

A JARVIS MANN DETECTIVE SHORT STORY

THE CASE OF THE MISSING BUBBLE GUM CARD



R. WEIR

**The Case of the Missing
Bubble Gum Card
A Jarvis Mann Detective
Short Story**

**By
R Weir**

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**With love to my
wife and daughter
This short story is
where the journey begins**

The Case...

I drove westward on Evans Street enjoying the beauty of the day, the driver's door window cracked slightly open on my 1969 Mustang Boss 302. The afternoon sun filled the western sky and warmed me through the marred windshield. Despite what most people outside of Denver think, winter isn't always freezing cold with snow up to your waist. On the contrary, this February day gave us sun with temperatures nearing 60 degrees. A light wind in the crisp air stirred the city's fresh, though at times tainted aura. I missed my turn while admiring the fanny of a lovely woman walking down the street. It had been worth the extra drive, for it really was one glorious spandex concealed behind.

Making a left turn onto Broadway once the light had changed, I turned left again a block later down Warren past Lincoln and left into the alleyway. Dodging trash dumpsters, I drove cautiously down the already narrow backstreet. Pulling into my parking space on a small deserted paved lot which faced Evans, I shut off the heavily travelled engine.

The building I lived in was a raised dual level built after World War Two. I'd rented the lower half for several years now, calling it home. The bland gray color, with brown wood slats surrounding the outer middle third of the building's main body, didn't add much ambiance to the area. The neighborhood stood reasonably quiet, while at times adventurous. Walking the streets at night wasn't advised, and never should be done alone, though one might say that about most neighborhoods these days. The area had a good mix of cultures, with all races represented. No cushy suburb for me—but a real city with real city people and problems, the kind of environment I'd always wanted to live and work in.

My home served as a place of business too. A cheap plastic white placard with deep blue lettering anchored to the brick wall read "MANN PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR." The mere words made one tremble with fear, though the sign itself was a letdown. One day I hoped to have a large luminous one, with lots of flashing lights. The more colors the better. Unfortunately, the low balance bank account dictates for now, squashing those dreams of seeing my name in neon.

In thirty-five plus years of life, I've been doing P.I. work for the last ten, seven of which in my own practice. The glamour of the job had worn off after the first domestic case. The woman who had hired me took the shocking news about her husband's infidelity out on me with the coffee cup she held in her hand. The scalding hot liquid had certainly burned the skin, while the stain from

the horrid mud ruined my favorite gray sport coat, tarnishing my attempted G.Q. image. Her itemized bill not only included the cost of the jacket, but the shattered cup as well.

Getting out of the Mustang, I noticed him; the young lad sitting at the top of the stairwell. To describe him as a boy would have been unfair, though he wasn't quite a man either. He appeared to be fifteen, possibly sixteen years old. As I approached, he rose to his feet, my detective eyes deducing that he stood about 5'7", with around 150 pounds of solid athletic build. Dressed in faded blue jeans, LeBron James T-shirt and sneakers, the young African-American gave a cautious smile. He appeared to be a bit nervous.

"Good afternoon," I said cordially. "Waiting for someone?"

"Do you work here?" he asked.

"Do you need a trim?" I said, referring to my upstairs neighbor, the hair designer business which was closed on Sunday and Monday.

"No," he stated while pointing at the sign.

"Beautiful, wouldn't you say?" I remarked. "Draws in the clients from miles around!" I wasn't trying to be snarky—just my usual banter.

"Are you a private detective?" he stated with no conviction in his voice.

I found it difficult to believe he couldn't tell. My current appearance apparently didn't present itself as tough enough for the line of work. Most people think we wear leather from head to toe—fedora, jacket, pants and boots. I wore an old brown leather jacket on my fit torso, which was all the cowhide I could afford besides my tennis shoes. Black denim jeans and a gray sweatshirt didn't ideally give me that macho tough guy look. With my sarcastic sense of humor, he probably thought I did standup comedy, which is a common mistake many folks made.

"When there's private detective work to do," I replied proudly.

"You look different than the actors on television." More disdain in his tone.

"Just don't tell my mother. She wanted me to be a doctor. I wore a stethoscope around my neck when she used to come to visit." Not even a smile crossed his face. The humor seemed lost on him.

"I hoped you'd be available to hire as I have a lost possession, I need your help locating."

I looked him over carefully. He seemed like a polite and sincere person. I was currently in between cases, which is normal if the truth be known. It wouldn't hurt to hear what he had to say. The possibility of making money always got my attention.

"Come on inside. You look cold without a jacket. It's warm out, but not that warm."

Down the steps to the lower half of the building took us to where I lived and conducted my business. The big-time detective agencies have large fancy buildings, with lobbies, elevators, and secretaries. My lobby was an outdated kitchen, though it was for the most part clean. I had a secretary for about two weeks once, an old girlfriend who helped me out. Unfortunately, she found out I slept with another woman and quit on me in a fit of fiery anger. For some reason she never used me as a reference. Today my only secretary turned out to be a fifty-dollar digital answering machine. It was always on time, polite to the customers, and couldn't care less if you didn't feel like talking after intimacy. Though the black box certainly wouldn't look or smell as lovely and it was hardly enticing to curl up with at night.

The little red light wasn't flashing, which meant no one wanted my services. The LED would last forever, for it rarely blinked. Apparently, the snappy greeting scared people off before they spoke. A masterfully designed website would be cool, while my Yellow Pages advertisement should be larger than one line, but cost remained an obstacle. I could have politely turned the lad down. With nothing of importance going on today, I'd hear him out and see if he'd surprise me with the case of the century.

"I'm Jarvis Mann," I proclaimed. "Have a seat."

He sat in one of the stiff wood chairs reserved for clients. No fancy furniture in my living room, which also served as my office. Just an old desk and two chairs, both made of pine, a pair of white metal four drawer filing cabinets, a worn brown sofa and matching recliner. Papers covered the top of the desk, neatly piled for easy reference, an LCD Monitor and keyboard to one side attached to a desktop computer sitting underneath on the floor. Behind my desk I sat in a chair I'd slept in on many occasions. The cushy high back chocolate brown leather rocked and swiveled with the best of them. The fancy agencies had this type of quality furniture for all to sit in. But my rates were better.

"I feel strange asking you for help," the lad said, his eyes focused on the polished natural wood floor.

I tried to put him at ease. "Why don't you tell me your name first?"

"Dennis Gash," he answered, his eyes now staring my way.

After hearing the name, I had to ask. "Do you play football Dennis?"

"I'm a running back in high school," he answered with surprise in his voice. "How did you know?"

"A wild guess." With a name like Gash one had to play football. John Madden would love this guy. A touch of mud, blood, and sweat gripping his clothing would be the clincher.

"I'm a sophomore so I didn't play much this year. Coach says if I continue to grow, I might be a starter in the future. I'm extremely fast but need to get stronger. With a little work I hope to be like my favorite running back Adrian Peterson."

Adrian Peterson was a future NFL Hall of Famer. A running back that came along once in a generation, like Jim Brown. Dennis was compact in size, making it challenging for him to reach that stature. But smaller backs can be great too, like my personal favorite, the now retired Barry Sanders. Sometimes heart is more important than size.

"Dennis what can I help you with?" A question the expensive agencies would ask. *Where did these brainstorm come from!*

"A valuable item of mine was stolen and I'd like you to help me find it."

"Tell me?" More snappy questions. I had a million of them.

"You're going to laugh, but it's valuable to me. Someone stole a baseball card of mine."

Holding back the laughter I would hear him out. *No, not the case of the century.*

"I can tell you're not interested," said Dennis, sounding dishearten. "I should go." He started to rise but I waved for him to sit.

"I must say that it's not every day someone comes in and asks me to find a bubble gum card."

He looked put off by my words. "Not just any old bubble gum card. This one is worth quite a bit of money—almost twelve hundred and fifty dollars. If my dad found out, he'd kill me."

From the sincere look on the lad's face and the way he was squirming in the chair, one would only guess the punishment he'd have in store. Still I wasn't convinced I could lend assistance.

"Dennis, are you sure you didn't lose or misplace it somewhere?" I asked, while leaning forward in my chair.

"I had the card yesterday morning, carrying it to church in my coat pocket to show my friends. We placed it in penny sleeves and a top loader for protection, with a small sticker on the back bearing my name and address. Later we played around outside while our parents talked inside. I'd forgotten all about the card until I returned home. That's when I realized it was missing." He shook his head as if he was displeased with his mistake.

"Maybe it fell out of your pocket and is sitting in the back-seat of your car. Did you drive to church?" I rested my elbows on the desktop, something my mother would have scolded me about doing.

"No, we always walk since it's close to home."

"It fell out somewhere between home and church," I concluded. "Someone would likely find and keep the card. I'd say chances of locating it are slim. Did you check with the church to see if someone turned it in?"

He nodded. "I did right away, and they didn't have it. That's when I remembered passing your house and noticing your sign. I thought...maybe..."

Wow the plain banner worked. *Time to save money and get rid of the wimpy Yellow Pages advertisement.*

"Your parents' homeowner's insurance would probably cover the loss," I offered as a resolution.

"No. I can't tell my parents." His eyes scanned downward. "Father would be angry, and I don't want to disappoint him. He gave me the card when I was about seven. Said he trusted me to take care of it, like his dad trusted him. Continue to hold onto it and in time it would be worth a great deal of money."

Twelve hundred and fifty dollars was a significant amount of money to someone his age. Hell, that was a lot of dinero to me! I doubted the chances of finding the card. Still I put my P.I. mind to work, grasping for a brainstorm. In seconds I came up with the most crucial question of the day.

"How much money do you have?" I asked, not expecting a big payday.

"I have about seventy-five dollars in a savings account," he replied, his eyes meeting mine.

"Do you realize what I charge per hour?" Lately that had been a big, fat, zero.

"No."

I told him my rate, his audible gasp filling the room.

"I could work a couple of days and eat up the value of that card, plus your savings account and not be successful in tracking it down."

"I have other cards that have value, though not as much as this one." His eyes filled with anguish. "Please help me!"

The magic word broke down my resistance. I wasn't sure there was anything to do to help, but I had nothing planned this afternoon and no good sports games were on TV. Time to negotiate a deal.

"Sometimes I do jobs for insurance companies for a finder's fee. Usually it pays between ten and twenty percent of the value of the merchandise. Here's what I'll do. I go around with you this afternoon and ask about the card. You can pay me in value with another card from your collection if it turns up. Adding up to ten to twenty percent of the lost card's value. If we don't find it, then you owe me nothing. But you must tell your father you lost it."

"But he'll be mad at me!" he proclaimed with concern.

"I'll go in and help you explain. That's the deal. Take it or leave it." Pausing for his reaction, I saw the realization on his face. "I'd say that's fair, wouldn't you?"

Dennis nodded his head. This was his only hope. I didn't figure we'd find the card, but at least he would own up to his father like a man, which is never easy for someone his age. I remembered that horrible feeling of admitting fault to my dad, and the anticipation of the oncoming punishment and the fear I felt. And growing up, fault had been a big part my life.

"What card did you lose?" More high-tech questions.

"A Topps Ernie Banks rookie card."

"You're a Chicago Cubs fan I gather."

"Yea. My dad and his dad too," stated Dennis proudly. "Grandpa got the card in 1954. He bought others as well, but Ernie was his favorite. Even after he'd given, thrown away, or lost many others in his collection, he cherished Ernie the most. He found out how much the card was worth and protected it from deteriorating. Condition of the card is where its main value is judged and this one is near mint. Its value increases every year I keep the card. Grandpa told me he paid about ten cents for the whole pack. A massive increase in market price if you ask me."

"I'll say. I wish the stock in my business had appreciated that much through the years. The certificates are only good for placemats right now."

More wit lost on Dennis. Little did he know my jokes would someday be worth more than the Ernie Banks card. Good thing my humor was currently free of charge.

"Okay let's get started," I said, rising from my chair. "We'll follow the path you took to church and talk to your friends who joined you that day. Maybe they can shed light on what may have happened."

"Are you going to carry a gun with you?" asked Dennis, now standing.

The stigma of television. I suppose TV Private Eye's wore their guns in the shower.

"Do you think we'll need a gun?" I asked with a smirk.

"I'm not sure."

"Maybe if I flash a .38 at your friends they'll talk—tell us what we need to know."

His face blazed with a stunned expression. "We don't need to do that!"

"I agree. I only carry a gun when absolutely necessary. And I don't care to even then. Let's see if we can solve this caper with our wits and if that doesn't work we'll come back for the heavy hardware."

Dennis broke out into a smile. I'd won him over. Next thing you know I'll have him laughing hysterically. Usually they didn't get hysterical until they received my bill.

I led the way outside to my old yellow and black striped car. He may have walked to church, but we were going to drive there this time. My six-foot, 180-pound frame was in decent shape, but the cool air of late afternoon began rolling in, and Dennis certainly wouldn't be able to stay up with my lightening pace. Besides I liked to do my part and add to the brown cloud that seemed to linger overhead during the winter months.

The inside of my Mustang made the outside seem like a jewel. The black vinyl seats were torn, the black vinyl dash cracked, the floor covered with trash and dirt. The AM/FM mono radio probably had tubes instead of transistors. The mileage on the speedometer had turned over several times, with somewhere around 387,000 miles on an engine which ran loud but smooth. In seven years of driving I'd totaled about 95,000 miles of my own. I planned on making improvements as soon as the money started rolling in. New leather seats, a stereo with handsfree Bluetooth, and new speakers came first. This wasn't a shiny brand new BMW, but at least no one wanted to steal the relic in its current condition.

Dennis didn't appear to be overly impressed with my wheels. The passenger door creaked badly when he opened it. He sat down gingerly and looked down at the floorboard before he placed his feet. He slid the wrappers on the floor aside, the golden arches on them quite prevalent. Only the best in gourmet fast food for this P.I. A good portion of my meal time was spent in the drive-thru.

"I had to let the cleaning lady go the other day," I joked while starting the engine. "The cook as well!"

Backing the Mustang out into the alley, we pulled onto Evans. With Dennis directing, we turned almost immediately onto Sherman, then two blocks later east on Iliff until we came to his burnt umber brick home on Grant Street.

"This is where I live. We walked from here up a block to Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church." Dennis pointed forward, the Mustang taking less than a minute to arrive.

The church was a long narrow building made of soft brown brick, with stained glass windows gracing the south side. A very tall brick and stone outdoor temple with a statue of Jesus Christ erected out front. On the far north section of the block stood the church school and a house. In the middle of the property, a playground was built, and the leafless bushes and dead ivy looped along the chain linked fence. The playground combined grass, concrete and sand, with a wooden jungle gym and slide, basketball hoops, four square and hopscotch

markings on the asphalt, and a rack for locking up bicycles. A quick search of the grass and sand revealed no Ernie Banks card, though we did find a quarter and several wads of spent chewing gum. This did not satisfy my client. Time for the second phase of the job.

"Like you said the card isn't here," I stated. "Do you know where the kids you played with live?"

"Yes. Three of them are close by."

"Okay, let's go talk with them and see if they can tell us something."

The first home sat across the street from the Harvard Recreation Center. Alonzo lived in a simple one-story tan brick structure, with layered white wood siding around the middle of the frame, badly in need of repainting. The roof was v-shaped, with steep slopes down both sides. A couple of leafless bushes and one tall evergreen graced the poorly kept front yard in need of seeding or sod. Parked in the driveway was an aqua mid-nineties Chevy pickup, which appeared to be in good shape except for the bed, rusting through in spots. Reaching the steps, I tried to ring the doorbell only to have Dennis inform me it didn't work. A vigorous knocking on the storm door got a response.

"Hey Dennis, how are you doing?" stated Alonzo with a smile.

"Not too bad. Can you come out for a minute, we need to talk."

"Sure."

Hollering to someone inside, he stepped outside, closing the door rather clumsily. He appeared to be of Spanish heritage, with very rich black curly hair and brown skin tone. His blue jeans were faded; his dull white jersey had dark lettering on the front spelling out 'Lincoln' which I cleverly deduced to be his high school. His canvas Nike sneakers were worn and in need of replacing. His simple dark windbreaker finished up his fashionable ensemble. He acted leery of me, never once glancing my way until introduced. With a polite handshake and short eye contact he turned back to his friend.

"What's up?" He had his hands in his jacket pocket for it was cooling off quickly.

"You remember yesterday at church I showed you the Ernie Banks card?" inquired Dennis.

"Sure. What about it?"

"When I got home it was missing. I was wondering if you might have seen it."

Alonzo turned and stared off into the distance. "What's this guy got to do with it? Is he a cop or something?"

Apparently, C-O-P was traced all over my face. That strong authority figure in me always shined through.

"Sort of," said Dennis, staring my way, not certain what else to say.

"Your friend here hired me to help him find his card. I'm a private detective." I pulled out my wallet and showed him the license which did little to impress.

Alonzo didn't know what to do, as my occupation made him nervous.

"Are you saying I took the card?" Anger began to show on his face.

"No man I'm not," declared Dennis. "I'm wondering if you might have seen or heard about it disappearing. I just want the card back."

"Do you know how much the card is worth?" I asserted, adding my two cents. The question got Alonzo's ire up even more.

"What are you implying?" His voice seemed to hang on the last word.

"It's valuable to your friend here. And money sometimes clouds a person's judgment."

"I took it, is that what you're saying?" Alonzo's tone was just short of shouting.

"No. But I haven't heard you say you didn't." I gazed at him, gauging his reaction.

"Well I didn't. Ok. I don't steal from friends. At least those I thought to be my friend." Alonzo turned away again, his feelings hurt.

"Good enough," I said while turning and heading towards my car, convinced he was telling the truth.

As I got there, I saw the two of them talking. The anger had receded, and they shook hands with a series of grips too complicated to explain. Even with months of practice I doubted I could duplicate it. The two separated, looking satisfied with the result.

Now with both of us back in the car I wondered where to next.

"Why did you come down on him?" asked Dennis, a tinge of anger lacing his voice.

I turned my body to look at him. "Well sometimes you confront someone bluntly to get an honest answer. When you work in the world I do, it's easy for people to lie. Most everyone I encounter have an adversity to the truth. They live lies, becoming second nature to them. The direct approach sometimes is the best one. I came out and said what had to be said, pushing your friend to give me an answer."

"You believed him?"

"Yea, pretty much. I couldn't tell if he was avoiding me because of shyness, he hated authority figures, or I'm white."

"Maybe a little of all three. He's had problems with cops, his parents, and even a couple of white kids at school who are racist. His first response is to be cautious since you represent what he sees as the establishment."

I nodded, impressed by the words I'd heard. "Good analogy. How old are you?"

"I'll be sixteen in a month."

"You act older than your age. Tell me something, did you believe him?"

"Yea I did. He was being straight with me."

"I agree. Where to next?"

At the next stop we came up empty. The mother of his friend told us he went with his father to see a Denver Nuggets game and wouldn't be back until late. Strike two.

With only one swing left we headed east. On Vassar Street we stopped in front of a two-story blood-red brick home. The whole neighborhood was made of brick, the building material of choice in those days. In the yard stood Terence with basketball in hand, his frame several inches taller than Dennis, and heavier. He wore newer looking Reebok high-tops, black sweats with matching sweatshirt, and a Colorado Rockies baseball cap. The young African-American appeared to be in excellent shape, and extremely athletic. Dennis explained to me he was a two-sport athlete—football and basketball, the main focuses of his life. He dreamed of being an outside linebacker or power forward.

We left the car and Dennis greeted Terence happily. The two appeared to be close friends. I figured I wouldn't be pushy this time. The lad was built to blind side me. It had been a while since I'd woke up without any recollection of my name, and getting my ass kicked by a teenager might damage my tough guy image.

"This is Jarvis Mann," introduced Dennis.

"Good to meet you sir," said Terence.

I shook the hand and found it strong and firm, the voice deeply baritone. He was damn close to my size but thicker and likely stronger, yet only a year older than Dennis. He had big wide brown eyes, short growth under his chin, and a noticeable scar running along the right side of his nose.

"Going to shoot hoops?" asked Dennis of his friend.

"Thinking about it. Got an hour of sun left. Care to join me?"

"I can't. Tomorrow I should have time after school."

"I'm sure you're here for something. Came to see my sister I bet." He gave a sly glance to his friend.

"No, not today." Dennis seemed embarrassed. "I wondered if you've seen my Ernie Banks card. It's gone."

"No man I haven't. When did it go missing?"

"Somewhere between the time I showed it to you guys and when I got home. My father is going to be pissed."

Terence nodded. "I can relate. I remember when I lost Dad's camera a couple of years back. I couldn't sit down for a week."

"If you see it will you let me know? It's worth a whole lot of money. Mister Mann is a private detective I've hired to help me find it."

"That sounds like an interesting occupation," asserted Terence. "It must be exciting chasing down the bad guys."

"Sometimes, but lately..." I stated while shrugging.

"Well, got to go before I lose all my daylight. A pleasure meeting you Mister Mann. I'll see you at school tomorrow Dennis and we can shoot hoops afterwards."

Terence climbed onto his shining black eighteen-speed bicycle and peddled off with basketball in hand.

"Strike three," I said.

"What?" wondered Dennis.

"Just counting out loud. A baseball analogy since we're searching for a baseball card. I believe we've struck out. Anyone else you can think of who might have had access to it?"

Dennis gave it a few minutes thought. Thinking the worst of people didn't seem easy for him. Zero was all he came up with.

"How about someone in your family, maybe a sibling? A brother?"

"Yea, but I don't think he'd do it. He respects my stuff. Never had a problem with him taking anything of mine."

"Gee, I wish I could say that about my brother," I uttered. "He couldn't keep his hands off anything of mine. I'd always get in fights with him for using my bike and baseball mitt."

"I guess you didn't like him much."

"On the contrary. Though two years older, he saved my butt on a couple of occasions when someone was picking on me. Even if annoying, he went to the wall for me when necessary."

"I saved my brother a couple of times. When it's family..."

The time had come for me to use my years of experience. When faced with a problem I found it best to talk over your options with your client and a course of action may come to light you hadn't thought of.

"We need to think like the bad guy Dennis."

Dennis nodded.

"Put yourself in their shoes. If you stole a valuable bubble gum card, or even found one, what would you do?"

"I'd try to sell it," he said without hesitation.

"Sell it where?"

"Someplace that buys collectors cards."

"And is there one in the area?"

"There's one right on Broadway—Bill's Sports Collectibles. I've been inside many times."

"Good job," I declared. "You'd make a good detective. Let's take a trip to see if anyone has brought in an Ernie Banks rookie card to sell recently."

The drive wasn't far, only a few blocks away and we arrived in short order. Since it was getting late on this Sunday, I hoped they remained open.

"If I was the culprit, I'd do one of two things," I expressed on the way over. "I'd either hold onto the card for a while to see if anyone missed it, or if in desperate need of money, try to cash it in right away. My professional instinct says Bill's Sports Collectibles is the spot where we'll learn something."

Dennis agreed with me, though he didn't appear overly impressed with my deduction. It would seem few people ever were. A reaction I'd gotten used to. We found an open parking spot as Bill's seemed to be busy on this Sunday with four cars parked out front. The entire structure was theirs, the combination tan brick and green aluminum trimmed facing looking freshly remodeled. White security bars graced their windows, as well as sports posters depicting many of the greatest athletes. Their yellow sign showed the business name; the hours on the main door showed they'd be closing soon. We needed to be quick.

Inside the whole store had wall to wall collectibles; programs, guides, books, autographs, jerseys, pins, pennants, caps, jackets, posters, and collecting accessories. They specialized in Baseball and Football cards but carried Basketball and Hockey as well. Glass cases displayed the various cards of thousands of athletes from all the different eras going back beyond my birth date. From every team you could imagine, and from teams which no longer existed. The prices for a small piece of cardboard were outrageous. And the wheeling and dealing led one to believe that sports cards were traded much like stocks on Wall Street. The common man's hedge against inflation—an investment in the future.

One could see the change on Dennis' face as he walked up and down the various cases fixating in awe. It wasn't his first time here but that didn't matter. Displayed before him were his heroes staring back in two dimensions. It may be as close as he'd ever come to these athletes.

A salesperson greeted us, and I asked for the manager who thankfully was working. A few minutes later we were talking. His answers to my well thought up questions might clear up the mystery.

"We're looking for an Ernie Banks rookie card," I stated, getting right to the point.

"You're in luck," replied the Manager. "We happened to encounter one recently."

I glanced at Dennis and could tell he knew we'd hit pay dirt.

"What condition is it in?" I asked.

"Nearly perfect. Stored in a penny sleeve and a top loader to protect it. The previous owner had taken wonderful care of it."

"May we see it?"

He led us to the rear of the store where he removed the card from the display case, so we could view it. The sticker with the name and address had been removed from the back, though the tacky residue remained. On the front, a new price tag listing a figure close to the book value. This certainly was the card.

"Can you tell me where you got this?" I inquired.

"We purchased the card yesterday."

"Can you give us a name?"

"That's privileged information I can't divulge. Why do you ask?"

I pulled out my ID. The picture was driver's license quality, making it lousy. It took him a minute to match the photo to the face.

"What's this about?" wondered the Manager.

"Dennis here had his Topps Ernie Banks card stolen yesterday," I said while putting my hand on his shoulder. "It appears someone has sold it to you. He had his name and address labeled on the back, which has been removed. If you check you can tell it was once there."

The manager took the card in hand and felt the stickiness. He glared at me and Dennis for a moment, seeming to weigh the situation. He placed the card back into the display case and locked it.

"There is nothing I can do," he stated. "I'm sorry Dennis here has lost a valuable card. You've no proof he is the owner. His insurance will cover the monetary loss."

"We understand, and we accept the fact you're not to blame," I affirmed. "You made a straight business deal. But you can tell us who sold it to you."

The manager paused to contemplate. "I don't know."

"Please. This means more to me than the money." Dennis sounded extremely sincere. Please had worked wonders on me earlier. *Would it work now?*

"I shouldn't do this. I don't know his name. He insisted on being paid in cash. Luckily, I had eight hundred dollars in the store. It is dangerous to keep lots of cash on hand these days." He stopped to reflect. "He was a little older than Dennis here, and bigger. He was black and appeared to be an athlete. He had one of those strange haircuts, short on the sides and longer on top, plus a little

growth under his chin. What else? Oh, that's right. Now I remember. I noticed a scar on his face, along his nose. I asked him about it, but he didn't answer me."

"Terence!" came out of Dennis's mouth a second before mine. The culprit had been found. Terence was the last person I suspected.

"Thank you for the information," I said. "Much appreciated."

"If he confesses to stealing the card," stated the Manager, "I'll sell it back for what I bought it for. But hurry as it may not last long. I have it priced to sell."

"Sounds fair. We'll contact you."

Dennis and I walked out of the store. Anger seemed to well up inside, an emotion I couldn't blame him for having. If a close friend had ever done that to me, I'd have been furious too. Now the question was what to do.

"We go confront him," stated Dennis without hesitation. "He said he'd be playing basketball at the church.

It's what I'd have done. Though how will the lad react? Terence was much larger, and probably stronger. But one did not steal from friends. I would stand in the background and watch, for it was all I cared to do. It was between them to settle their differences.

In silence I drove until we pulled down the alley behind the church. A couple of basketball hoops lined the outer ring of the pavement in the middle of the lot. There shooting in the fading light stood Terence. As I watched, he expertly made every shot from fifteen feet away and at least for today, he was deadly accurate. The young man had skills.

Dennis didn't hesitate for a second. As soon as the car stopped, he was out the door and determined to extract answers. Following I stayed well back. I'd only interfere if the confrontation got ugly. The first words spoken were direct and to the point.

"I know you did it. I just can't figure out why." Dennis shouted with a touch of spitefulness, his right index finger pointed.

Terence seemed startled. He did not immediately respond.

"I see you've brought your stupid look with you. Little doubt from someone with half a brain lacking smarts. Did you think you'd get away with it?"

Terence took a shot and missed for the first time since we'd arrived. Dennis snatched the rebound and tossed the ball into the grass yard which got his friend's attention.

"Hey bro!! What the hell is up with you?" Terence had a confounded look.

"Don't give me your bull! You know what is up. You stole from me. A brother no less. How could you do that to me?"

Dennis now sounded like someone from the street. More so than at any time this day. I wondered what had brought it out. Was it the anger or the feeling of

betrayal? You did not betray a friend.

His eyes now averted, Terence realized he was caught. He attempted to play dumb, though I figured him to be quite intelligent.

"The trading card! My Ernie Banks rookie card! You swapped it for money. Sold me out for the long green. Did you need it so bad that you stole from me? Give me a reason or I'll take you down!"

There was no fear in Terence, though confrontation wasn't on his mind. He tried to turn and walk away but Dennis wouldn't let him. He grabbed him by the arm and rose up on his toes, standing eyeball to eyeball. Terence attempted to pull away and the scuffle began.

This was less a fight than a wrestling match. Both rolled to the ground struggling to deliver a punch. Dennis landed a couple to the chest and shoulder, while Terence covered up and tried to push his smaller opponent away. After a couple of minutes, I deduced little was being accomplished. I intervened by grabbing Dennis, pulling him to his feet. He wasn't happy with me, but I figured he'd gotten his best shots in. Sooner or later the larger Terence would put him down.

"Let me go," Dennis yelled. "I want to punch his lights out."

"Cool it!" I said firmly. It was the closest I came to the language of the streets.

"Ok!" Dennis calmed down some. He understood the moment was over. Nothing in the way of violence would happen right now. Still he needed to have an answer.

"Terence, I believe your friend here is hurt," I said with my Father Knows Best tone. "He doesn't understand. All he wants to know is why, and I believe you're man enough to tell us that much."

Terence brushed off the dirt from his sweats and wiped the perspiration from his face as he got up. It was always hard to admit a failing. Somehow, I sensed there was more than simple greed to this lad's dirty deed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had no choice. I didn't plan it, but I had to do something."

"Go on," I said while Dennis stood silently.

Terence couldn't look at either of us, his hands resting on his hips. "I found the card in the play yard over there. It must have fallen out of your pocket sometime while we were horsing around. I picked it up fully expecting to give it back to you. But then I remembered what you said when you showed it to us—how much money it was worth." He sighed before continuing. "I needed the greenbacks."

I thought the worst. Drugs, booze, gambling, or a payoff for gang related problems that plague our city. All those thoughts flooded my mind, and I felt guilty rushing to judgment before hearing the facts.

"Dad has been out of work for months," uttered Terence, his eyes now fixed on his friend's face. "He worked for twelve years with a company that recently went out of business. It came as a complete surprise to him. One day he was working—the next unemployed. He's been searching real hard, but can't seem to come up with anything. I can tell he's worried."

It was a sign of the times. The economy was weak right now. Bankruptcy and foreclosures were up, welfare and unemployment lines were long. Good honest hard-working people were having a rough go of it.

"His unemployment checks aren't large enough. He could pay the rent, the utilities, the car payment, or buy food. Sometimes he can cover two or three, just not all four. Mom's job helps, but it's not always full-time. They've juggled the money for several months now, even receiving help from family, but it's caught up with them. The deadline was nearing."

"What are you trying to say?" asked Dennis, his anger subsiding, his face filled with concern.

"We needed fifteen hundred dollars by the end of the month or we'd be evicted. Dad and Mom had scraped a little more than eight hundred dollars, but they realized it wouldn't be enough. They told us their problems, preparing us for the worst." Terence paused, a tinge of emotion in his voice. "I will live with Mom's parents, while my two sisters go to Dad's brother, while Mom and Dad move in with Grandpa and Grandma Williams. Mom wasn't happy with splitting the family up. It was tearing her up inside. And Dad, well we knew he was hurting for not being responsible for providing for us. You could tell he wanted to say he was sorry, but he couldn't. That wasn't his style."

"I gather you sold the card and gave your parents the money." It was the logical next question for me to ask.

"I agonized over it for a few hours," said Terence, his arms now crossed, his head hanging in shame. "It's not easy stealing from a friend right in the front yard of God. I had to do something, for I felt helpless. Knowing my parents would be suspicious of where the money came from, I went to Bill's and got all the cash I could get, sealed it in an envelope and put it under the door with the word gift written on it. That way they'd figure it was an anonymous donor, someone from the neighborhood who'd heard of our troubles, or charity from the church. They had to take it then, and it was enough to get us by, at least for a while. I hoped things would look up for us now and give Dad time to find work

again. He thinks he's got a good shot at a part-time position. The interview is tomorrow."

"Stealing isn't the answer," I asserted. "There are better ways, and I'm sure you've come to that realization, because it currently shows on your face. The internal guilt will torture you until you come clean." It was my best sermon in many a day. The one I'd given to myself numerous times when money had gotten tight.

"Did your parents use the money?" asked Dennis.

"Yes, they did. They told us tonight the plans to move had been postponed for now. But they stressed to us the trouble was far from over."

Dennis stared for a long time at his friend. The anger and even the twinge of hatred had gone away. The sorrow for the misfortune of what Terence and his family were going through showed in his eyes. There would be no pity, at least not out loud. He stepped forward, extending his hand, Terence doing the same, the grip between them held for several minutes. Nothing more needed to be said.

After retrieving the basketball, we loaded his bike into my trunk, strapping the lid down with a bungee, and drove Terence home in silence. He got out and Dennis walked him to the front door, talking for a time out of earshot. I couldn't hear them and didn't want to. What they shared was most certainly personal. A moment between friends—among brothers, they would remember forever. A swirling orange glow filled the ebbing skies.

Dennis got back into the car and told me the money was no longer important. Terence could have it all to save his family. This was a gesture born out of deep feelings. In challenging times, we must make sacrifices. And a little piece of cardboard appeared small on the grand scale of things.

"What are you going to tell your father?" I asked as we pulled up in front of his house.

"The truth." Dennis seemed resolved of the proper action. "If he doesn't understand, I'll make him understand."

"I'll stand with you." This was my gesture of friendship.

"Thanks, but I'll do it myself. You must come inside. I owe you payment for the help you provided."

"I'm not sure I did much."

"You helped me to confront my problem. Not to mention drive me all over the place to find the card, making me realize material goods aren't the end all. You've earned your choice of one card from my collection."

I couldn't argue as the strength bled from the lad's broadening shoulders. I followed him into the house.

I stood in the foyer and waited. Dennis returned with his thick notebook of several hundred neatly displayed cards in two-layer sleeves. We sat on the comfortable ebony sofa in the living room as I searched through each page carefully. Most teams were represented, with cards from Hank Aaron to Todd Zeile, a catcher whose career started with my favorite team growing up, the St. Louis Cardinals. Players from the Chicago Cubs past and present were strongly prevalent. Though he had been traded to the Yankees the previous year, Alfonso Soriano was his current favorite player, his picture mixed in with other great Cubs. All the cards were in excellent shape. Many had value, others probably not much at all. Three of the collectibles stood out.

The first was a Mickey Mantle card, a Topps from the year 1964. It was the last time the Yankees had made the World Series for many years, and his last superb season before injuries brought a premature end to his career in 1968. With a good set of knees, he would have hit over 700 homeruns.

Then the greatest right-handed pitcher baseball would ever know. Sandy Koufax was the best left hander, but Bob Gibson was the most intimidating pitcher to ever play. This Topps 1970 card showed all his career stats, including the most dominating season a pitcher ever had in 1968. His 1.12 earned run average that year will probably never be matched and forced baseball to change the rules by lowering the pitcher's mound to add more offense to the diamond.

Finally, there was the Topps MVP card from 1961 featuring my father's favorite player of all time, and probably the greatest to ever play the game. Willie Mays had the grace and style tremendous athletes had. He could run, field, hit for power and average. His over the head catch in the 1954 World Series is legendary. Truly he was a marvel to watch. Though I'd only seen him play via archive footage, what he did was incredible and my father's stories of watching him play were etched in my mind. This was the card I wanted.

"Do you know the value of this one?" I asked, pointing to it.

"Not a whole lot. I believe twenty-five or thirty dollars at the most." Dennis seemed somewhat surprised. "I have a Henry Aaron card in there worth close to a hundred dollars. This would be more in line with our deal."

"Well Hammerin' Hank the homerun king was one of the greats. But Willie Mays was special to me. Dad told me stories of seeing him play in San Francisco when he was a kid. He did it all. Those were the tales which bonded us and what I remember best." I shook my head in happiness. "This card here is the one I want. Deal?"

Dennis wasn't about to argue. "All yours Mister Mann."

"I think we've been through enough for you to call me Jarvis."

We shook hands in a more conventional way. I hadn't learned those complicated series of clasps yet. I hoped someday he would teach me.

"Hello," sounded a deep voice from outside the room. In walked a tall, strong looking man, a cautious smile working over his face. I stood to shake his hand and introduce myself. I left out my title for I didn't want to alarm him. The mere mention of private detective can make even the strongest men quiver. Dennis would explain to him later.

"Well, I'm sorry but I must to be leaving," I said. "I hope I can stop over sometime and take a closer view of your collection. It's quite impressive."

"I'd like that." said Dennis rising from the sofa.

"Don't bother. I'll find my way out. A pleasure to meet you Mister Gash." I shook his hand again and headed towards the exit. When I opened it, I heard Dennis speak to his father. "We need to talk, Pop."

I closed the door knowing what was coming. I figured he'd have no trouble making his dad understand and would take pride in how his son handled the situation. It was the kind of thing a generous man would do. He'd certainly matured today, as had I.

Driving home I knew right where I'd put the Willie Mays card, placing it in lower left-hand corner of the autumn mountain picture which hung behind my desk. When things looked down, and times had gotten tough, and the entire world seemed cruel and unkind, I'd stare at the card and remember a young man who'd learned to give and forgive, while facing responsibility all in the same day. With such heart the future held hope if others like him emerged from this grim, greedy, selfish world. Maybe the 'me generation' would turn into the 'we generation'.

The thought of it all brought a smile to this cynical brow of mine. I stared into the rear-view mirror, for I'd forgotten what happiness looked like on my face. I enjoyed what I saw and wished to see it more often. One could only hope.

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Chapter 1**

It was a hot, hazy Sunday afternoon, and I was getting back from a friend's garage where I'd spent the day working on my classic '69 Mustang, though classic might be a slight exaggeration. I'd received a large check from a case I'd recently finished, so I had some money to spend. The engine had been running rather rough in the summer heat, and the gas mileage on the old yellow-and-black thing had been very poor. I tuned her up, changed all the filters and put in fresh motor oil, so she roared like a lioness. *Why are cars always considered she's?* Probably because, like women, cars required a lot of attention. Though this little lady never complained about my snoring.

I felt a bit greasy from the day's work when I returned home. I still lived and worked from the place on West Evans Street below the beauty salon. It seemed their clientele outnumbered mine, though mine usually paid better. Of course, one person a week would outnumber mine. Maybe we could run a joint special together. Get a haircut and a crime solved for one low price! *Maybe I should go into marketing.*

Stepping down the sloping stairs to my home office, I unlocked the front door. Once inside I remembered I'd turned off my smartphone, and a few months back I'd removed my landline to save money. Even though there was always a concern about missing an important call, those calls came few and far between. I needed to get the car running just right and didn't want to be disturbed. Besides the cell battery was at less than 20 percent, where it annoyingly was warning me to charge it, but I had no charger with me. *Maybe phones were female as well!* I found the adapter on my desk and plugged it in while powering it on. The little envelope icon popped up with a cheery chime. Sure enough, someone had called and left a message.

"Damn, a call!" I stated out loud. Sometimes I liked to listen to my own voice as it echoed off the walls. I often wondered if they heard me upstairs. Probably not over the girl-on-girl chatter and 2000-watt hair dryers. Though today they were closed, so only the spiders whose webs seemed to appear everywhere would capture my quips.

The possibility existed it could be a wrong number, with the person calling hanging up once they knew that they'd dialed incorrectly, using those precious cell minutes. Or it could just be someone marketing something, even though I was supposed to be on a no-call list. But I sensed this was potential Private Eye business, as I'd been on kind of a roll with a couple of decent paying jobs over the last few months that didn't require taking pictures of a cheating spouse, from clients whose checks hadn't bounced.

The voice on the message was short and to the point, sharp and sexy, from female vocal chords that struck a note with me. It was a sound one hoped would live up to the actual person's appearance. *Does the voice ever match the face?*

"Hi, my name is Emily. I'm in need of your services. A friend from church, Dennis Gash, gave me your name and said you'd be able to help me. Please call as soon as possible, it is quite urgent." She rattled off the digits of her phone number eloquently.

What a voice! I could listen to it endlessly. Something about how she said, "I need your services" lifted my spirits. If only calls like that came every day. If only I got one like that once a year! But the voice also sounded concerned, even scared of something. That was the kind of work I did. Solve other people's problems to the best of my abilities.

She had mentioned Dennis Gash, a young man I helped earlier in the year find a stolen bubble gum card. Until these last two cases it had been one of the higher-paying jobs over the last twelve months. That job's souvenir was a Willie Mays baseball card placed in the left-hand corner of the autumn mountain picture hanging behind my desk. A memento I'd treasure always.

Being the master sleuth that I was, I knew what to do next. I reached for the smartphone and dialed her number. *Why waste this talent on Madison Avenue!*

"Hello." It was the same voice!

"Hi, this is Jarvis Mann. I'm returning your call." I tried to sound as cool as I could, but I sounded like a teenager in puberty. For some reason I was always nervous when talking with a prospective client, especially a female one. I had to mute the phone to clear my throat.

She sounded a little nervous as well, but for a different reason. "I'm glad you returned my call. I hope you're not too busy. I need to hire you to investigate, as I'm scared for my life."

I couldn't tell her the only thing keeping me busy on most days was finding ways to avoid the bill collector. "Oh, I think I can fit you in my busy schedule and help you. I have some stuff on my hands right now I need to deal with first, but if you'll give me your address I'll be over as soon as possible."

I wrote down her address on a piece a paper I unearthed from the clutter on my basic pine desk. I told her it would be an hour or so before I'd be over, though she only lived a couple of miles away. The stuff on my hands I had to deal with was the grease from working on my car. The Mustang had become a money pit these days, so I hoped to earn a bit of cash to help pay for other essentials it needed, like gasoline—not to mention groceries and rent to keep me off the street.

It took some extra-hard scrubbing, but I was able to remove all the black grime. Showered and shaved, I was clean and dry and smelling of aftershave. I figured my normal getup of blue jeans and a T-shirt would be a letdown for her. She would be expecting a gumshoe extraordinaire, so I tried to dress the part, though that would be challenging with a limited wardrobe. So I did the best with what I had to work with. Dark slacks, black-and-yellow-striped polo shirt and freshly polished black wing-tipped shoes adorned my athletic frame. This was my spiffiest meet-a-client outfit, straight from Target and Famous Footwear. The one that made women's hearts melt. At least I wished it did.

The drive over didn't take too long. I hit every green light as I headed east on Evans, until I came to her street. This Denver neighborhood was a step up from mine. Clean, well-kept homes, nearly all of which were a red or tan brick. Urban renewal had invaded the area, with a sprinkle of newer buildings mixing with the old. I found the address and parked on the street. Her home was similar to the rest on her block but was the nicest of them all. It sat on a huge corner lot. A beige brick with dark-green trim adorned the two-storey home, a luxury for an area that was ranch-dominated. A huge cottonwood tree graced the front yard, white puffs of seeds blowing in the wind. The lawn was nitrate-enhanced green and newly trimmed. I got out and strolled the cracked, uneven concrete walk to the front door and rang the doorbell. The chimes even sounded classy.

Now, anytime you hear a voice for the first time, you imagine what the person looks like. I'm not certain why we humans do this, but it seems to be natural for us curious creatures. Sometimes you're right on target, and other times you're not even close. Usually when it's a woman's voice I'm far off the mark. Normally when I think they're beautiful they're rather ugly, and when I think they're ugly they're gorgeous.

Since I thought Emily sounded like a fox, I assumed the worst. What I got landed somewhere in between. Not a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit babe, but certainly not ugly. She was simple, maybe a little bit plain, and possibly would be described as the girl next door, though more likely the woman next door, for she appeared to be in her mid-to-late thirties, her long, straight brownish-blond hair parted in the middle and swept back out of her deep-set blue eyes. Her body

was nicely built, though I'm certain she thought her hips were too wide. *Don't all women think that!* Dressed for the sizzling summer day, she wore cutoff blue-jean shorts designed to reveal her shapely, tanned legs and a bright-orange T-shirt with a Broncos logo on the front, just tight enough to show off her ample bosom. Her face, devoid of make-up, smiled warmly and invited me in. After looking her over some more I decided *a little bit plain* had been overly harsh, as she had a natural beauty to her.

As I stepped in the door a brown-and-white beagle gazed at me square in the eye with a hint of anger and flash of teeth. I was amazed it hadn't barked and wasn't sure what to think. He was a small- to medium-sized animal, but with dogs that didn't matter. When they sink their teeth into you, you'll know it. Now, firing off a gun would get their attention but wouldn't make a good impression on my possible client. Besides I'd left my 9MM locked away in the car glove box only for emergencies. Didn't seem like I needed to be heavily armed for the meet and greet.

Emily took charge, speaking to the pet firmly. "Opus, stop it! This nice gentleman is here to help me. Sorry, I'm dog-sitting this week for my neighbor, who is out of town. He doesn't like strangers much: very territorial. Likes to bark a lot, and I'm surprised he didn't yelp at you. I always know when the postal carrier is delivering mail, as he barks endlessly." She paused to compose herself. "Sorry about the rant. Please make yourself comfortable."

I found a seat on a plush sofa in the living room. Looking around, I took in the surroundings while keeping one eye on Opus and the other on Emily, who had taken a chair opposite me. Sounds hard to do, yet I did it. All part of the skill set needed for a P.I. I always noticed minute details, like the doilies on the tables, the bright and clean appearance of the bleach-white carpet, and the various pictures that covered the walls, including one of a famous woman whose name escaped me. I also was buoyed by the "nice" comment she had made. One always grabbed for the trivial things when you often slept alone at night. But I digress. This was a possible client, and I needed to treat her that way. Hitting on her would likely not lead to a job. Opus might not like it either, being territorial.

"Care for something to drink, Mr. Mann?" she asked while smiling with pearly-white teeth.

"No thank you. Please call me Jarvis. May I call you Emily? I don't recall you leaving a last name on the message."

"White, Emily White. And yes, please call me Emily. That's an interesting name, Jarvis. You don't hear it often."

"Most think I should be part of someone's household staff with that name. I've taken my fair share of ribbing through the years. It was my grandfather's

middle name. I like that it is different and sets me apart from everyone else.”

“I love it. It’s very masculine.”

I smiled as I savored the masculine comment. What man wouldn’t! If she was trying to butter me up, it was working.

“What is the problem you need my help with?” I asked, getting straight to the point. I never was good at small talk. Those statements like “Boy, it’s been so hot lately” always seemed corny to me. Rarely was I invited to parties for that reason alone.

“I have an issue where I think someone may be stalking me, and it’s starting to scare me.” A tremor shook her voice.

“Tell me about it?”

She sat back in her chair and took a deep breath. “I started noticing this a month or so ago. Certain nagging things, like the sense someone was following me: first a car and then a person always seemingly behind me when shopping. The feeling someone’s been in the house. Items not where they should be when I returned home. Finding the door unlocked when I’m certain I locked it. Calls on my home phone and cell, with no one speaking on the other side when I answered, the numbers always blocked. Lots of little things like that.”

“Do you ever see them? Can you give me a description? What about a make, color and model of the car you’ve seen?”

“That’s part of the problem, and I’m not the best at descriptive details. From what I’ve seen he’s male, but seems like a different person each time. Anywhere from 6 foot to 6’3” with dark hair, clothed in various outfits, from jeans and a T-shirt, to dark slacks with a light-colored polo shirt. Much like you’re dressed now. The vehicles have been anything from a dark four-door sedan to a large SUV to even a motorcycle. I get glimpses, but it’s always a little different and nothing I can pinpoint exactly. He seems extremely elusive and sly—a shadow in the background.”

This all sounded strange to me. I hoped she wasn’t some kook searching for attention. I’d need more to go on and tried not to seem too perplexed by what she told me. I needed the job and liked what I was looking at.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said, reading my thoughts, “*crazy woman seeing things*. That’s what the police told me as well. They thought they were talking to a nut job, though they didn’t say it in so many words. But I’ve been down this road before with someone else, and I don’t care to go down it again.”

“So, you’re saying…” I asked.

“Yes. This isn’t the first time I’ve been stalked!” she said with a chill in her voice. This potential case had just gotten more interesting.

Chapter 2

Emily got up from her chair. “I need a drink. Are you sure you don’t want a refreshment?”

“Bottled water would be fine if you have any,” I replied.

She left the room for a few minutes. Opus—the name reminded me of the comic strip *Bloom County*, one of my favorites—followed her out and back in again when she returned, hoping for a treat. He was in luck, as he carried out of the room a biscuit, sat down and devoured it. She handed me the water while taking a sip of her own, and sat down. She was trying to compose herself before beginning her story.

“It was around five years ago,” Emily began. “I was finishing up a rocky marriage to a man whom I once adored. He was sweet, loving and beautiful: all a girl could hope for. But then he changed into this controlling, jealous, crazy man who didn’t allow me to breathe. Anyone I talked with or interacted with, whether it was friends or co-workers, he’d swear I was having an affair with them. It didn’t matter if they were male or female. I couldn’t have any type of prolonged conversation without him launching into a jealous rage. We’d been married going on three years, and the last two were hell. I had to get out and move away. But he wouldn’t let me. I was trapped. No family to help, and the few friends I had left feared him. But I had to find a way.”

“What did you do?” It was an obvious question to ask.

“Fortunately, there were no children to tie me down. I packed up everything I could take with me one day and left. Really, it was a month of preparation before I moved to the other side of town. We lived in Westminster at the time, and I had substantial money put away he didn’t know about. I decided to move down here. I found an apartment and a lawyer to help me escape. I had to get out from under his control to take back my life. Those that I worked with helped shield me from him as best they could. Once the divorce papers were served I thought he finally understood and would get it through his thick head. My lawyer made it very clear to him and his lawyer that he was to stay away. But then it started.”

Emily stopped to take a breath. You could see reliving this was hard for her, and that many sleepless nights had been spent dealing with the drama that was her former married life. I kept my mouth shut and listened intently. It was one of my best traits.

“First it was phone calls begging me to come back, that he couldn’t live without me. I was adamant that I wouldn’t and that he should get on with his life. Finally, I stopped taking them, but the phone rang and rang at all hours every day, so I changed numbers. Then he began following me everywhere, to

work and back home again. If I went out to shop, he was there. Off in the distance but where I could see him. If I tried to approach him to tell him to leave me alone he would walk, run or drive away, only to return later. He must have taken time off from work for several weeks, as he wouldn't stop. His harassment wasn't verbally or physically threatening me but menacing, to show I'd never be free. I couldn't sleep for fear he was going to snap. Be one of those ex-husbands that walks in, shoots his ex-wife and then kills himself.

I started carrying a camera with me and taking pictures of him out there in the distance, with a time and date stamp. I gave them to my lawyer, and he got a restraining order that he was quickly served with. But it didn't stop him, and he was arrested twice over the next few weeks. And though I saw less and less of him over the next few months he was still there at times, watching me. I had no life and could make no friends and was always afraid to leave the house. But you know what got it to stop: the divorce. Once that was finalized and we faced off in court, and he heard the things I had to say about my life with him, I never saw him again. He didn't even try to defend himself in court. I watched and watched, but he was no longer there. It was like he fell off the face of the Earth. I was happy, as I could now live, work and sleep in peace. I had my life back."

"And you never found out what happened to him?"

"No. I didn't want, need or ask for financial support. I just wanted to enjoy my life."

"And now it's started again," I said. "Do you think he is the one stalking you?"

She stopped and mulled over her answer. "I'm not really certain. It's been five years, so it's hard to say. Since I've not gotten a clear look at this person, I can't tell positively it's him. But it could be. And that's what I need you to find out."

Before going any further, I knew I needed to go over the standard items I always covered before being hired for a case. There was little doubt in my mind that I'd be taking it, but she might decide otherwise once she heard my rules.

"You need to understand some things that I will go over with you. I will dig into your life, ask questions of you and your friends. Be a pain in the ass to help me do my job. Some of the queries may be personal, but I'll require honest answers. If you can't truthfully tell me what I need to know, I can't and won't do the job. I'll be able to finish the work more quickly and successfully with the proper information while saving you some money. If I find out later items that you didn't tell me, I'll drop the case, but you'll have to pay me for my time up until that point. Do you understand this?"

She nodded without hesitation.

“Next, the cost. It’s an hourly rate for every hour I work on the case that I’ll itemize for you, plus all my expenses in doing the job. This includes any meals, mileage or money needed to find the answers. I will provide all receipts and promise not to eat at Elway’s every day. And I’ll need a \$1000 retainer to begin. It can get expensive fast. If you don’t have the means to cover the costs, then we can part now at no expense to you and I can maybe direct you to someone less expensive.” I quoted her my hourly rate, knowing few out there would be any cheaper.

“Money isn’t an issue. I will write you a check right now.” She got up and grabbed her checkbook, wrote a check without hesitation and gave it to me. “What else do you need from me?”

I glanced at the check and admired the excellent script it was written in. I folded it up and placed it in my wallet. “Now the intrusive part: the personal questions.” I pulled out a pen and small notebook to take notes. I used to record this with a digital recorder but determined people were less forthcoming when they knew what they said could be digitally archived forever. I also found that I listened more intently, and my recall was better when taking notes.

“Let’s start with his name and everything you know about your ex-husband. Where he lived when he was growing up, how you met, how long you dated, where he worked, if he has any relatives living and in town I can talk with. Anything else important you can give me to work with. I need the whole scoop.”

“His name was Mark Remington. Yes, I changed my last name back to what it was before getting married. We met in Westminster, Colorado. It was a setup date by a friend, a co-worker at the time. We dated for about six months before he proposed. I at first was hesitant to say yes, but he persisted and was very charming. He bought me flowers, took me to fancy restaurants, was easy on the eyes and good in bed. We got married about three months later and rented a house and lived there until I moved out, as I mentioned earlier. He worked for a construction company in that area. He was a foreman for a local contractor whose name I can’t remember. My former lawyer should be able to give you that info, as he had a detailed file on him. He works for the law firm Bristol & Bristol. Tony Bristol is his name.” She got up, walked over to a nearby desk, pulled out a business card and gave it to me.

“What about any relatives?”

“His mother lives here in the Denver area, and her name was Mimi Remington. We weren’t very close, and he wasn’t close to his mother either. I’m not certain if she’s still living in town or is even alive, as her health always was poor. I also believe he had a sister, but she lived out of state. Tony may have that info in the file as well.”

“Friends. Places he would hang out. Anything he did regularly that might help me locate him.”

“He loved slow-pitch softball. Played it all the time. Always wanted me to come watch in an attempt to impress me. I was a talented player myself before we met, but he wouldn’t let me participate. In his mind only, dykes played softball; his words, not mine. There were several fields and leagues up north he played at. Also, there was a bar he would drink at afterward with his teammates. Charlie’s, I think it was called. Tony should have that on file as well.”

“Thanks, this is very helpful.” I finished writing up what I’d heard and flipped to the next page. “Now, how about someone else who might be involved other than your ex-husband? Could be someone you work with or dated recently that didn’t go well. Someone you met at a bar and had a one-night stand with. Anything like that which could create this situation.”

Her cheeks turned red, as I think I embarrassed her. I knew it had to be asked, as normally you aren’t stalked by a random person. It’s almost always someone you know, dated or were in a relationship with.

“I don’t go to bars to pick up men or to be picked up!” she said, almost with a smile. Or maybe it was a smirk. “I do hang out at the place down the road with friends from time to time. Occasionally, someone will buy me a drink. But nothing has come of it. No sparks that flew, no hot night of passion with a man I hardly knew. Not my style. Really, I enjoy just being by myself most of the time. No one has really clicked in my head for a while now. And I’m really cautious because of what happened with Mark.”

She stopped for a second, as if she remembered a memory long forgotten. “I did have a date with one of my co-workers. He was known around the office as the Hound, always hitting on women at work. There even were a few complaints of harassment. We went out about nine months ago for one date. Just dinner and nothing else, as he really was a bit of an ass. He asked me out several other times, and finally I met him for drinks and flat out told him I wasn’t interested and to stop asking me. I then left, and he never bothered me again. There were a few people that said he bragged we’d slept together, though I never confronted him about it. But he moved onto another job about six months ago, much to the relief of all the females in our office. I happily have not heard from or seen him since.”

“And what was his name, and where is he working now?”

“Rickie Ward. He is at another consulting company now as a salesman. I believe they made him a partner. Consultants for All, I believe is the name. Our personnel director at work can give you more details.”

“Where do you work and what do you do? How long have you been there?”

“I work in the Tech Center for Reliable Consulting. I do consulting work for retail companies. Tell them what to do and how to do it. Straighten them out and make them more efficient and profitable. I’ve been there for thirteen years, and I’m a shareholder.” She gave me the office address and suite number.

“If you were employed there during the whole divorce mess with Mark, it would be best if I can talk with your co-workers who worked there during that time. Hopefully that’s OK. If you need to clear it with someone higher up, I will. Just want to hear from others about what happened as they remember it. Always helps to get different perspectives.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem. We aren’t a huge operation, about forty people. Most weren’t there but some were, including my assistant Jeanine. I’ll talk with Tammy, our personnel manager, to make sure she’s OK with it. Since I’m a shareholder I can convince her if she’s resistant.”

We went on for another thirty minutes, covering little things, filling in the gaps. Going over her routines, when she shopped and where, her work hours, the time she left in the morning and when she usually made it home, where she ate, where she worked out, if she went for walks or bike rides. All were things she did regularly but with no real obvious pattern and nothing that popped out as problematic. We went over rough descriptions of the man she’d seen again—or men, in this case, as the description varied quite a bit. The types of vehicles she’d seen. I tried to tease out as much detail as possible. It could have really been anyone, but at least we eliminated creatures from Mars as suspects.

“What I think I’m going to do is get info from your lawyer and then try to track down these two men. I’d say you should be safe at work. I’ll do is from a distance in the mornings and evenings try to spot someone watching you when you’re at home. If you go shopping, I’ll either go with you or follow from afar. You can text me when you’re leaving and on your way home. Let’s try to keep your routine normal and not vary it much. While you’re at work I’ll track down whatever leads I can come up with. Hopefully, we’ll get lucky and find him. If the problem worsens, there are other things we can do. We may need to try and bait him to bring him out in the open, but I don’t expect it will come to that. Do you have any questions?”

She shook her head. “No. I just want it to be over again. I can’t live like this.”

“I’ll do all that I’m capable of. I’m good at this, and we’ll get him.” I said it so convincingly, I even believed it.

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