

## Chapter One

Back when I was sleeping it would have been way past my bedtime. Instead, I found myself cruising along something just wet enough to call a river. Spinning red lights jarred me loose at the peak of my negative obsession, one where I end all the pain and misery in my bleak life and commit suicide. Then I'm reincarnated, only to come back as myself.

I pulled into a lot that was level because the potholes had finally taken over. Flash-bulbs burped and cops were busy doing a job they were never properly trained to do. When I climbed out of my car, and started toward the shindig, a boy in uniform fresh from One-Hour Martinizing waved me away.

"Sir, you'll have to leave the area."

"What's going on?" I spurted out, knowing what his mechanical response would be.

"I'm sorry, that's official police business. Now please —"

Before his voice could crack, he was interrupted by two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of man that was solid in the center but loose and doughy everywhere else. Homicide detective, Floyd Cooperman. The droopy eyes in his round head were the color of faded jeans that had done some time kneeling on coarse cement and they were sunken like they'd been stepped on by an angry hooker's high heels(which they might have been, but only in fun). "Strelacheck, he's all right." Floyd, slapping the air with a hand that could have been Babe Ruth's mitt, and waved me over. "Come on, you might as well take a look. Hey, what the hell are you doing in this neck of the slums at one a.m.?"

"I love to sit by the river and listen to the sound of waves crashing against the bodies," I snapped back. Before I could break into my "A" material I found myself standing over a man who had met, and decided to stay with, his maker. Floyd pulled an evidence bag from the inside pocket of his coat. "We found this next to the victim."

It was an 8X10 ten photo of a dark haired man with a perfectly groomed mustache and the kind of good looks you'd like to have staring back at you from a mirror. Floyd held the photo next to the face of the corpse. It was the same man, only clean-shaven. He now had brown hair, full of annoying blonde streaks, the sides shaved in rows like planted crops. The hair on top was an inch high and pan flat.

"The Make Over Killer strikes again!" Floyd eased out of his throat. "A real good job too. Maybe I can get an appointment," I said as we both stood up.

Memories. You can't live with them and for some dumb reason we refuse to live without them. The "Make Over Killer" had started its killing spree the same day "that face" had started killing me.

"You need an appointment with your bed. Get some sleep. You look like you're the one who's dead," Floyd belted, knowing full well that I was the one who should be wrapped in a rubber sleeping bag. Sure my heart was still beating; it just hadn't gotten the message yet. Or maybe it had gotten the message, but was just waiting for me to show some initiative. Or maybe it was following orders from the big Man upstairs. "Keep beating... and beating and beating... and beating... I'll let you know when he's had enough."

I don't think I'll ever forget that face, no matter how many times I'm reincarnated and tossed back into this lopsided ball game. Angel was her name: a name that fit her like a two-fingered glove fits a blind butcher. She had the kind of looks that made the heads on statues turn: mine practically landed in her lap. Since she strolled into my office six months ago I've been living each day hoping it was my last.

\* \* \*

## Chapter Two

It was a typical morning for me — it was afternoon. My first cup of Java went down like it was trying to take me with it. And on most days I would have obliged, but not today. My life was at its-all time high - the month's rent was paid, and it wasn't even the twentieth yet.

Now, my place might not be the Taj Mahal, but it was a step or two better than my business deserved. The only thing neat about my office was that the dust formed a nice even layer and covered most of the holes in my genuine imitation Naugahyed couch. My desk was old, but it didn't have the bones to be considered antique. I bet the overgrown shrub it was made from was the missing link between a tree and Formica. I had two metal cabinets that could be opened with just the right crow bar. My landlord insisted that the place was carpeted. I argued that the floor was just mildewing.

I had all the modern inconveniences including electricity and the latest model rotary phone. I had second and third thoughts about paying the damn phone bill. Although a phone was a necessity to my "thriving" private -eye business, it was a heck of a nuisance. And it started early that day. I didn't answer it on the first ring. I was too busy reading the recycled news printed on recycled paper.

There was one new story that would soon be repeated thirteen times during the next year. “The Make Over Killer” had struck for the first time. He or she had taken a plain Jane and turned her into corpse most girls would die to look like. This one did. I tried to stare the phone down, but the damn thing kept screaming at the top of its lungs. I couldn’t hear myself worry, so I gave in and picked up the receiver, convincing my fragile ego that maybe there was work on the other end.

“Mantle Investigation.”

“I’m about to jump out my window,” the caller pleaded.”

“This is 907-5153. The suicide hotline is 970-5152!” I shouted with as much support in my voice as anyone could have whose phone number is one digit away from Suicides Are Us.

“I can’t even dial, I’m useless... I should jump and do the whole world a favor.”

“You’re not useless... I’m sure they’re things you could do. I can’t name them off hand.” While I was trying to convince this man and myself it was better to be alive and in pain, than dead and peaceful, I swung my seat around towards my desk and there, twelve tiny inches before my eyes, was that face. Trying to describe what she looked like would be like trying to describe a rainbow to a blind ape. When she looked in a mirror, I could imagine the mirror pleading with her to stay and then when she left smashing itself on the floor. She was the kind of girl that God probably kept a duplicate of for himself. Yeah, the big G had outdone himself on this one.

She waited till my heartbeat quieted down before she spoke. “Your door was open. If it’s important business, I can wait outside.”

“No, No... It’s not important.” I mouthed, as I picked my jaw up from the table. Then I remembered the high squeaky voice that was coming from that odd looking black thing stuck to my ear.

“I’m gonna jump right now!” it squealed.

“If it’s what you want... I’m sure you know what’s best,” I said without out knowing words were emerging out of my gaping mouth as I hammered down the receiver.

“I’m Angel Macnare.” she purred.

“Uhh-Aaajax Mantle.” I remembered my name. I was gaining control. “I’d offer you a cup of coffee, but I’m aging it another week.” I was being humorous, but that statement would’ve passed any lie detector test.

I got my first indication that Angel’s nerve wasn’t far behind her looks when she asked: “May I sit, Mr. Mantle?”

“Sure, as long as you can afford the cleaning bill.” She smiled and stepped back from the desk, and revealed a body that proved God was a sexist. I liked what I saw and had a feeling I liked what I couldn’t see even better. She wiped about a year’s worth of soot off the chair and sat down. She must have felt my eyes on her legs, a trip that

seemed to gladly go on forever. And pulled down her dress. I moved my eyes up to real estate that was just as desirable. She hugged her pocket book and ruined my view, which was the equivalent of someone tenting the great pyramids.

“I don’t know where to start, Mr. Mantle,” she said nervously.

“Start at the beginning. It gives things a certain order that way.” I always had a way with words.

“I’m not really sure if it’s the beginning. You see Mr. Mantle... I suffer from amnesia.”

“And you want me to find out who you are,” I said, while I thought about how someone with her looks could walk around without anyone remembering who she was or what she ate for breakfast. If I had amnesia the only thing I’d remember was her.

“I wish it were so simple. You see, about six months ago, I woke up with my car smashed against a tree. I didn’t remember hitting it and a few moments later I realized I didn’t remember who I was. A policeman was on the scene almost immediately and asked for my drivers license, that’s when I found out I had a name and an address.” She paused nervously. “Do you have a cigarette?”

“Yeah, a lung full,” I said, picturing us exchanging chest ex-rays. “You know, smoking is a very nasty habit that’ll lead you to other nasty habits.” That I would have been glad to show her. I lit her weed and watched the smoke rush into her mouth, which sucked my morning breath away.

“When the police dropped me off at my address a few tenants in my building greeted me on the way in. I didn’t remember any of them. Good thing none of them saw me trying to figure out which key fit my lock. I would have looked quite foolish.”

“Yeah, the kind of foolish that men give up their happy homes for,” I slipped under my breath.

“It was a nice one bedroom apartment, tastefully furnished. Actually quite warm... My closets were full of clothes I approved of... I felt weird, like I was illegally entering someone else’s house.” She leaned forward and flicked off the ashes from her cigarette. Had I been alert I might have gotten a peak at some cleavage. “Yet, some how, it all made sense that it was mine. It was exactly my tastes, which I found myself discovering with each moment. It was strange, like I was dreaming, but I was dreaming someone else’s dream.”

“That happens to me during my sexual fantasies,” Luckily she ignored my dim wit and continued on.

“Later that night, I was searching my desk and I found some personal papers and a bank book. I was shocked to find that I had seventy-five thousand dollars in a saving’s account and another six thousand in my checking. I didn’t even know if I had a job or what I did. There were no pay stubs. In fact the only deposit in the saving’s account was

made two months earlier when it was opened, and it was originally eighty-two thousand. Apparently I'd withdrawn money over the last two months to live on. The next day I hired a private detective to try to find out about my past, and he confirmed my suspicions. My name was false, it had been taken from a little girl who had died twenty-four years ago."

"Someone, even you maybe used her birth certificate to get your social security number, driver's license and credit cards," I spit out, trying to show her I knew my business the little that was left of it.

"The detective figured that I was running away from something before I lost my memory, and told me to forget about my past, if I knew what was good for me." Angel rose from her chair and started to pace.

As discretely as possible I pushed away everything on my desk that was in my line of view of her gorgeous gate. Fortunately, nothing that fell off broke. Sure it was a risk, but we detectives have to be able to examine every facet of our clients, and she was well faceted.

"Well, I couldn't just leave it at that... I had to find out more about myself. Do you know what it's like not knowing who you are, and where you come from?"

"Yeah, but unfortunately after I sober up it all comes back to me." I blithered.

"I tried a few shrinks hoping they could unlock the past. Unfortunately they were more interested in looking up my skirt than looking into my mind," she said in a tone that did nothing to kill the idea that that remark was aimed at me... "They told me to get on with my life and forget my past, it may never come back, and please pay on the way out."

She stopped pacing, and for a few seconds stood motionless in front of my desk. I studied that face again. It wasn't just her looks; there was something behind those perfect bones that was reeling me in faster than a kid hauling in his first fish.

"Well, I decided to make a life for myself. I didn't know what skills I had... But I did have almost eighty thousand dollars, which was enough money for me to start my own small business. I was visiting a florist shop, which I was interested in purchasing. The shop was practically next door to the cemetery where the private detective told me that poor little girl I had gotten my name from was buried. There, a man approached me. When I saw he was drinking from a bottle of alcohol I started to walk away. I remember what he said, exactly. I seemed to have an excellent memory, almost photographic, odd isn't it?"

"Not really, Einstein could calculate formulas that looked like a Jackson Polluck painting, but couldn't balance his own check book."

"I never knew that, I think." She believed me. It's funny, how if you throw around a few names, people eat it up like it fell off of God's plate. I could see a smile trying to take root on her lips but it soon passed and she continued.

“The man wore an expensive suit but on him it looked strange like -”

“Like a leather cover on a snuff magazine. I know the type,” I blurted out showing her my fine breeding.

“That describes him rather well. Anyway, he spoke out of only one side of his mouth, and he said, ‘Hey, sister, you following me? I guess you only saw the faces on the dead presidents that were paying for your drinks.’ I kept thinking he was making a pass. I told him that I didn’t mean to be rude but I honestly didn’t remember meeting him before. That did not deter him in the least. He blurted out; ‘Even a full tank of hundred proof won’t make me forget looks like yours.’ I tried to be polite as not to upset him. I told him that it was possible that we could have met somewhere, but not at a bar. I didn’t drink. He didn’t believe me for a moment. He said, ‘Oh, we met all right, and you were chugging down the hooch like there was a five alarm monk in your belly. But what I’d like to know is, what the hell are you doing at my sister’s grave?’ That stopped me dead in my tracks. My heart practically pounded through my blouse.”

She remembered the guy’s words, but my imagination had to fill in his attitude.

“All I could say was, ‘Your sister’s grave?’” ‘You heard me!’ he shouted! Then he continued on. ‘As enthralled as you and Romeo was about the tragic demise of my kid sister, it wasn’t sob story enough for me to make you travel halfway across the U.S. of A. to pay your respects.’ I thought it best not to mention that I was now using his sister’s name. I told him I knew nothing about his sister and he had mistaken me for his someone else. I was visiting the grave of a friend that is nearby. Then I asked him where is it that he thought we had met. He still didn’t believe me. He grinned and then said, ‘I don’t know what your game is lady, but I’m positive I banged the brews with you and your slimy boyfriend a few months back and about a thousand miles from here in Cap City. A joint called the Neon Crevasse.”

She didn’t stumble on the guy’s words but repeated them like they were all separate items.

“I think spotting me at his sister’s grave and my denial of ever having met him frightened the man, because he burst off and refused to answer any of my questions. I tried to follow him, but he jumped into the only taxi around and was gone. So I took a train here. I’m afraid of flying. I’m sure I’ve never flown before. It’s funny how I don’t have a memory, but I know little things like that. Anyway then I —”

“You looked up detectives in the phone book and my name was the first one listed.”

“Actually, the pages were torn out. Yours was the only name left. It’s funny how they went to all that trouble of leaving it behind. It was just a sliver in the middle of where a page would have been.”

“It must have been another one of my satisfied customers.”

She stopped in front of my desk, waved a few loose hairs away from her porcelain

cheeks, took a deep breath for effect, which worked like a charm, and popped the question. "So will you find her for me?"

If I listened only to my gut, I would have played musical chairs on meat slicers for her, but there was more to this than met my hormones. I got up, and when I found myself to be just a few inches taller than Angel, I tried to stand like aliens were beaming me up. "I don't know. Let's take a look at some of the variables. Before your memory flew the coop... There's a good chance that you also took a powder from your family and friends... Which at first look doesn't make sense, because you would have found some addresses or phone numbers. Unless, for a very good reason, you were being careful and committed them to memory - a memory you no longer have. Which might mean you're running away from something, and sticking your perfect nose in, which could make my job even more difficult and possibly extremely dangerous."

"Until I get my memory back, I don't really have a life. I'll pay whatever you ask."

"Sure, you'll pay... but I'd feel kind of bad if even a small portion of it went for my funeral," I snapped back.

For a second a brief wave of sadness cornered her face, but it quickly turned to determination like the instant water and cement become concrete. She started to turn and I let her. I wanted to get a good view of her B-side, which on her was just another number-one hit. But I spoke before she got away. "I didn't say I wouldn't take the case, just give me a few minutes to bounce it around my bean box." So what were my options? On one hand I might find myself minus a pulse beat... On the other hand there was...

I wasn't just looking at her... I was memorizing. Sure, she knew what I was doing, but she just stood there letting my eyes go where no man in my tax bracket had ever gone before. It was my neck or her body... Not much of a contest. Anyway you only live once and even if I managed to squeeze out a few more lifetimes, I'd have to go through a lot of lives before I had another shot at anything her caliber. And even then, with my luck, I'd probably come back as poison sumac and my only hope would be that she liked small red rashes. Yeah, I was falling for her gorgeous act all right, hook line and libido.

"About my fee..."

"You'll help me?"

"Why not. The way my life is headed the only thing I have to look forward to is a comfortable death bed."

"I'll pay you double... No, triple your normal fee. Thank you so much."

I don't think it happened in slow motion, but that's the way I remember it. Angel floating up on her toes, leaning forward and planting her lips on my cheek. I felt every gorgeous cell acting like tiny suction cups, slowly flattening against my skin, then easing themselves away, but still holding on, until the smallest particle between two human beings separated reluctantly, like hands reaching for their lover as the ship sails away.

Only I was being shanghaied, but I didn't know it yet.

"Is four thousand up front enough?" she asked, breaking the mood.

"Make it two. I wouldn't want to find myself in a tax bracket."

"She better be a great piece," good old Tony, my adorable pet parrot, interjected, startling Angel.

"About time you woke up."

"About time you woke up." Tony screeched, mimicking everything but they way I sometimes spit when I talk.

"Who wants to be conscious in this dump?"

"Do you mind telling me what's going on here?"

Angel hadn't realized where the other voice was coming from and probably thought she had shelled out two grand for a batty detective who liked to carry on small talk with himself. Before she had a chance to ask for her dough back, I walked over to the closet, yanked the door open, and rolled out a large metal bird stand. Perched on a branch like a horny construction worker on a metal beam, was a melon sized black and yellow bird. "Angel, meet Tony." The bird let out a whistle and then spoke.

"If I was only five years younger and human." It wasn't Shakespeare but at least it was an improvement from what his previous owner had taught him.

"Nice to meet you Tony."

"Do yourself a favor and dump the bum." Sometimes out of the mouths of birds. I wished she'd listened.

"Clam it Tony!"

"Clam it, Tony! Do the world a favor, and throw yourself out the window! Tony heckled.

I could have buried him with my wit, but I'd look kind of foolish humiliating a dumb animal. Instead, I poured seed into his feeder. "That should shut his yapper for a few minutes. Tony was a present from a local hood I did a favor for. The sleezeball had a heck of a sense of humor and taught the bird a few choice phrases."

"And a few I'm sure he picked up around here."

"I was hired by Harry the Horse, the local mob boss, to find his wife. Harry was convinced his "bride no longer to be" was cheating on him, but found out she was doing volunteer work at a smoke-enders clinic. Apparently it was a busy day for Harry, and he had forgotten to call off the hit on his wife. When he hadn't seen her in weeks he began to think she flew the coop. I found the Mrs. dead in their bed. Harry had never noticed the body, he uses an extremely thick comforter, and his work makes him so accustomed to the odor of dead bodies he didn't smell anything unusual. Harry was embarrassed by the incident and swore me to secrecy and said it was best that I pretended I didn't know him. He paid me handsomely, and gave me the bird as a constant reminder to keep my trap

shut. I thought about returning Tony to Harry, but like I said, we're not supposed to have met. So, now I'm stuck with a parrot that sleeps till three, and talks like he was hatched in the gutter."

"That certainly explains it." She turned away, took a few steps, and then spun around, not nearly as fast as my heart was spinning. "So, how do you go about finding my past?"

"We'll go to the Neon Crevasse Club tonight."

"We?"

"Yeah, as in you and me. We'll see if someone recognizes you," I explained, leaving out the part about wanting to spend every remaining second of my life with her.

"But what if no one remembers me?"

"Believe me, no male with a partially working eyeball will want to forget you. And no female who looks at herself in the mirror will be able to. I'm sure if there are beings in outer space observing us — they're watching you walk," I said, while watching her breathe.

"Where should we meet and what time?"

"Grab a cab and meet me at The Neon Crevasse Club, at eleven, it's on sixth and June. The Crevasse is one of those joints that believe in wearing less is more. And even though I'm sure you'd look great in an iron lung, wear mostly skin." I softened my voice when I noticed her feeling uncomfortable. "Otherwise they'll make us in a minute. If you have spent any time in the place, you'd have dressed the part. We have no idea what you might be running away from, so it'd be a heck of a lot safer if we didn't make too many waves."

"You're right, Mr. Mantle."

"Ajax," I squeaked.

"Ajax... I'll see you at eleven. And I'll look the part."

She turned and walked out of the room, knowing my eyes were following each sway of her giggling duff like it was a hypnotist's watch.

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## **Chapter Three**

The cab door opened like it was the curtain going up on King Kong. Only instead of the beast came beauty, long legs sliding ever so slowly towards me. They were the kind of legs that made other women's look like two stacks of books propped under their fan-nies. And it was a hell of a dress she was sort of wearing... It was like using a Band-Aid to cover a mummy. And what little material there was clung to her body like it was

afraid of falling.

“You passed the audition,” I said as I gulped for air.

“What audition?”

“You got everyone’s attention within hormone distance.”

“I guess this dress is what you had in mind.”

“If I had that in mind I would have brought along a cold shower. Two showers,” I drooled out, as I pointed to the entrance of the club. “That’s the Crevasse.”

Angel clung to my side like her dress was Velcro. I thought my heart was going to pound through her chest.

The Crevasse club was in an old pock marked tenement building; the kind of building where fires start, and don’t end till the block is a parking lot. Pink and blue smoke poured out of the doorway, like it was a pansy dragon... The entrance was surrounded by neon lights the color of those tiny fish that I always found dead on the bottom of my tank.

“I’m nervous,” Angel said, when we arrived at the doorway.

That’s okay, it’ll probably be a turn-on for the local psychotics.”

Before we could take a step, a large bouncer poured out of the smoke like a genie who had Gold’s gym in his bottle. Just as he was about to tell me what my wish was, I handed him a pair of twenties.

“I’m Ulysses S. Grant.”

“I thought you looked familiar.” He moved his biceps and there was room for both of us to pass. A few steps into the joint, the smoke thinned and we could see a sign overhead with large red block letters that read: “Tonight Transvestites Free.” Another bouncer was grabbing the crotch of a female impersonator in a spandex dress.

“He’s okay,” the bouncer shouted and let the guy or whatever through.

“Interesting clientele... They come here from every walk of low life.” I whispered to Angel.

“What’s our next move?”

“You and that dress are making it. Let’s find a table and see if an unfamiliar face finds yours familiar.”

We wound our way through a menagerie of all-American weirdoes, like the woman with earrings which were large ears that hung below her regular ears, a gal kissing a man with a stocking over his head, or the armless man sitting in the middle of two women who were both fondling themselves with his artificial limbs. We found a table that looked like the slime had been wiped off. I pulled Angel’s chair out.

“Sit here and enjoy the skievery while I disappear for a few minutes and give the sleazebags a chance to notice you.”

Just as I turned to leave, an anorexic waitress in a black pants suit that accentuated the curves in her bones approached Angel. Before I was out of earshot, I heard her

raspy voice. “The gentleman over there would like to buy you a drink.”

Angel’s birthday suit was starting to do its work. I nodded to Angel to go ahead. She picked up my signal. “Oh, thank you, I’ll have a wine spritzer.”

I decided to scope out the joint, see where the emergency exits were just in case. I squeezed my way through a gyrating dance crowd that looked more like a hundred upside down insects trying unsuccessfully to turnover. By the time I had returned to Angel’s table she’d done her work. There were about twenty wine spritzers in front of her, and as many men around the bar lifting their drinks, toasting the catch of a lifetime. Only she wasn’t gonna be caught by any of them — I hoped. “Buy the first one, get the next forty free, huh?”

“No, just a few not so secret admirers.” She smiled at her play on words. Before I could come back with something smart, a ventriloquist and a dummy approached. The ventriloquist was a thin bony type that looked like he would rattle in the wind. He had pale eyes that probably faded from a lot of crying. The dummy was Howdy Doodey with a chip on his shoulder. Red hair, freckles, and a jaw that could snap your fingers off.

“Hey, gorgeous, I missed not seeing your lovely bones in this dump. I see you have a new boyfriend,” the dummy said in a mean screechy tenor.

“I’m not her boyfriend. Just a cousin from back east.” I chimed in.

“Uh-huh. Kissin’ and lickin’ cousins,” he cracked, his jaw actually snapping shut.

“He was jjjjjust joking. Weren’t you Tab?” the ventriloquist apologized. Here was a guy that took pride in acting meek.

“Yeah, sure...”

“We were like brother and step sister growing up.”

“Sounds even more interesting.” The dummy’s mouth opened creating a half smile and then turned to Angel. “So where’s the Rip? I’m surprised he let you off the leash.” Angel chucked a glance my way and then spoke. “Maybe, I let him off the leash? For good.” She was definitely a fast learner. Two seconds into the game, and she knew how to use her tools.

“Well, then if your cousin doesn’t mind, can we join you?”

“Do you mind cous’?” She said, the words floating on top of her breath.

“No, I always admired your taste in wood, but be careful he might have termites,” I shot out, as I pulled a seat out next to Angel for the ventriloquist and the dummy.

“Cous’ is a regular Jerry Mahoney. So, where have you been keeping yourself?”

“Home...alone. Cous had his hands full dragging me out tonight.”

“I bet he did,” the dummy said.

“I just sat around in my teeny weenie night gown. I was feeling low, and awful lonely.” Angel ran her hands along his knotty face. “Tab, you have such smooth skin... Such incredible lips. And a very sexy voice... Could you do me a favor?”

Tab leaned forward his marble eyes looking down Angel's blouse. "Sure, anything."

"I'd love to hear my name coming out of your sensuous mouth." Angel whispered as she flapped his wooden jaw.

"Please say it for me!" She was actually seducing wood. "Okay," the dummy sighed, and then he paused to take a deep breath. The ventriloquist was good, he wasn't only throwing his voice, and he was throwing his breath. "Lauren."

"Lauren?" Angel questioned, and then covered up her blunder up with a smile that would have made a transsexual in the middle of the operation reconsider his options. "How about my last name, too? I want you to say it all."

"Hey, no one ever told me your last name. Right Sid?" the dummy said, to his faithful ventriloquist.

"Y-y-y-yeah, I-I-I never heard anyone call you anything bbbbut Lauren," he sputtered out.

"Tell me your last name and I'll say it real slow."

"No... The mood's over," Angel said sharply.

"I'll recreate it."

"I'm sorry, it's over!"

"Something ain't Kosher, here. You flash your baby blues, and I'm ready to write off the memories of you and Rip laughing at my squeaky voice," the dummy screeched.

"I was acting, then. I didn't want to make Rip jealous."

"No, a girl like you uses jealousy like other girls use air. Anyway, I don't know who jilted who, but with an ex like yours running around, this ain't the time to take chances."

Angel had done her part, now it was time to use the professional interrogation techniques I learned from my correspondence course. "And just where can we find the big bad lug? My cousin's got some keepsakes to return to him."

The dummy's head swiveled from Angel to me, and kept making the round trip as he talked.

"If anybody knows what rock he's under, Lauren should know. They were practically twins."

"Enlighten me. Her memory ain't so good since the break up."

"Neither is mine," he said as he stood up. "I don't like the smell of this."

I pushed him and his maker back on the chair, and held onto the Dummy's shirt. "Maybe, I can refresh your memory." God, I was quick with the clichés.

"Hey, what's going on here?"

"Yeah, leave Tab alone," the ventriloquist pleaded. "I will, when he tells me where Mr. Rip is."

“He said, he doesn’t know.”

“And I say he does.” I grabbed the dummy’s arm and held it over the candle in the middle of the table, letting the flame tickle his elbow. “I’ll make it easy for you. Just an address. I’ll look up the zip code.” For someone with a low burning point, the dummy was a cool customer.

“I don’t know,” he said and smiled.

I could see the Ventriloquist’s face tighten, and knew where the weak link was. “No pain. No gain. Spill it!”

“I don’t know nothing!”

I didn’t want to start a fire. So I came up with another brilliant idea. “They say your brain is like a tape recorder. It remembers everything. You just need to use the right stimulus.” I picked a pitcher of water off the table and poured it down the dummies mouth.

“Please, stop it,” the ventriloquist shouted with a voice that almost sounded manly.

“When I get what I need.” I glanced at Angel who looked on with the coolness of a veteran Gestapo officer.

“Don’t tell him.” the dummy gurgled.

“I got a feeling he’s gonna tell me.” I grabbed the dummy on the top of the head and started spinning. “Round and round she goes. Where she stops nobody knows,” I shouted maniacally, keeping my best side turned to Angel. This time the dummy’s mouth shot open as wide as a cargo plane and omitted such a high-pitched yell, I think I actually saw the ventriloquists’ lips move. “Okay... Okay... I’ll tell you!” the ventriloquist shouted. “We haven’t seen Danny around lately. Honest. But I thought I saw him going into the “Jugs Mill.”

“Yeah, it’s on Fiftieth and Bradley,” the dummy sputtered out.

“And what did you say Danny’s last name was?”

“I didn’t, but it’s Collins. Danny Collins,” the ventriloquist said, as he shifted the dummy to the other side of his lap, and then tried to smooth out Tab’s shirt.

The dummy brushed away the ventriloquist’s hand as he spoke. “Don’t tell me Lauren forgot his name too. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t want no part of it.”

I gave them my most menacing look, which probably resembled a smile button. “Then you better keep both your traps shut about this. ‘Cause Tab would look real pretty in my fireplace. Now beat it.” Before I even finished my macho threat they were gone. “You had nice friends. Yeah, a couple of real do gooders.”

“I suppose we’re off to the Jugs Mill.”

“Unless you want to dance. But I’m a little behind. I haven’t received my Twist instruction tape yet.”

I followed Angel across the dance floor, hoping she would stop, turn, and ask me to dance. And the music would slow way down, the house lights would color everything in black and white, and she'd slide into my arms, nestle her head against my shoulder, and I'd tell a sole piano man, to "play it again, Sam."

\* \* \*

## Chapter Four

The Jugs Mill was a long thin hole in the wall with a lone bar that hugged its right side. There was dust everywhere even on the roaches, many of whom were picked up by the handful and used to cover bad tips. The clientele, a group of good old thugs, who probably spent the afternoon beating each other's families up, were whooping and hollering as topless dancers gyrated to a fuzzy rock beat that could barely make it through a pair of cracked speakers. I took two steps into the bar and hoped the crunching sound under my feet was peanut shells, but I knew better. When my next step took five seconds of crunching before it hit the ground, I turned to Angel. "Stay put for a few seconds."

"I'd like to come with you." she pleaded.

"Patience, beautiful. Let me question the bartender about Danny. If he knows anything he might not talk with you around. If he clams up, I'll signal you. Come over and stick your mug in his face, and let's see if there's a reaction above the waist."

"All right, but please hurry."

Angel was worried about what might crawl up her legs, and I was worried that something might get there before I did. I left her standing there and I could hear the scuffle of a thousand little legs circling around Angel just out of her aura's reach.

I neared the bar and realized what I originally thought was a new spastic dance step, was the dancers so immersed in trying to hear the buzzing music, they were stepping on the fingers of the guys at the bar. I nudged in between a few fellow homosapiens; I like to give people the benefit of the doubt, and looked around for the bartender. All I could see was an occasional mop of black hair scoot up and down the bar. Just as I was about to try and pet it, a small hand reached up and placed a beer in front the guy next to me.

"What will it be, Mac?" It squawked.

I leaned over, following the tiny voice to one of those cute little people who are lucky enough to wear cheaper kid's clothes. He had large round eyes that looked like they were glued onto a flat pock marked face; a face that could've easily been a pie plate which still

had half-eaten remains stuck to it. "I like a bartender who keeps a low profile," I blurted out.

"Another comedian. There's so many around here, politicians are appealing to the comedian vote. Now what can a little guy like me do for a great big guy like you?" he said as he tried wiping the wet bar top but kept missing the damp spot.

"I was wondering if you could help me out?"

"Helping my fellow man. That's what I live for?"

I belly flopped a fin on the bar, and before I could say the word "midget" a little hand made it disappear. "Has Danny Collins been around here lately?"

"Danny Collins, one of those names that ought to sound familiar, but I've never heard of him. But I'm new here. This is only my second night. What's this Danny Collins look like?"

"I don't know," I said, as I waved Angel over.

"Well, that certainly narrows it down."

"I imagine Mr. Rip is quite handsome," the words gliding out between Angel's lips like they were riding on a cloud. The bartender didn't react other than the usual quantum leap in testosterone. But a slim surgically endowed dancer took a quick look at Angel and was startled. And it wasn't the usual homicidal jealousy. She stepped on a patron's arm, then almost kicked him in the mouth before stumbling up the bar, knocking over drinks and other girls, finally falling off and crashing into shelves of liquor and the mirrored backdrop.

"You know this may just be a hunch, but I think she knows something."

"You P.I.'s notice the tiniest details," Angel spouted out in such a way that I noticed all of her details and especially the ones that weren't so tiny.

We didn't know if Danny Rip had ears floating around so we decided to wait for the dancer a few fragrant doorways up the street. Angel leaned against the blue doorway; long strips of paint peeled their way toward her slender shoulder. Still, with Angel's face center stage the weather-beaten blue looked better than any sky you could see in Montana.

I tried to stand as close to Angel as I could without touching her. Unfortunately, six inches was as close as I could get (give or take four inches). I attempted to hide my attraction by looking up at the sky and imagining where the stars would be. "Personally, I couldn't dance topless, but I had a girlfriend try it for a day. She was fired... She was bouncing her pride and joys and almost knocked a customer unconscious. The owner accused the clumsy dame of having two left breasts."

I suppose if she had time, Angel would have laughed at my witty play on words,

but the dancer stepped on my punch line by firing out of the club at that moment. She shot passed us before Angel could stop her. “Wait till she gets up the block,” I chimed in.

Having one eye on my objective and the other on Angel, my trained sense of observation failed to see the worm that exited the club a few heart murmurs after the dancer. We stayed in the dancer’s shadow for about thirty yards, or approximately fifteen homeless people, before coming up on either side of her. She was ninety-ninety point nine percent more covered up than she had been in the bar. A long ankle length sweater covered jeans that I imagined were skin tight and torn in strategic areas. And some people accuse me of thinking of women as sex objects. They wouldn’t be so hard on me if they knew even in my sexual fantasies I died at the end.

“I caught your act. Loved your routine.”

“Yeah, thanks,” she spit out. I guess she was used to compliments.

“Especially the finish,” I dropped on her. Like most self-respecting narcissists, she turned away from me, her stiff eyes screeching to a halt at Angel’s face.

She slowed down, punctuating a twitch, and then tried to catch her rum breath. Words seemed to be forming on her lips as they came out. Some emerging before they were fully developed. “Wwwwwhat do you want with mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmee?”

“Just a few answers,” I came back with.

“IIIIII dropped out of school. III was never good at answers.” Little things like a stutter and a twitch make it hard to be glib.

“Well, maybe Danny Collins can help you? I said as a crowd of pedestrians caught up and swallowed us.

“I don’t know any Ddddannny Collins.” It was close but the twitch was winning the battle of nerves over the stutter.

“I love a girl who can lie with a spastic face.” I said sensitively. Something silver caught my eye and then was gone.

“Pppppppplllllease. Llllleave.... I ccccccann’t.”

I was concentrating too hard on what was sputtering out of her mouth to notice that her Jerry Lewis Impression wasn’t that good, or to see the geek passing the baton into her back.

Meeee.....uhhhhhh.....ahhhhhh,” she moaned. I’d like to say I knew all along she just had a knife shoved in her spine, but I just thought it was a case of nerves and maybe it was time for her to cut out caffeine.

“Calm down. I just need the name of a place.”

Her body shook violently as the bad guy pushed. But she kept walking on, like a marionette whose operator was having a stroke. A good shrink, even a media Freud, notices the tiniest changes in a patient. Good thing I didn’t choose psychiatry to fall back

on. Case in point. One, I failed to see the man spike the blade in the dancer's back. Two, I failed to see that he couldn't free his artificial arm from the dagger. And Three, I hadn't an inkling that it was his attempt to free the knife that was causing the dancer to act like the top half of a live sex show.

"I have money?" Angel pleaded. Even someone without a memory remembered to never underestimate a fellow homosapien's greed.

The dancer some how managed to stay on her feet, while the killer thrust her body forward and backward, trying to shake the knife loose like his hand was caught in a hunk of gooey saliva from an alien creature. Being the careful observer that I was trained to be, I noticed the killer, although at the moment I thought he was just another pedestrian in too much of a hurry to realize he was about to occupy the same space and time as the human being in front of him.

"Hey, mister, can't you see the lady's..." Before I could finish my idiotic plea, the dancer's face froze - an expression that even cremation wouldn't hide. Her wobbly legs went limp and she fell forward like a worn out mattress. For a few seconds she took the killer with her, but the sudden plunge was enough for the knife to shake loose. Angel screamed, causing my remarkable sixth sense to notice the murder weapon stuck in the dancer's back. It was still attached to an artificial arm, which unfortunately was not still attached to the artificial arm wearer. "Stay here," I ordered Angel.

The killer ran up the block slicing in and out of crowds. Early on in my detecting career I learned that when chasing someone, you should run in the same direction as the person you're after, and if possible at a faster speed. These instincts took over and before I knew it one foot was placed in front of another, and then repeated again and again, and I was moving. God, the miracle of life. I was a pretty fair athlete. In my earlier years I played some minor league baseball until a hundred mile an hour fastball came to a close to the soft mushy inside of my brain... but that's another story. Although a few giant steps slower than I was in my prime, I had plenty left to catch up with the killer. I was about five yards away and closing in, when I guess the killer heard my lungs gasping for nicotine. He stopped, ripped open the door of an idling car, yanked the driver out and jumped in. He threw the car into gear and it charged forward. Lucky it was an American car and hesitated just slightly, enough time for me to dive head first onto the windshield like I was sliding into second base. I hit the car hard but was plenty thankful it was metal and glass and not astro turf. The killer swerved around pedestrians and other cars while I dug my nails into the cheap metal and hung on.

The killer got cute, and tried spritzing me off with windshield fluid. He even turned on the wipers, which swept across my shirt ironing away this week's wrinkles. Did I ever tell you that I love my job? That being a detective is big macho fun. You get to dress like a slob, eat food fit for a bypass, get beat up by men bigger than a bread line, get stiffed for

your salary, expenses or whatever they can find behind your cushions, or better yet, you get to meet great looking broads who put their hooks in you and then dump you for a guy opening up his first bank account. I guess the killer was not a man of great patience. No sooner had I landed on the hood of his car he grew tired of my presence and used his chin to steer the heep, then removed a gun from his jacket with his still attached artificial arm.

Before I noticed the revolver pointed at my midsection, he fired the first shot. It tore through the window and the last milli-second before it was going to tear through me; it was knocked away by the sweeping arm of the windshield wiper. The last two shots did the same, before he heard the click of an empty chamber. If all the numbers were drawn in a sweepstakes this man would finish dead last in a global lottery. I pressed my face against the glass and smiled, rubbing his misfortune and my ghoulish expression in as deep as I could. Then I saw him mouth the words "I'll send you on a trip, you son of a bitch!" He ended the sentence by jamming on the brakes and then immediately stomping on the gas.

Any thoughts of sending me off the hood were soon diminished of their importance. The air bags exploded open completely blocked the killers' view of myself or any part of the road. And then his trusty Midas breaks failed. The car gained speed going down hill and swerved left and then right, or vise versa, grazing any automobile or stationary object in it's path. When I saw where the car was heading I closed my eyes and jumped off. I was fortunate. The car's momentum tossed me into a patch of gravel and dirt, scrapping a few layers of skin off my arms and legs. The killer wasn't so lucky. The car split the wooden fence and dived grill first into the river. Once it fought it's way through the debris and the brown foamy sludge on the surface, the vehicle sunk into the something that only city folks would have nerve enough to call water.

I couldn't swear to it in court, I was up to my nostrils in dry dirt and rocks so my vantage point wasn't the best, but I was pretty sure I saw something splash away from the car. And it wasn't the Loch Ness Monster. I'm pretty sure the Loch Ness Monster doesn't have an artificial arm.

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