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Chapter One

There are few things more depressing than walking through a maze of dirty back streets at 3:00 a.m. seeking a hooker with a heart of gold.

Been there, won that stuffed teddy bear.

Yet here I am on a random Wednesday doing just that.

Before you jump to the easy conclusion that I've again fallen on hard times and am looking for love in all the wrong places, let me calm your frayed nerves: I'm working a file.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Marital cases and I have a long and troubled past. They are the worst type of investigations for a number of reasons, most notably the fact that information provided by the distraught client is usually wrong. For example, the subject almost always leaves at a different time than the one given, be it from work, a buddy's house, the ex's apartment after visiting the kids and so forth. Then there's the matter of how much time these files can suck out of one's life. There's a television program that specializes in this entertaining field and it kills me when the creepy host proudly states, *"On Day 9 our investigator locates the target's vehicle parked in a visitor's spot near a friendly female acquaintance's townhouse."*

Are they serious? If I don't get results by Day 3 my head is on the chopping block.

Day 9, as if.

My current case has the added element of the potential cheater carrying on a disjointed conversation in his sleep with a prostitute named Mary. Or Kerry. Or Sherri. Apparently this dolt snorted or snored at an inopportune time and the exact spelling couldn't be rendered. The second outlandish aspect of this file is the wife's claim that hubby handed over a gold heart charm hanging from a necklace. More specifically, *her* necklace.

"I'm certain he mumbled something about 'a down payment' and 'tonight at The Cougar Trap.' That can only mean that disgusting Drake Road area in the east end, right?" She paused before adding, "And believe me, I've searched everywhere and my necklace is gone!"

I examined my 30-something, average everything (height, weight, looks) client and had to make a swift assessment. Should I throw her out due to such flimsy evidence, or break it to her that if lover boy were making plans anywhere near The Cougar Trap her marriage was probably already over?

Decisions, decisions, decisions.

"I'll do what I can," I stated, making sure to get her money up front, a business practice private investigators and hookers share, among other seamy traits.

The fact that my girlfriend and I were heading out on a mini-vacation in three days probably played a role in my final answer. A little extra spending cash would come in handy.

And really, how hard could it be to locate a phantom lady of the evening wearing a gold heart charm inscribed "I Luv U" and working mid-week in the roughest area of town?

Wednesday: Hump Day. Sounds about right.

"Hey honey, if you're lookin' for some action you came to the wrong side of the street."

"And how's that?" I asked skeptically, approaching an over-the-hill streetwalker. She was quite the vision with her garish make-up, matted mop of brown hair, Daisy Duke short shorts with fishnet stockings, topped off with a stole over her shoulders made of a mink needlessly killed circa 1972. "Let me guess - you're celibate?"

She shook her head and smiled, revealing gaps in her upper and lower rows of teeth. "Oh no, not this girl. I proudly sell-a-bit here, sell-a-bit there, sell-a-bit anywhere you'd like, sweetie" she laughed.

Given her outlandishly sad appearance, her laugh wasn't an unpleasant sound, which caught me off guard, although it really shouldn't have. After all, she was a human being with real emotions, once an innocent little girl and the glimmer of sunshine in her parents' eyes. Certain personal characteristics can't be beaten out of you, regardless how hard someone (drunken Daddy, pimp, abusive boyfriend) tries.

"Then why am I on the wrong side of the street?"

"Because my dance card is full. I'm just waiting for a taxi to arrive."

I slowly glanced down the infamous Drake Road and noted we were the only people out at this time of night: no other pedestrians, no barflies stumbling out of the fabled Jewelled Stallion or Mickey's Den watering holes, and not a car in sight. It was eerily quiet, too.

"Believe it or not, I wasn't aiming to hook up, but I am looking for one of your co-workers."

"To talk or just cuddle?" She stopped and gave me a cool look. "She's not your sister, is she?"

"Not that I'm aware of, although around here I suppose anything's possible." Headlights came into view a few blocks away. "Your name wouldn't happen to be Mary or something similar sounding, would it?"

"For a price it could be," my near-toothless wonder replied.

Always the businesswoman, I thought.

"Are there any other girls in the immediate vicinity with such a pretty name?" I inquired as I lifted \$20 out of my wallet. "I see you as the unofficial Den Mother down here and I want you to know your acquaintance, if she exists, is not in any trouble."

"Whenever a cop—"

"Ex-cop."

"Whatever. I'm just sayin' anytime the *likes of you* comes a lookin', someone is in trouble." My colourful new best gal pal took the money when her taxi pulled up to the curb. "There's a fire escape at the back of The Cougar Trap that leads to a second floor apartment. You might want to start searchin' there."

I followed her gaze across the boulevard and noted the fire escape bathed in bright blue neon from the building's flashing entrance sign.

"Can I use you as a reference?"

"Sure thing, babycakes. Tell the twins Truffle Divine says you're okay."

The taxi sped away before I could thank my helpful guide, but not before I confirmed my client's lost necklace wasn't part of this evening's costume drama.

Knowing that being out alone in this neighbourhood was frowned upon by the police and county coroner, I began to briskly walk to my next, and possibly final, destination. Unlike many of my P.I. associates, I don't carry a gun, brass knuckles, nunchucks or pepper spray. I figure if I can't talk my way out of a situation and am overpowered, these same weapons could easily be used on me, which would be a real shame in my humble opinion.

"What do I have to lose except my life?" I asked myself aloud as I crossed the street.

To be continued ...