

Case of the Missing Millionaire

A Marly Jackson Mystery

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Dedicated to Dashiell Hammett, my unknowing muse and the man who gave me my name, and to Nik, my own Thin Man.

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Chapter One

The Stranger

I didn't trust him. He was gorgeous; six feet three inches of pure beefcake, his brown wavy hair perfectly sculpted and sun-light at edges, his green eyes showing surprising intelligence for such a beautiful arrangement of bones. His skin was too tan for a Chicago November, beautifully covering a structure speaking of wild snow-dwelling ancestors.

He was a beautiful lying sack of shit, and it was my job to figure out why.

"You want me to find your boss?" I asked again for the tenth time. Old cop trick; keep asking the same question until they change their story. Seven years off the force and the habits didn't die, no matter how far down the toilet my career had gone.

"Yes! Now will you take the case or not?"

I looked him over. Brooks Brothers black suit, starched white shirt in an old Reilly collar, his tie was loose, pure silk, and creased-new. The only skin visible was his face and hands, and the hands told a story his eyes never could. The left one had three busted knuckles,

barely healed over, the wounds made from punching something or someone hard, repeatedly, and in the last twelve hours. The fingers also curled strangely, like smashing into things was an old habit matching a few scars.

My guess was this missing woman was his sugar momma, and he used her as a Bobo doll. She'd had enough and took off, and now his meal ticket had skipped town. Wouldn't be the first time, though he was certainly the best-dressed kept man that had darkened my door.

Normally I would have sent a lying sack of shit running, but this had the potential to be the most exciting case to date of my career as a PI. This had the promise of big money and sex, and I was bored enough to dig deeper.

"Well, Ms. Jackson?" he asked and I just kept my level gaze on him, making him sweat.

"Call me Marly," I said automatically, waiting, watching him squirm.

He was a bit too classy for my office, busted knuckles or no. Oh, the wood was old and real, the books numerous, but the floor was peeling black & white vinyl tiles, and years of cigarette and cigar smoke turned the white walls a slightly off color. I'd covered one water stain with a George Tooker print. What the hell, I thought, deciding to take the case. I needed a few new things around the office and he looked like he might have some money.

"What's her full name?" I asked and pulled a notepad and pen from my desk, pushing aside the Sunday Tribune and the article on the latest WTC cleanup efforts. I found the pad more personal than clacking on a computer keyboard while a client was talking, and my desktop computer was old and frankly embarrassing.

“Mary Beth Anderson.” Something about that tickled my memory, but nothing came immediately to mind. Getting my computer to Google would have to wait, on an old Pentium 2 the journey was like sailing from Madagascar to Sweden. However, he said it like I should know, and I knew he’d thrown her name around before.

Sighing, I took the bait. “Where do I know that name?”

He frowned in distaste. “She’s one of the heads of the Historical Landmarks Preservation Society, she’s in the paper pretty often, and she’s a very famous millionaire.”

The last word breathed across my skin like a lover’s touch. Money; I didn’t have enough of it, was always losing it, and desperately needed more of it.

“Those Frank Lloyd Wright psychos?” I hedged, trying not to tip my hand. Last I’d heard one of Louis Sullivan’s churches had burned down and they were under suspicion, being that Sullivan fans and Wright fans never got along.

His lips twisted into a wry smile. “They’ve been called worse.”

“Where does her money come from?”

“The old fashioned way. She was born into it and married more.”

“Still married?”

“Me?”

Looking up I snorted. “Anderson.”

“Yes.”

I stopped writing and sat back, chewing on my pencil and wishing for a cigarette. I didn’t normally take cases on Sundays but this honeypot had shown up at my door knocking until I stumbled out of bed hung over to let him in. “Why isn’t her husband here?”

“He’s in Europe on business. He’s a developer,

works a lot of remote sites. I have his secretary trying to reach him but she says he's unreachable."

Hmm. "So what do you do for Mrs. Anderson?" I looked him up and down and got a pretty graphic idea.

"I handle her personal affairs for her...this seems to be a personal affair."

The way he said affair was just the right level of flirtation, and I had to resist snorting again. "Did you file a police report, Mr. Roberts?"

He hesitated long enough I knew the name wasn't the one on his driver's license. "No," he drawled at last, shaking his head and worrying his tie, proving he was most a blue collar boy playing dress up. "Look, she wouldn't want this getting out; she wouldn't want the world to look into her personal life. I need discretion here."

"How long have you been fucking Mary Beth Anderson?" I asked jotting notes on my pad, casually dropping the bomb that I hoped would finally rattle his cage.

He slammed his large hands on the desk making the ancient wood and me jump. "I wasn't fucking her! It's not like that! You have to find her! You have to find her fast!"

He'd been lying about a lot, but that seemed genuine. "She have an expiration date?"

"What?"

"Why the urgency?"

"She never goes missing. I handle all her travel plans, and I got nothing. She didn't use her credit card, can't find her on any plane or train. She has a house in Florida but it's empty."

"She into drugs?"

"Not really. They're there at parties, but she can easily afford it."

"She fucking around on you, sparky?"

“I am not fucking her! It’s not like that!”

Jaded as I was, I had to wonder why he seemed so resistant to the idea. Maybe she was ancient, or fat, or perhaps he was gay. I sighed; it’d be a waste.

Nonplussed, I returned to scribbling. “And what’s the nature of her personal affairs?” He didn’t respond and I looked up to see him staring at the picture of me in uniform with Mayor Daley sitting on the shelves behind me. A postcard from my college roommate covered up the person next to me and the Mayor, and it seemed to puzzle him.

I snapped my fingers rudely, pulling his attention back to me. “Mr. Roberts? What did you do for Mary Beth Anderson?”

“I was a, um, an assistant.” He was hedging, holding something back.

I set the pad down and leaned back in my chair. “Mr. Roberts I’m afraid I can’t take this case.”

His face was a picture of stark fear and panic. “But you have to, you’re the only one I can trust. Finnegan said you would do this!”

My left eye twitched at Finn’s name, the bastard covered by the postcard in the picture. We’d been partners at the CPD as beat cops before either of us made detective, and though we’d never been the most straight, upright uniforms, I hadn’t turned to a life of crime when we left the force. I also hadn’t said more to him than a casual “fuck off” since 1997.

“Michael Finnegan is a fence and an asshole. Do yourself a favor, Mr. Roberts, if that is your real name. Stop hanging around people like Michael Finnegan and Mary Beth Anderson. Get a job in construction, find a nice girl in Lincoln Park, and settle down to make pretty little vapid babies.”

“Fifty thousand dollars,” he said, ignoring the slur, and I knew from the tremor in his deep voice that was all

he had to give. He couldn't negotiate for shit.

I liked money. A lot. With that kind of dough I could get new computers, fix up my car, paint the damn walls at long last, and get a better pull-out couch. "Sold, but you have to give me something."

His body stiffened but his eyes mellowed, telegraphing liquid sex. Not gay, but a pro...interesting. "Anything," he husked.

I pushed my glasses up my nose, well aware I did not generate that response in men like him when I dressed two sizes too large and wore only my hangover as an accessory. "I want the truth."

The seduction turned off with a switch so fast he it confirmed he was a pro. How do I know you won't tell the cops?"

I snorted. "I don't deal with cops anymore, that's why I went private. It's easier to shoot people."

Those green eyes widened. "Really?"

It was, but I shook my head. The story of why I'd left the force was a little complicated, and he didn't need to know. "No. So, going to drop the act?"

Finally he sat leaned back in the rickety wood-slat chair in front of my desk and sighed, his posture relaxing. "Fine. I entertained some friends of hers."

"On their backs?" I said calmly and he blushed deeply, jerking a nod.

"What did you get out of it?"

"A salary, a place to live, everything I wanted. Three nights a week I entertained, the rest of the time I was free to do whatever I wanted."

"And you never entertained Mrs. Anderson?" Again, he shook his head. "How many other 'entertainers' worked with you?"

"I think there might have been others, but I never met them, heard their names, anything. I'm not sure if there were any current, or if I was the just the latest."

I stared at him, judging. There was a lie in there somewhere, but too many choices to narrow down easily. "Why on earth would she arrange this?"

"She liked to watch." He blushed.

The blush surprised me. "How?"

"Everyone knew about it, we made tapes for her. Mary Beth was big on watching."

"Everyone? I thought you didn't know those other 'entertainers' you mentioned."

"All right, there probably were, she had a lot of DVDs, but I never met them. I spent most of my days with her and they never showed up. I don't think anyone took her, I think she ran from something, I just don't know what."

It made sense. She was his meal ticket and she'd skipped town, all right. "How much is she worth?"

"I assume millions, I don't know. I never handled her finances."

"She have any money of her own, or was it all daddy's and her husband's?"

"She couldn't skim anything without them noticing, and it would take time. She disappeared this morning, last night I spoke to her, then she was gone."

"Give me a few minutes." I turned on the desktop at last. "Want something to drink?" Maybe some alcohol in his system would loosen that silver tongue.

"What have you got?"

I got up and walked to the small bar housed on a middle shelf of the bookcase on the far wall between the windows. I was down to Jameson's, soda, and a single finger's worth of vodka. I sighed. No tequila, the drink I found best for getting what you wanted out of people. "You like whiskey?"

"Sure."

I poured two glasses and looked out the window. It was a quiet part of town, the north side of Uptown, and

traffic moved freely on a Sunday afternoon. I looked for his car and couldn't see anything nice, just two battered early American models and a half-rusted Civic hatchback.

"Here," I passed him one and before I could toast he knocked it back. Raising my eyebrow I sat down, waiting for my browser to load.

At long last I could search for Mary Beth Anderson. Pages of hits, something only reserved for real names. Search mine and you'd get shit other than when I finally legally changed my name from Marlene to Marly, and possibly a footnote on the case that had got me thrown off the force, though my godfather had worked hard to keep it out of the papers.

She was a member of the Wilmette Yacht Club, a Northshore millionaires-only joint, and worked hard to promote Chicago as a fashion center as well as canonize Frank Lloyd Wright, a frivolous and silly-at-best pastime.

She was married to a man who made millions in land deals here and abroad, was five years her senior, and seemed spotless. Most mentions of her involved events and parties, but there was something about her giving a graduation speech at her high school, mentioning a Harvard MBA. Not a cookie-cutter trophy wife after all.

Then I saw something which made my heart stutter. Her father was Alfred Sorvino, the notorious mobster who had waged a bloody war in the early 80's to carve out a piece of the South Loop for territory.

This explained Roberts' fear need for discretion. Sorvino's specialty was protection, fire insurance activation, and body dumps in Crystal Lake or the Cal-Sag Canal. Daddy was a factor I wouldn't bring up if he didn't, so I closed the page quickly and only scribbled down notes to the effect of "stay the fuck away from

Sorvino.”

The man who pretended to be Timothy Roberts fingered the cheap glass and watched my eyebrows ratchet up. “What did you do?”

“I Googled her. Busy social life, hocking fashion and preserving old buildings, and she’s a got an MBA and everything. The plastic surgery seems minimal. Not a bad score when you shop around for a sugar momma.”

He pursed his lips. “Fashion was a hobby, she thought it was glamorous, but it’s a lot of hard work. Her bread and butter is preservation.”

“Busy work.”

Roberts nodded.

“How was she paying your salary?”

“The women paid for it.”

“So she was your pimp.”

He gave me a look of smoldering rage at that word but said nothing. It was true.

I looked him over, and he let me. My sexual partners were few and far between, mostly men I picked up at the Purple Rose. If Roberts had walked into the club instead of my office I would have bought him a beer and asked him home. He seemed All-American, clean cut, a little rough around the edges, the kind of guy a woman could use for a night and not have to worry about overmuch.

Here, the dim fluorescents of my office showed a tired, panicked whore whose pimp had disappeared.

“I find it hard to believe she’d pimp you out to her friends and never ask for a freebie.”

Again he blushed, very strange for a man who sport-fucked for a living. “It wasn’t like that; she wasn’t really a pimp, and I am not a whore.”

“Past tense...is this still going on?”

“It stopped a couple months back, these days I just sit around her place and take notes, sort through her invitations. She has a fetish, a weird one, she likes to

watch. She has enough tapes to keep her satisfied for a long while, so my job is easy.”

“Suppose one of these women objected and Mary Beth took off?”

“They paid for it, they agreed to it. None of the women involved would ever threaten her, they’re her friends.”

I snorted again. “Where I come from if a person has sex for money they’re a whore, the person who manages them is a pimp, and the customers are johns. None of them are friends.”

“I was her...whatever the male equivalent of a mistress is. It’s not the same. Look, yes, my job was originally to bring her pleasure, but Mary Beth is different. Watching is the only thing that gives her pleasure.”

“A kinky bent and more money doesn’t change it, Mr. Roberts. A mistress usually has sex with whoever keeps her, if she or he has sex with others for money, that’s prostitution.”

His blush deepened. “Mary Beth i- she is...different! If she didn’t watch she couldn’t...”

“No need to stutter, I heard you the first time. Did she let you fuck whoever you wanted?” He blushed darker and shook his head. “So she called the shots? Voyeurs are not usually so picky.” I knew that pretty well. I liked to watch too, and I never kept regular partners for that kind of play, it was too risky.

“I don’t understand it, but I respected her wishes.”

I sat back and chewed my pen. This was getting interesting. “She disabled or something?” I looked back to the computer. She seemed like a typically spry, rich 40-something, ten years older than me, but well-preserved surgically. She had a medium build and olive-toned skin. Eerily she kind of reminded me of a posh version of pictures of my mother.

I sighed. "Was she sexually dysfunctional?"

He shrugged, and I realized I hadn't said it as quietly to myself as planned. "Just kinky then," I drawled, watching him closely. No blush now. Interesting.

"Look, do you think I did something to her and then hired you? Are you insane?"

The tie was almost completely off, revealing a very tan throat. I could see what Mary Beth saw in him, hell I'd pay to watch him fuck as well, but if I'd been her shoes I would have fucked him myself too.

"You know who her people are," I said hedged. "If I was in your shoes and, say an accident happened, I'd want as many bodies between me and them as possible."

That tan noticeably paled. "Her father has nothing to do with this. He can't know anything. She's his only child, if he loses her...everyone she's ever met will be dead." *Me in particular* was written between his lines.

"Apples don't fall far from the tree. Suppose her husband works for daddy. Suppose she threw the wrong contract her husband's way. Suppose one of these ladies objected to being watched. There's too many possibilities here, I'll need at least six weeks to figure this out."

Panic gripped him. "I need to find her ASAP. I'm really worried about her. Look, I can vouch for the club, no one hurt her. Her husband is clean, and her father knows nothing. Mary Beth has worked hard to make sure of that."

Switching gears, I pulled out my cigarettes and lit one, sitting back with the notepad. I'd been wanting one since he walked in oozing sex from every pore, and it was now helping the blood to flow back to my brain. "Tell me about the last time you saw her."

"Friday night when I helped her get ready for a party. Yesterday afternoon she called, asked for a meeting at nine p.m., but when I showed up her place

was locked tight, not even the live-in maid was there. I called her, her friends, I even called her husband's secretary...no one had heard from her in two days. I called some people from the party Friday night and apparently she'd never shown, they said she hadn't even accepted an invitation."

That screamed a planned disappearance, but why call him over the next day? "Thanksgiving is next week, maybe she went to visit family."

He shook his head. "Her family is all here. Look, she's not the type to call me and then take off. Something is wrong here. I need to know where she is. I need her back." He rubbed his face with both hands.

"Need her that bad, do you?" I asked sarcastically.

"I do," he replied curtly and didn't elaborate. "Do you think you can find her in the next twenty-four hours?"

My gut clenched. That was a tall order even when you knew where the missing person was headed. Here I had nothing, and this was starting to smell like a murder case.

"Just what happens then?"

"I figure we have until tomorrow night before her father starts sniffing around."

Then the hammer would come down, and if I took the case, my head was under it too. "I'm going to need more than fifty grand if I have to sweat a mobster."

"I'll do what I can, if you get Mary Beth back safe I'll make sure she pays you."

"She better not be spending all her dough on drugs and other hot young men on some tropical island."

He began to fidget in the chair. "She's not like that. Watching is her only vice."

"Let's talk facts. I need to know her enemies, her friends, her specs too. Fill this form out." I opened a drawer and passed him a three page mini-booklet and

pen. I tried to keep everything present tense but it was a ploy; millionaires never go missing, they just died.

“All of this?” he asked and I nodded.

I took a long pull from my Camel and saw him watch me blow the smoke out slowly. “You mind?” I asked mockingly.

“No. Can I have one?”

“Finish the booklet first.”

His eyes softened, and this was what I was pushing for. When his hand went to the booklet which lay near my own hand, he attempted to touch me and I jerked back. To cover I tossed him a cigarette and scooted my chair back.

While he filled the booklet out I flipped through my day planner to see where I was at with my open cases. Goody goody, two cheating cases and a case of worker’s comp fraud. That night it was surveillance on a cheater.

After ten long minutes he passed me back the paper and to my surprise his handwriting was neat, his grammar excellent, everything spoke of decent breeding, clashing with that bruised hand. “Let me ask you, how does a guy like you end up banging this kind of gong?”

He slumped, the weight of memory suddenly on his shoulders. “Same way anybody does. What made you become a cop?”

Well that answered nothing, and was artfully well done. “Better question is what made me join the PI racket.”

“Fair enough Ms. Jackson; why did you become a PI?”

“You’ll see.” I smiled and looked the booklet over. Mary Beth Anderson was only thirty-nine, healthy, five ten, had fake breasts and teeth and lips, and yes, her highlighted-blond hair was artificial too. The list of enemies was short; a few social rivals and a group of people who were fans of Louis Sullivan and blamed

Anderson's group for the earlier fire of Sullivan's church.

The list of friends was five names long and three had dots next to them. "What are the dots?" I asked.

"Those are her friends, the ones I was...with. The rest weren't close friends, more associates, people she only sees every now and again socially."

I matched the list to the page I had pulled up on Google. He'd missed a name of a close friend, and since he worked closely with Mary Beth I knew that omission was important, and kept it to myself. As luck would have it, I already knew about Elizabeth "Kitty" Hyde, Mary Beth Anderson's best friend.

"You're lucky, Mr. Roberts, I can begin working the case immediately."

"Really? You can find her by tomorrow night?"

The look I gave him was intended to make him wet himself. "Only if you're being honest. You are being honest with me, aren't you?"

"I'm telling you all I know."

"All you know, or all you want me to know?"

He stubbed out his cigarette and looked out the window.

I turned in my chair to pull down a blank folder for the Anderson case. "So you have my money?"

He pulled a cashier's check from his coat. "Ten thousand, your usual fee. I'll have the rest of it to you tomorrow."

I took the check, held it to my little desk lamp, squinting. It was Bank of America and ten times my usual fee of a thousand.

"How did you know my fee?"

"I got your info from Finn."

Well, that story hadn't changed. "Tomorrow, eight a.m. sharp."

He stood, awkwardly holding his hand out to shake.

I stood too and only eyed it. “You have my card, call me if you want an update, but I recommend you wait for my call. And Roberts, eight, not eight thirty, not nine. Eight, forty grand, and if the gods smile upon us you’ll have Mary Beth Anderson by tomorrow night.”

As he shakily smiled, I silently amended that to dead or alive.