when I look behind me, there’s no one’s there.”

“If you’ll pardon me for saying so,” I offered, “yours is the kind of figure most women wish for and men have titillating dreams about.” *So speaketh the voice of experience.* I leaned back in my chair and regarded her evenly. I had to be careful not to scare her off with my bold candor. When *Poor Richard* recorded in his Almanac that honesty was the best policy, he probably wasn’t offering the average bachelor tips on how to score points with the opposite gender, or for expanding his business client list either.

In truth, I doubted I was telling the woman anything she didn't already know. I was quite sure she was fully aware that her figure was magnificent – well-proportioned enough to make men stop and notice, inwardly reaffirming that there was a God and thanking Him for His handiwork. “A girl with your looks can expect a few eyes to follow her.”

She smiled. I didn't.

“I know what you mean, but this is different.”

“Do you feel threatened in any way?”

“No . . . just . . . *uncomfortable*. I don't like the feeling that I'm being watched in that way, if you know what I mean.”

I shifted slightly in my chair to assume a more relaxed position and trained my eyes on hers. I certainly didn't want the young lass to feel uncomfortable. “So you want me to tag along behind you for a while, see if you've picked up a tail, is that it?”

“Something like that.”

Sounded easy enough. Quite frankly, I could use the work – easy or hard.

“That isn't all, Mister Jarrett.”

“Call me Tim, if you like.”

That smile again. Warm and sincere, radiating from the lips of an angel. “All right . . . *Tim*.” Hers was the kind of face and frame that guys had tacked up over their bunks on destroyers in the war. Worth fighting for. Worth dying for. Damn, and I was doing so well at trying to forget that hellish nightmare. I struggled to suppress the past and concentrate on my present company. *Ahh, much better*. Tawni's facial complexion appeared smooth

and unblemished, her smile wide and lips full under a short straight nose that turned up just a tiny bit at the end. I noticed she didn't wear makeup. She didn't need to. Fresh and pure, the typical 'girl-next-door' type, only this sort of girl rarely lived next door to wise guys like me. That's probably one good reason why they stayed so fresh and pure.

The congeniality quickly died and Miss Wolfe became serious once more. "Last week, someone broke into my house. The back door was jimmied and several of my drawers were turned out. Nothing appeared to have been taken, but I was invaded nonetheless."

"I see," I mused soberly. "And where is it that you live?"

"2641 West 14th. It's a small one-bedroom house on the other side of the packaging plant."

I knew the area. Tiny economy dwellings for modest-income families. Inexpensive homes raised overnight to accommodate the surge in population after our boys returned home. "Neighbors see anything?"

"No." *They never did.*

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a personal secretary for a clothing distributor."

"Are you privy to any confidential material, something a competitor might want to get their hands on?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Do you keep any valuables in your home like diamonds or furs?"

Tawni laughed, her genuine humor helping to raise my gloomy spirits. “Only what I have on my body.” She pinched the thin gold necklace around her throat between her thumb and forefinger, the fine glittering butterfly pendant hovering enticingly above her ample cleavage. “You like?”

“Very nice,” I nodded, hoping the girl would take my assent as an appraisal of her choice in jewelry. I averted my eyes to the pad on my desk and jotted a few notes to give the impression I was giving her case some serious consideration. *Beautiful girl . . . someone following her . . . house broken into . . . drawers turned out.* Sounded to me like the young lady had picked up an unknown and unwelcome admirer.

My client glanced at the slim gold watch on her wrist. Delicate and fairly expensive. “I can’t stay too long. I have to get back to the office.” Tawni withdrew a hundred dollars from her clutch purse and handed it to me. “Take this as a retainer,” she said. “I’ll hire you for a week. If after that time you haven’t found anyone following me, we’ll call it quits.”

“Fair enough,” I nodded, accepting the money.

“I assume you have a permit to carry a gun?”

“Yes, but I try not to use it. Noisy little thing. Has a way of ruining people’s evenings, not to mention their wardrobes.” I found that carrying a handgun was a necessary evil of the trade. It helped even the odds between me and the bad guys and also reinforced the restraining barrier holding back those dreaded ghosts of the past. My rod and my staff may

comfort me, but my .38 revolver keeps the monsters away.

The client leaned forward to hand me a company business card with her name and telephone number written on the back. I gave up trying not to stare conspicuously and gaped openly at her impressive curves. “I get off work at five o’clock,” she smiled, obviously catching my gaze. “Come over to my place around seven this evening and I’ll try to give you something more.” My heart leaped into my throat and my brain grappled with my mouth not to beg for a descriptive explanation of what she meant.

I mentally slapped my face for being such a lecherous wolf salivating over the pretty young Miss Red Riding Hood. Why was I even noticing her body at all? After all, a client was a client, and it doesn’t exactly instill confidence to be drooling and making gaga eyes over their physiques. She’d probably think I’d spend more time pondering her figure than about the case. Perhaps I only needed to escape from this maudlin mood I was in and Tawni offered a convenient refreshing detour. I had plenty of lady clients in the past and settled most of their cases satisfactorily. That this young lass was prettier than most should have no bearing on our business arrangement whatsoever. And yet, my mind couldn’t help thinking that this lovely lady magically stepped into my life at precisely the right time to break me out of my dreary doldrums.

Miss Wolfe rose to leave. “There’s just one other thing,” she added hesitantly. “I have another job – at night. As an exotic dancer at the *Fantasies Lounge*.”

I couldn't keep my eyebrows from leaping up. "A stripper?" I asked, straining to keep the incredulity from my voice. There was a God after all.

She blushed a little and nodded.

"You certainly have the curves for it," I said, and meant it.

"Thank you," she smiled innocently. Perhaps Tawni didn't even realize just how beautiful she was. Some insecure types needed to exhibit themselves to others just to have them validate what they themselves won't dare acknowledge. "It's just to help pay the bills. I'm not ashamed of it, but I don't want to publicly advertise it either."

I nodded. "I understand." The unwanted ardent admirer scenario was beginning to develop considerable merit. "You think maybe a fan of yours wants to get more than just a gander at your goods?"

"That's possible," she said.

Tawni Wolfe had those somber and dark bedroom eyes beneath long natural lashes. Sensuous, yet alert. They told me she was the type of woman that knew exactly what she wanted and almost always found a way of getting it. That kind of woman scared me. Stunningly beautiful types that, with a wink or a nod, could manipulate poor drooling saps like trained animals. Fortunately for me I wasn't the kind of sucker to fall for that trap. Well, not usually. I glanced at the back of the business card. "All right. I'll be over at seven."

Tawni extended her hand. "Thank you, Mister Jarrett."

I took her soft delicate hand in mine. "*Tim.*"

“Yes, of course.” That smile again. I studied her shapely gams as she pivoted on her heel and sauntered toward my office door. Strictly in the line of duty of course. If I was being employed to watch her backside, I had to make sure I was watching the *right* backside. Maybe I should even be a specialist in that particular field, catering to voluptuous young women who needed to have their beautiful bodies under constant surveillance by a trained professional. Now there’s I job I could really take a shine to.

My luscious new client turned at the door and glanced back over her shoulder to catch me openly eyeing her. I suspected that she was practically expecting me to stare at her exit by the way I had shamelessly gawked at her in front of my desk. Normally I’m not the type to peep overtly at the soft shapes exclusive to the female anatomy but this girl’s style and allure was downright captivating. She could probably also tell that her exit had made me nearly stop breathing. Some women exuded sexuality without even realizing it and the sultry Miss Wolfe oozed aplenty. Tawni smiled and slowly winked one eye at me for a more dramatic departure, leaving me wondering if that was also part of her sexy dance routine.

After she had gone I studied the handwriting on the back of her business card and expelled a long deep sigh. Miss Wolfe was some dame all right, and I was thinking I might actually enjoy this dismal gray day after all.

Logan’s Diner was built to look like a long railroad dining car with an extension along one side

for the kitchen. A number of booths lined a wall of glass windows with aluminum upright poles separating every other table. It was one of my favorite places to visit since my old days of being a beat cop. And the waitresses occasionally offered me a free cup of coffee or slice of pie now and again even though I wasn't a patrolman anymore. They always treated me well and I tried to patronize their establishment whenever I could.

Kevin was in a booth by himself when I arrived, putting to use his latest pickup line on a young redheaded waitress named Mabel. She stood by the booth with her hands on her hips loudly smacking her chewing gum. The lady appeared unaffected by the man's sweet talk. She smiled at me as I stepped through the door, the tiny silver bell tinkling over my head.

"Am I interrupting anything?" I asked.

Mabel glanced at my friend with a disinterested expression and then back at me. "Nah," she sighed. "You weren't."

"I was just about to get your telephone number," Kevin grinned.

Mabel looked at him and loudly smacked her gum. "Nah . . . you weren't." She looked at me. "Coffee?"

"A coca-cola please, Mabel."

"You got it."

I slid into the booth across from Kevin. "So what is this big favor you have to ask of me?"

My Friend feigned a pained expression. "What makes you think I would do such a thing?"

"Because you're buying lunch."

“Forever the cynic,” he scoffed. “A guy can’t even pick up the tab for a sandwich without his pal getting suspicious about his ulterior motives.”

“Spill it.”

Kevin frowned at me a moment, then expelled his breath in a sigh. “Well, since you mention it – “

“I thought so.”

“It’s only a teenie weenie little thing.”

“Your last teenie weenie little thing almost got my head knocked off.”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know that girl was married, and to an ex-marine, no less? Besides, this favor has no risk to your life and limb whatsoever.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“You remember my aunt Helga? My mother’s sister?”

“The one with the big wart on the side of her –”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Well, mom’s been feeling a bit poorly lately – “

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks. I’ll tell her you’re thinking of her. Anyway, Aunt Helga was going to visit mother by taking a cross-country train ride out to where mom lives. Wouldn’t you know it, her train has a short stopover right here in town this very afternoon. I was hoping you could meet her at the station, maybe show her around the city, then get her back to the station in time for her outgoing train this evening.”

“Why can’t you do it?”

“Well, you see, I have this very important deadline I have to meet. Very important. Critical, in fact. My editor insists I finish this big story by

tonight. Oh, did I also mention that my car is in the shop? The brakes are squeaking, I think.”

“You know something? You are an awful liar.”

“Hey, I happen to consider myself a fairly good liar. I’m just not trying very hard at it, that’s all.”

“And how long is Aunt Helga’s layover?”

Kevin sheepishly shrunk a tad in his seat.

“About four hours.”

“You have got to be kidding!”

“It’s just for one afternoon. Think about that poor decrepit old woman sitting all that time in a cold and dirty, lonely old train station all by herself with no one to keep her company.”

I held up a palm to stop him. “All right! All right!” I winced. “What time does her train come in?”

“Two twenty. And her evening train is six fifteen. Boy oh boy, Tim, will I owe you big time for this one!”

“You better believe it,” I grunted. “What is your aunt’s last name? I would hate to be seen standing on the railway platform shouting ‘Aunt Helga! Aunt Helga!’”

“Sterns,” he grinned happily. “Helga Sterns. Tim, old pal, you’re a lifesaver.”

I snorted in disgust. “Peachy.”

I sat in my reclining desk chair staring out the large picture window as the sun struggled to peek out from behind the clouds. More specifically I was watching the cute secretary in the office building across the street. She was a comely woman, probably

in her mid twenties with straight, shoulder-length ash blonde hair. I liked to refer to her as Veronica Lake after the movie star for the hairstyle she wore, her straight tresses hanging down covering one side of her face. I would often catch her working late at night at her desk, the exposed half of her pretty face illuminated by the small desk lamp. I studied the woman, speculating on what her life might be like. Was she married? Did she have any children? Was her voice high-pitched and squeaky or low and sultry? Did he have a kitty cat named Boots or Snowball? Would she close her eyes and rest the bare side of her face against your cheek as you slow-danced to Guy Lombardo? Was she romantically involved with anyone? Not that I was interested in myself, you understand. Merely passing the time with indiscriminate speculation.

I had about an hour to kill before I was scheduled to appear at the train station. Although, in actuality, I felt such time spent in dutiful observation of the mysterious Miss Lake was not frittered away as idle inactivity. In my own little way I was indeed providing a valuable service – watching and protecting the woman, making sure no harm would come to her as she toiled away all alone in the dark office building. *Just one of my many services ma'am, no extra charge.* Gee, what a nice fellow I was.

My mind kept drifting back to my latest client with the shapely figure and bedroom eyes. Why had I become obsessed with those features unique to the female anatomy all of a sudden? It certainly came as a genuine curiosity to me. Sure, Julie Marsh would flirt and flash her shapely gams and flutter her long

eyelashes at me and I'd simply shrug it off as harmless fun. Yet as soon as a sensuous seductive siren like the delectable Miss Wolfe saunters into my office I fall all to pieces. I couldn't explain my sudden fascination with the lady. My latest client had a come-look-at-my-body type of magnetism about her and I couldn't help but to oblige. Some women just have a certain animal effect on men – drawing out their primal instincts – the hunter caveman persona. And this blonde beauty was definitely drawing my hunter instincts to the surface, suddenly giving me the urge to club her over the head and drag her by her long blonde hair back to my cave.

I guess it had been much too long since I thought about any woman in that way. Burning the candle at both ends can take its toll on a man's health as well as his mental attitude. I suppose all work and no play makes Timmy a dull boy after all. Perhaps a dash of little afternoon lechery serves to prove I was still human. It was good for a man's overall condition – keeps a man from becoming a frustrated pervert flashing his open rain-slicker at old ladies in the park.

Julie strolled into my office and closed the Venetian blinds to block out the few scarce rays of afternoon sun. “Got any plans for tonight?” she lilted gaily.

“Oh, nothing special,” I mused almost to myself. I parted the wooden window slats with my finger to check one last time on the distant Miss Lake. “I gotta go meet someone later.”

Julie batted my hand away from the blinds and scowled playfully at me. “It's not polite to spy on people.”

“I was merely observing,” I protested. “In case you had forgotten, it’s my job as a detective.”

“It’s not your job to stare at women all day,” she snorted, resting her hands on her slim hips. “Unless it’s me you want to watch.”

“Couldn’t do that, angel,” I sighed, reclining back in my chair. “You would be too much of a distraction. I’d never get any work done.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind,” she chuckled. The girl moved behind me and began massaging my shoulders with her fingertips. “You could spy on me all day if you like.”

I closed my eyes and savored her gentle caress. “I look plenty,” I admitted. “You just never catch me.”

“Well then, next time be sure to let me know.”

“That would take all the fun out of it.” Julie and I would engage in this playful banter every once in awhile. Neither of us was serious and we knew nothing would ever come of it. However I detected a recent tone in her voice that belied a slight twinge of genuine sincerity. It unnerved me.

Julie leaned forward and draped her arms around my neck, her lips close to my ear. “Why don’t we go out tonight?” she murmured. “See a movie? Have some dinner? I know a new dance club opening downtown.”

“I told you I had to meet someone.”

“Then how about tomorrow night?”

“We’ll see.”

“You know, traditionally it’s the girl who’s supposed to play hard to get.”

“Believe me angel,” I sighed ruefully. “This guy isn’t worth getting.”

“That should be for the lady to decide.”

“There must be plenty of boys closer to your own age who would perform back-flips to get your attention,” I said. “Why not give one of them a chance?”

“Boys are so immature,” she huffed. Julie straightened and smoothed her fingertips over the stubble on my jaw. “I prefer older men like you.”

“Older men like me?” I frowned. “I’m not quite ready for the old geezer’s home just yet.”

“You know what I mean,” she laughed. “I would think a man your age would enjoy having a younger woman hanging on his arm.”

“Gosh, you’re making me feel better by the minute.”

“Well, you just say the word if you want to take me out sometime,” she said. “I would clear my busy social calendar for a night out with the boss any time.”

“Sure thing, angel.”

“You gonna get some dinner?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good boy.”

“Run along now and I’ll lock up after you.”

“All right.” Julie offered me a pat of her hand on the top of my head and turned to go, her girlish figure drifting gracefully out of the office leaving the lingering fragrance of wildflowers in her wake. I supposed such boss/employee relationships had changed quite a bit since the days when I was a kid. It was a whole new world. More women were

working away from home and Julie just wanted to have a job with a little excitement in it. She eagerly answered my newspaper advertisement and offered to work for less than the usual going rate. That is, when I actually paid her. Many was the time she went weeks on end carrying my credit voucher. Good thing she was still living with her parents who were financially well off.

Seeing as I had no lingering feminine influence in my life, I saw nothing wrong in allowing the young lady to foster her illusions that I was an available male. Not to say that I would ever accept any invitations from the lass. But it was nice to know I was wanted. And with the strange hours and questionable establishments I tended to frequent in the pursuit of my profession, finding a steady girl who would put up with my career would prove quite the challenge. So I continued to be married to my job, clandestinely ogling ladies behind their backs, and appreciating the female form from afar. It's a whole lot safer that way.

I stepped out the front door of the office building onto the sidewalk and was greeted by movement and a hissing noise emanating from the bushes to my right. "*Pssst . . . Jarrett.*"

I turned my head to spot Wally the Weasel crouching behind the shrubbery under the window. "Hello Wally."

Wally the Weasel, my usual informant was aptly named. Not only was the skinny little wretch weasel-like in manner, but his resemblance to one of those furry little rodents was clearly evident as well.

Narrow hatchet face, beady eyes and a long pointy nose; a creature seemingly nocturnal by nature.

“Don’t look over here!” the vermin hissed. “Act natural.”

Act natural. A grown man standing all alone on the sidewalk watching the evening traffic and strolling pedestrians, passing the time by having a nice casual conversation with a hedge. I’d probably look a little less stupid and conspicuous if I was wearing a sandwich board declaring *Eat at Edna’s*.

Wally was a little quirky in his mannerisms and methods, but not any stranger than some of the kooks I had to deal with in my line of work. Long ago I had helped the little guy out of a tough scrape. As a result, the man became eternally loyal and faithful to me. It was kind of like taking in a stray Basset Hound but without all the drool and shedded hair on my trouser leg.

As it happened, I was nursing a beer one night at the bar of Vinny’s Pool Hall hoping to pick up a lead regarding a ring of car thieves. A wealthy dame had her beloved Rolls Royce purloined and rather than collect the insurance settlement hired me to get it back. The job turned out to be more than merely a simple case of larceny. The trail led to evidence of a large-scale chop-shop that took stolen vehicles, gave them new identification tags and papers, and shipped them off to destinations unknown for resale. I followed my various leads to discover that one of the stolen car painters often frequented the seedy pool hall.

A scuffle arose in the corner. I turned from my beer to see a scrawny little fellow being harassed by

two burly bruisers. Unfair advantage on their part, but then, it wasn't my argument. Suddenly the big men started beating on the little one, punching the poor cretin in the face and gut and knocking him to the floor. Normally I wasn't one to interfere in someone else's fight, but two against one simply wasn't cricket. I took a final gulp of my draft of Schlitz and wandered over to the tussling trio, contemplating how I might even the odds a bit. "Hey, buddy," I called as I lifted a pool cue from the rack on the wall. "Mind if I play through?"

One thug turned to me, a scowl on his ugly mug. "Huh?" I swung the butt end of the pool stick sideways, smacking him hard in the chest and sending the goon careening off a billiard table.

"Hey creep!" the other one slobbered, shaking a meaty fist at me while holding his dazed victim by the shirt collar. "This doesn't concern you."

His partner quickly recovered and lurched at me from the side. The man punched me squarely on the chin and knocked me into the rack of cues on the wall, the sticks clattering loudly onto the dirty wooden floor. I braced my back against the wall and checked my jaw. "It does now."

I sprang onto the two bruisers, punching and kicking them in turn. Both were substantially larger than me but I was the better fighter – ducking the poorly aimed punches and countering with solid connections to their stomachs and jaws. The little fellow cowered under one of the billiard tables until the melee was over and the two bullies lay in a pile on the floor.

“You can come out now,” I announced, straightening my tie and returning to my drink at the bar.

The small man crept out from his hiding place and scurried to my side. “Thanks pal,” he panted, glancing nervously at his assailants. “I could have taken them on my own but they caught me by surprise.”

“Yeah, sure,” I nodded. “Why were they so intent on working you over in the first place?”

The guy seemed to shrink a little and anxiously wrung his hands. “Somebody must have told them . . . I mean, they must have gotten the idea . . . maybe the cops heard that they . . . kinda took part in a jewelry store heist?”

“I bet I can tell who squealed to the police,” I grunted. I tossed a single onto the bar. “We better cut out before they come to.”

“Good idea,” the man muttered weakly. He followed me out the side door into the dark dirty alley. “Lucky for me you were around when those goons started to get rough.”

“Not so lucky for me,” I scowled and shoved my fists deep into my coat as I trudged down the dimly lit alley. “Since we can’t go back into the pool hall for a spell, your little tussle might have cost me a good lead.”

“A lead?”

“On a robbery case.”

“You a cop?”

“Private investigator.”

“Well, well . . . imagine that.”

“Intervening in your little disagreement just sent me back to square one.”

“Not necessarily,” he grinned broadly. The fellow stopped me with a hand on my sleeve. “This may be your lucky day after all.”

I paused and frowned at the little man. “How so?”

“It just so happens that acquiring information on the sly is one of my specialties. And since I owe you one we could say this little tidbit is on the house.”

I stroked my sore jaw and studied the man. I was in a sour mood and was not looking forward to telling the client about losing a promising lead. Since I had little to lose, I decided to take a chance. “All right. Get me the address of a car chop-shop in the area that specializes in fancy imports and we’ll call it even.”

“Done!” The guy gave a wide toothy grin and extended his hand. “My name’s Wally. People sometimes call me *Wally the Weasel*.”

His beady dark eyes glinted in the light of the streetlamp at the mouth of the alley, his thin lips baring a row of glistening white teeth. “Can’t imagine why,” I grunted, accepting his shake. “Tim Jarrett.”

“Well now, *partner*,” Wally beamed, taking my elbow and steering me from the dark corridor. “I have the feeling this is the beginning of a fortuitous business relationship.”

Wally came through just as he predicted by providing me with the location of the auto ring’s secret operation. I recovered the stolen Rolls intact, the wealthy matron happily bestowing upon me my fee as well as a generous bonus for my speediness and

confidentiality in the matter. Not being the greedy sort, I passed the bonus on to my new business associate. The Weasel was more than happy to accept monetary compensation for his efforts. He continued to offer tips from time to time, keeping a low profile to avoid discovery and possible beatings from disgruntled criminals. I repaid him when I could, ours becoming exactly what he had predicted – a fortuitous business relationship.

“So what brings you here Wally?” I asked nonchalantly, glancing casually up the street. “I assume your visit isn’t merely to inspect the local foliage.”

“Word on the street is that Joe is looking for you,” the plant whispered.

Joe *the Moose* Muscelli was an aging gangster from back in Al Capone’s era who still didn’t mind getting his hands dirty from time to time. His grandson Ricky was much worse – arrogant, hotheaded and stupid, which was a dangerous combination in a criminal. I did the little brat a favor by getting him locked up for a very sloppily-planned payroll heist before he could do any real harm. I suspected his dear Grandpa Joe had taken it rather personal.

“Ricky?” I asked.

“That’s my guess,” the hedge hissed.

“The little creep needed to be taught a lesson,” I snorted.

“And maybe Joe might return the favor by giving you a pair of concrete galoshes and take you swimming in the east river just to teach *you* a lesson.”

“Moose doesn’t scare me.”

“Me neither,” Wally whispered. “It’s all those bullets that go whizzing around when he gets angry that tend to make me feel a tad uneasy.”

“Well, thanks for the warning anyway.”

“Just watch your back.”

“Sure thing, Wally.” I dug a sawbuck out of my pocket and tossed it into the bushes. “Go and get yourself a fresh coat of fertilizer.”

I stood on the railway platform looking up and down the length of the train for a stout, middle-aged woman with graying hair and a case of lumbago. Aunt Helga didn’t seem to be anywhere in sight. Maybe she missed the train, or maybe she was still on it and was having difficulty getting her baggage together. I decided to wait patiently by the passenger compartment holding my handmade sign from a piece of discarded shirt box with the word STERNS written on it.

An attractive young woman in her mid-twenties walked up to me. She was slender and very pretty, her black hair cut quite short in an Audrey Hepburn style. She wore a dark blue skirt and matching jacket over a frilly light blue blouse and had an overnight bag in her left hand. “Is that for me?” she smiled warmly, nodding her head to indicate the cardboard sign in my hand.

“I don’t think so,” I frowned. “The woman I’m waiting for is much older.”

“You mean Helga Sterns?”

“Why . . . yes.”

“That’s my mother.” She extended her hand to me. “I’m Kimberly. Kimberly Sterns.”

I smiled and accepted her shake. “Timothy Jarrett. I’m a friend of Kevin Keyes.”

“He’s my cousin.” The woman smiled warmly and slipped her arm through mine. “Let’s get away from all this noise and smoke where we can talk.”

I took her bag and led her through a set of glass doors into a large open room. I spotted a coffee shop across the way. “I have to admit,” I said, “I was a bit surprised to be met by you and not your mother.”

Kimberly laughed. “I’ll bet you were! The truth of the matter is, at the very last minute, mother had the opportunity to catch a performance by Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra. She certainly couldn’t pass that up! Mother already purchased the train tickets so I decided to go in her place.”

We stopped by an empty table with two chairs. “Can I buy you a cup of coffee or something?”

The girl winced. “Actually, I was hoping to have something a little more substantial. I hadn’t eaten all day and the prospect of having lunch in that dining car was simply too dreadful to contemplate.”

“Well then, let’s go out to some place nice.” I turned and steered us toward the parking lot exit. “And I can show you a little bit of our fair city while you’re here.”

Kimberly strolled leisurely at my side. “Don’t you have to get back to the newspaper?”

“I don’t work with Kevin. I’m a private investigator.”

Kimberly’s eyes lit up. “Oooh! A genuine private eye! How fascinating!”

“It isn’t as glamorous as you might think.”

“But do you track down criminals and gangsters like the stories in those dime store detective magazines?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “I’ve run down a thug or two in my time.”

“Thug!” she giggled. “How exciting!”

We exited the station and descended the stairs to the street. “I know a nice cozy Italian restaurant if you’re interested.”

“Italian sounds perfect.”

We crossed the street to the parking lot. “I’d like to apologize in advance for my car,” I said with a nod toward Old Betsy. “She isn’t a Cadillac, but she gets me where I need to go.”

“I think your automobile has character. And it’s exactly the kind of car I would expect a private detective to drive.” She stopped up short and drew in a sharp breath. “Is that a bullet hole in the rear panel?”

“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

The girl tentatively touched the puncture with the tip of one finger then turned to me, her eyes sparkling with giddiness. “I want to hear all about your exciting adventures!”

I opened and held the passenger door for her. “I wouldn’t want to bore you.”

“Oh please?” she begged. “It will be such fun! And mother will be so jealous when she hears what she missed out on!”

“Suit yourself.”

Kim rose up onto her tiptoes and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. I furrowed my brow with a puzzled expression. “What was that for?”

“For being my date for the day, and making my stay in the city wonderful.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” I murmured as she slipped into the passenger seat. “You haven’t heard any of my thrilling adventures.”

We stood together on the railway platform, bells ringing and steam hissing around us.

“I had a marvelous time,” Kim smiled warmly.

“Me too.”

“You know, I have to take the train back this way to go home again. Maybe we can spend some more time together.”

“I’d like that.”

The girl looked down at her shoes and then back at my face. “And maybe we can pick up where we left off?”

“Left off?”

“I mean, with us.”

I didn’t answer. I knew a large part of this girl’s interest in me was my dangerous lifestyle, along with her being all alone in the big city. Decidedly, Kimberly was a fun and attractive lady and a terrific date, but she was also related to my good friend. If anything developed between us, it would undoubtedly make its way back to Kevin. I didn’t have that many good friends, and I hated to think I could jeopardize that relationship over a quick fling with his pretty little cousin.

I handed Kim her overnight bag. “Have a pleasant trip, Kimberly.”

Miss Sterns took the satchel and raised up to kiss me softly on the cheek. “Goodbye,” she murmured dejectedly, then turned and disappeared into the train.

I watched her go, wondering why that sweet attractive girl would ever want to see me again.

And if keeping my friendship with Kevin Keyes was worth it.

I went home to put on a clean shirt and tie hoping my new client would notice my change in attire and be properly impressed. It’s the little things that count.

My ever-diligent and eternally suspicious landlady *Nosy Nesbitt* was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs. Her silver hair was pulled back and pinned behind her head making her look even more severe than usual. “Mister Jarrett,” she snorted with a disapproving scowl. “I do not appreciate having tenants coming and going at all hours of the day and night.”

“I’d be happy to keep an eye on them if you like,” I grinned helpfully.

The aged matriarch didn’t return the smile. “I run a respectable establishment,” she snapped acidly. “I do not approve of guns and clandestine shenanigans.” Mrs. Nesbitt was spindly and stern, conjuring up images in my mind of a wicked, crooked-nosed crone bent on terrorizing a hapless waif from Kansas and her little dog as well. A harmless hag for the most part but one that could easily reduce a man to ashes with her sharp tongue and piercing stare at the drop of a hat for no viable reason. I put up with the old hen if only to continually test my abilities of communicating

effectively with disgruntled or uncooperative members of the public. Also the small fact that she kept my rooms available to me had some tiny thing to do with it.

“My dear Mrs. Nesbitt,” I soothed offering my most ingratiating smile. “It’s thoughtful and considerate people like yourself who make it possible for those who uphold the law to do their jobs. Mine is a thankless, miserable profession – a poor servant struggling to make the streets safer for law-abiding citizens everywhere. I apologize for any inconvenience I may cause you in my pursuit of truth, justice, and the American way.”

The whole sappy spiel sounded pretty good. I think I read it in a comic book. The old hag wasn’t impressed. She just snorted and returned to her sweeping of the stair landing. I suspected she might also use that same broomstick for an occasional moonlit ride with her black cat Mephisto.

I arrived at Miss Wolfe’s place a few minutes after seven. Though I had plenty of time on my hands that evening I didn’t want to appear too eager to see her again. I spent part of my early afternoon doodling on my desk blotter and creating wickedly depraved mental images of the delicious Tawni offering me a personal and private rendition of her strip-tease act. Occasionally, she found it necessary to require assistance from a volunteer in the audience, and I, her willing and eager spectator, would happily lend a hand or two. My erotic visions were often interrupted by a ringing telephone or a trifling query by my ever-efficient secretary, forcing me to begin Tawni’s

titillating performance all over again. Gee, what a shame.

I pressed my finger onto the buzzer by Tawni's front door and waited. A floor lamp illuminated the front room behind the closed chiffon curtains and I heard a radio playing, but not very loud. I knocked and waited some more. Tawni was certainly taking her sweet time in answering the door. The radio program wasn't so overpowering she couldn't hear my knock. Had I interrupted something? Perhaps she was in the middle of changing into her dance costume to give me a sneak preview of tonight's performance. I rang the buzzer again and impatiently shuffled my feet. I glanced up and down the street to see if anyone was watching. A dog barked a couple of blocks away. I pricked my ears up to hear a bird chirping in a nearby tree. A robin, perhaps. Strange, I was fairly certain there were birds somewhere in the heart of the city, but one hardly gets the chance to hear any of them above all the noise and voices and automobiles. But they were there – if only one took the time and had an ear to listen.

I shoved my hands into my trouser pockets and peered up the empty street trying my best not to appear too conspicuous or too anxious to have the lovely lady invite me into her home sweet home. Shoot, I've waited all afternoon, a few more moments wouldn't kill me. I glanced down the other end of the street, noting a recurring theme with the design of the surrounding dwellings. Most of the homes varied slightly in color, trim and lawn decorations, but for the most part the fundamental design remained the same.

Square, uniform, identical. Little boxes in the suburb for little families.

I passed the time by thinking about my client a bit more. My, my, but that young Miss Wolfe was one stacked little lady. Her bust must have been a D-cup at least. Maybe even a double D – or was it 2D? Who was it that came up for the criteria for measuring that part of female figure anyway? Perhaps I might even add that particular skill to my list of services – busts measured and backsides observed. Not that Julie would allow such an alteration to my business cards. But with a job like that I'd be more than eager to come into the office – even on a Monday morning.

Normally I'm not the type to become obsessed with naughty visions of my female clients but this little lady was different somehow. Perhaps it was the mystery surrounding her chosen professions or even the thought of catching a glimpse of her dance act later – up close and very personal. *Don't mind me Miss, I'm just busy detecting.*

I supposed it was all right for me to think about women that way from time to time since I didn't have anything else to occupy my brain besides work.

I expelled my breath and glanced around. Will ya' look at all those nice cozy homes all in a row. Cute, but certainly not the lifestyle for me. I couldn't settle down into the quiet suburban neighborhood routine, especially with the odd hours and unusual occupation such as mine. And I'd probably have to keep the place fairly clean too. With a second story flat I didn't have to entertain very many unexpected visitors, and Miss Marsh knew better than to drop by for an impromptu cleaning. But with an accessible

house such as one of these cozy little cottages she could easily make the excuse of just happening to be passing through the neighborhood with her mop and dustpan in hand. *“Oh my! This place is filthy! Let me tidy up a bit as long as I’m here.”*

After nearly two minutes passed I felt the instinctive tingle on the back of my neck that something was wrong. One of those Private Eye hunches I got every now and then. I recalled our conversation earlier where Tawni informed me that someone broke into her house last week. Perhaps that evening she came home and surprised the guy, but on the inside this time. Maybe things got a tad dicey and the poor girl was knocked senseless or was tied up. I knew Miss Wolfe had been expecting me, so I felt I had every right to open the front door and let myself in. I jiggled the knob. Locked. So much for the direct approach.

I went around the side of the house toward the back. There was a screen door ajar leading into the kitchen. The light over the sink was on so I entered and called Tawni’s name. No answer. The house was small and square like the others on the block with the kitchen and dinette in back and a narrow hall leading to the front door. The only lights were from the lamp in front and beside where I stood, darkening the hallway with geometric shadows. I felt the eerie sensation that I wasn’t alone. Across the back of my neck caressed Death’s icy-cold fingers – a tangible though indefinable manifestation of his ghastly presence. Steve Mann’s blood had once filled my lungs and nostrils – its acrid, coppery scent leaving me attuned to the smell of death. I reached inside my

coat and drew out my revolver from the shoulder holster, my hand trembling slightly with trepidation. One doesn't last long in the P.I. business without developing the ability to instantly size up a situation and this place stunk of danger as thick as if the Grim Reaper himself had left a slimy, scummy wake through the house like a monstrous garden slug. I pressed my back against the wall and peered down the empty hallway to the front of the house. I doubted that anyone was still hiding in the place after all my knocking and shouting. Then again, Tawni told me she'd been burgled recently and it wasn't healthy to take unnecessary risks.

I inched myself down the hall, peeking into the doors of the bathroom and linen closets. I could see that the front of the house was divided into a living room and one other room, most likely the single bedroom. It didn't take me long to secure the back and side rooms. When I reached the end of the hall, I found Miss Wolfe. She was sitting in an upholstered high-back chair in the living room beside the radio on the side wall. She was dressed much as I had seen her that morning – minus the jacket which was probably hanging in the closet. Still as beautiful as ever. Except for the knife. Someone had buried a wooden-handled kitchen knife in her left eye socket, the blade shoved so deeply into her skull that only the handle remained exposed.

I fought the bile rising up in my throat. More death. The dastardly Grim Reaper had struck again, the blood of the innocent leaving an indelible stain on my flesh. I had seen my share of corpses both in the war and as a private dick, but none disgusted me half

as much as this one. This one I knew personally, and a beautiful dame on top of that. Such a waste.

I could tell from where I stood at the edge of the room that the once amazingly beautiful Tawni Wolfe had been dead probably about an hour. The wound in her face had ebbed to a trickle, the blood slowly dripping from her chin onto her exquisite cleavage and into her lap. The red on her blouse was of a dark purple hue and had starting to congeal. Tawni's right eye was open and her mouth slack, as though the killer had caught her by surprise.

Surprise, hell. It's not every day you find someone shoving a carving knife into your face.

I turned and swallowed heavily to keep from vomiting as I holstered my weapon. Why hadn't she come to me sooner? Tawni must have been in more grave danger than she thought. She had been secretive about her fears and now it was too late for me to protect her. The door to her bedroom was slightly ajar and I kicked it open with my toe. No cowering killers poised to pounce or give themselves up without a struggle. *Damn*. It was never easy.

A telephone stood on the nightstand by the bed. I took out my kerchief and lifted the receiver. I dialed Police Lieutenant Bill Rutland down at the local police station. He and I had traded notes on previous cases and I knew he would deal square with me on this one. Besides, his was the only police number I knew by memory.

"Rutland," he answered.

"Bill? Tim Jarrett."

"Yeah?"

"I'd like to report a murder."

“Cripes, Jarrett!” the man cursed. “Not again!”

“I’m afraid so.”

“So who did you ventilate this time?”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Now there’s a pleasant surprise.”

“A young woman’s been knifed in the front room of her house.”

“Friend of yours?”

“My client.”

“Hope she paid you up front.”

“Well, as a matter of fact – “

“Remind me not to hire you to protect the mayor.”

“You’re not helping my already bruised self-esteem.”

“Okay, okay, where’s the stiff?” I gave him the address. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah.”

“For Pete’s sake,” he warned. “Don’t touch anything until I arrive.”

“Sure.”

“I *mean* it, Jarrett.”

“Hey, you know me.”

“Yeah, I know you,” he growled. “Don’t touch anything until I arrive.”

I only had a few minutes before the boys in blue would show up so I did a quick inspection of the house, avoiding the living room. Not that I was squeamish about poking around a fresh corpse, I just didn’t want to disturb any evidence. I left the radio on, preferring the sounds of music over dead silence when having to share a room with a fresh cadaver. The house was clean – no lurking killers, no ticking

time bombs, and unfortunately no obvious clues. Just once I'd like to find a scrap of paper clutched in the victim's fingers pointing to the killer. *The butler did it.* No such luck. The only thing Miss Wolfe's corpse had to offer was that her death had been swift and cruel. Some sick wretch got incensed enough to carve up a beautiful face had permanently put an end to a young stripper's promising career.

After finding little sign of any significant evidence, I stepped back onto the front porch to wait for Rutland. I glanced up and down the street. Nothing had changed. Nobody knew or probably even cared that their neighbor was dead. *Don't bother me now, I'm watching Uncle Miltie.* Such was the way of city living. Folks moved in, folks moved out, people died. Thus endeth another gray day.

I shoved my hands into my trouser pockets and wished I had a cigarette. I wondered what it was that made me give them up the past few months. It was Julie. She would wrinkle up her pert little nose and make helpful comments about my health whenever I fired up a smoke at the office. So, of course, I took the only logical avenue available to me. I quit smoking there. I limited myself to lighting up only at home and out of doors, but the dauntless Miss Marsh would inevitably find a pack of cigarettes in my coat pocket and start her sermon all over again. I finally ended up bumming smokes from other people. When that got to be too much of an inconvenience I decided to quit completely. The girl was right, though. Food tasted better and I didn't get winded so easily if I had to chase some mug down a dark alley. Being a smoker was also a detriment if I found it necessary to

hide in a nonsmoker's closet, praying my nicotine scented clothes wouldn't give me away. I rarely confided to Julie that her efforts had a positive effect upon my life, fearing she may want to extend her feminine influence into other areas of my life besides cigarettes. But at times like these I wished I hadn't given them up.

Darkness was setting in with the air containing the scent of rain in it. Fitting. The perfect ending to a perfect day. I leaned my back against the doorjamb and watched the houses in the neighborhood gradually begin to turn on their outside lights. All was silent but for Tawni's radio still playing in the front room. A comedy program most likely. Strange that I hadn't taken notice of what Tawni had been listening to when she got knifed. I doubted it mattered. Very little of our evening radio fare can cause people to go berserk and hack away at each other with kitchen cutlery. I strained my ears to pick out some of the broadcast. I couldn't discern any dialogue, but the silence of the darkness was occasionally punctuated by the mechanical laughter of an artificial audience. It gave me an eerie feeling to hear those sounds emanating from the death room, as if Tawni's killer was mocking me. Having a good old belly laugh over my poor timing and failure to prevent that young woman's murder. Keep it up, chuckles – your time is coming.

I was angry. I had been looking forward to seeing the luscious Tawni Wolfe perform her strip-tease act at the *Fantasies Lounge* that night. It isn't often that a guy gets an eyeful of a gorgeous blonde peeling off her clothes and her paying the lucky stiff

good money for the privilege. Plus I had lost myself a client – something that doesn't sit well with future business prospects. Both gone – my evening entertainment and a paying client, all in one swift, stabbing motion. I cursed myself for being selfish and not thinking straight, but I was mad.

And somebody was going to pay.