

Noir Town

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The city was always dark. Tall, grey buildings threw heavy shadows onto streets forever shiny and black as though a recent rain had made an ineffective attempt to wash them clean. Instead, years of soot and grime coated every surface. It was as though the city's dark past was manifest as a grey shroud that fell over all the buildings, even the few new ones, like some kind of perverse original sin. I know. I admit it could just be my own depressed attitude. They say you can find beauty anywhere if you look for it hard enough...if you really want to find it. But...it's awfully hard to find beauty in the face of a corpse that recently took a five-story plunge off one of the city's ugliest buildings.

This city can't tolerate beauty. It finds beauty offensive, and every stone, every bit of oppressive concrete and glass will work together to snuff out all hope and beauty which might have mistakenly found its way into its dark confines. I didn't know exactly what wrong turns the woman lying at my feet took that brought her here, but I did know she was beautiful just a few hours ago when she took a seat at my desk and asked for my help.

I'm used to people asking me for help. That's what private eyes do. They help people with all kinds of problems. Even beautiful birds like the one lying at my feet. Of course, I usually make sure they can pay my fee before I agree to help them. So why did I agree to help Sally here when she admitted she couldn't afford the fee? At least not right away. It was simple, really. She had the kind of beauty that could cause King Kong to climb to the top of the very building towering above us and try to bat away the fighter planes attempting to machine gun him to death. Except in that scenario the beast fell to the pavement, not the beauty. Or former beauty anyway.

So, what went wrong, and what did I have to do with it? That's exactly what detective Johnson wanted to know, and it's why I was summoned here when they found one of my business cards scattered around Sally's corpse along with the other contents of her purse.

Normally, Johnson would make anyone tied to a murder come down to the station for questioning, but he had a vicious flare for the dramatic. He thought the questioning would be a great deal more productive, and satisfyingly more dramatic, if it was conducted at the twisted feet of the victim herself. He was right.

I'd had no idea why some idiot was pounding at my door at three o'clock in the morning. Opening it revealed the fleshy form of one of the city's most decorated detectives, Johnson and his broad, self-assured, and totally moronic grin. Johnson and I have a love/hate relationship. I hate him, and he loves it whenever I run afoul of his brand of the law.

“Come take a little ride with me,” were the only words he uttered until we were standing inside the police tape looking down at Sally. One of the troopers was drawing an outline around the body with chalk. He wasn’t having much luck because of the perpetual dampness of the sidewalk. The chalk would make a little screeching sound and then a few pieces would break off followed by a string of cuss words from the officer.

Johnson looked down at the poor girl, made a tsk, tsk sound with his mouth, wiped it with the back of his hand, examined the result a bit, and then looked at me with an almost genuine expression of sorrow. It was tainted with just the hint of a smile and with a small amount of spittle missed by his hand wipe. “Client of yours?” he asked as though he didn’t really care one way or the other.

“No,” I replied. “I just talked to her for a while. She couldn’t afford the upfront fee.”

“Now, Mike,” Johnson said, “I really want to work with you here. Already you’re making it difficult. You really don’t want to make it difficult, do you, Mike?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” This conversation was already going badly. I was having difficulty looking Johnson in the eye. I wanted to appear as though I was telling him the truth, but...he is so hard to look at, even when you truly are innocent.

“Do I look stupid to you?” Johnson said. “Judging from some of our past conversations, I’m pretty sure you really do think I’m stupid. I’d like to assure you I’m not, which is precisely why I refuse to believe you turned down a beautiful girl’s request for help just because she couldn’t afford your upfront fee.”

Okay. So Johnson was a little smarter than he looked. Although he looked pretty dumb.

“So? Believe whatever the hell you want. I’m just trying to give you the facts. You know...what actually happened rather than what you’d like to believe happened?”

“Okay, Mike. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt...since there is still a shadow...mind you, just a shadow, of a doubt that you were in some way involved in this poor girl’s untimely demise,” said Johnson. “I promise to believe you. For the moment anyway. Scout’s honor. Were we in the same Scout troop together? I forget. Oh well. It doesn’t matter I guess,” Johnson refocused trying his best to be sincere. “What did she want you to do?”

“It was a standard missing person’s case. She wanted me to find someone whom she believed was somewhere in the city. She wouldn’t say who it was, and she couldn’t afford the fee.”

“That was it? Really? The last you spoke to her before she contacted the pavement here?” I suspected Johnson got a lot of pleasure out of his little jokes. It didn’t matter what situation prompted them. I always figured with his jokes, Johnson had a short circuit running from his brain directly to his mouth with no check points in between.

“No. She was crying and upset, so I agreed to walk her to her hotel.” I felt a kind of imaginary noose tightening around my neck as I said those words.

“Now we’re getting somewhere, Mike. I knew we could establish a rapport if you just tried. Not so hard, was it? So, then, you walked her back to her hotel. What a sweet thing to do, Mike. Were you

in a beneficial mood? Did you want to save her from something? Were you the last person to see her alive?" Johnson wasn't even trying to hide the smirk spreading over his face. It reminded me of how quickly a deadly bacteria sample can spread across a Petri dish.

"No. I would have had to follow her up to her room, and somehow push her out of the window, which didn't happen. I said good bye to her in the lobby, and wished her luck. I saw her get into the elevator. Then I went to the bar for a beer."

"What time was that?" Johnson shot a glance at the nearby sergeant who was taking careful notes. "I don't know. Maybe around ten fifteen pm," I replied. "Look, Johnson, could I take a peek at the actual scene of the crime? There is a slim chance I might see something you or your crack team overlooked. Just a slim chance, mind you, but..." I was trying very hard to keep irony out of my voice, but I knew I was failing pretty badly.

"Oh sure," There was just a hint of a wry smile distorting his dumb-looking face and adding to the smirk. It made him look like a dumb smartass if there really is such a thing. I guess there is because I was looking at one now. "Sure. I'd be happy to let you wallow around up there contaminating the entire crime scene, except you happen to be my number one suspect. So. Sorry Charlie. No dice."

"Your number *one* suspect? What possible motivation could I have to kill a beautiful blond like her?"

"Suspicion comes first. Then proof, then arrest. That's the way we work it here in the big city."

"So, am I under arrest? Are you actually thinking of arresting me?"

"Oh, Mike, you hurt me to the quick even suggesting such a thing."

I knew Johnson was enjoying this little exchange a bit more than he should have considering he had absolutely nothing on me at all. "No. Please. You're free as one of those pigeons over to the park. Fly. Fly back to your luxury penthouse. Go back to bed. Get some well-deserved sleep. Try not to think about your little girlfriend lying here in the gutter. I'll be in touch later. I promise."

It was his way of telling me I had to walk back to my apartment. Rides with the police were usually only one way, and they always insisted you leave your guns at home. It was okay. Except for the danger inherent in walking unarmed through this town at any hour. Well, it would give me a chance to think things through a bit. At least a new day had begun, and the rush hour crowd was beginning to trudge through the 'financial district' as it was fondly referred to. It should have been called the 'banks will steal your money and then laugh all the way to themselves' district. Because it's what usually happened.