

A WIFE CAN BE MURDER

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I can still picture that stifling August night when Lola walked into my life. Especially since the security cameras recorded the whole thing. I was alone at the office. Carmelita, my bombshell secretary, had hauled her spectacular double-D's home hours ago. I was glad she had. The one time she left them behind, my lips were numb for a week.

Desperate for a breeze, I was standing at the open window, listening to street noises clatter in like garbage, thinking about the adulterous client I'd lost to a butcher knife—thinking that I should ask for bigger advances—when I heard the elevator in the hall rattle open and the click-clack of high heels. Suddenly a curvy shape darkened the frosted glass of my door—behind that goofy writing:

TNUH JEAHƆIM
2WOITAGITSEVMI

—and somebody knocked. I figured it was probably the owner of the curvy shape, but just in case I scrambled for my desk where I kept my .38. In my business you can't be too careful.

"It's open," I called out.

The knob turned, jiggled, then someone kicked the door. I was wrong. It wasn't open.

"Hold on," I said.

My first sight of her was like a slug in the gut. Actually, it *was* a slug in the gut. I doubled over, gagging and sucking wind.

"Next time don't keep me waiting," she said.

Cripes she was gorgeous, a silver-blond knockout in a scarlet wraparound sheath. And she had legs that wouldn't quit—at least not till they got down to her fuck-me pumps, which was good because if they'd kept on going they would have ripped up my floor. She drifted in on a river of throaty trombone glissandos and oily trumpet riffs, hips swaying to a sultry New Orleans beat. I was happy when she shut off her boom box. I hate jazz. I slid a chair out for her and she perched on the arm of it. I figured she must have a nice tight ass because it was a cheap chair and the arm was razor thin. And I noticed her skirt was slit high up the front. You'd think a classy filly like that could afford underwear, but when she crossed her legs I got a clear shot of New Jersey, except without all the industrial pollution. I slumped into the chair behind my desk and put my feet

up, and when she beamed her thousand-watt baby blues at me my Florsheims started smoking.

"Are you Mike Hunt?" she said.

"What're you, some wise-ass?" I pulled at my thick stubble. "I'm just a guy who forgot to shave this morning. What can I do for you, sister?"

"You don't know me, Mr. Hunt, but—"

"Yeah, I know who you are. You're Lola Braithwaite. I've seen your puss plastered all over the society pages."

"Really?" She blushed till she looked like the ripe tomato she was. "You're sure those weren't ads for hair extension products?"

"And I also know your billionaire husband's missing."

That's when the waterworks started. I shoved a Kleenex box at her. It was empty, so she just held it under her nose to catch the drips.

"You have to help me, Mr. Hunt," she blubbered. "The police think I had something to do with his disappearance."

I leaned low and to the side just to check how New Jersey was holding up under the strain. "Would you have any reason to get rid of him?" I asked.

"Besides the billion dollars, I mean."

"Well, he did beat me." I must have looked skeptical, because she started unfastening the front of her dress. "Want to see?"

"It's my job to examine the evidence."

She wasn't wearing a bra, and she had the roundest, sweetest melons I ever saw. I got up and walked around my desk for a closer squint. Her nipples stood up like fireplugs under my magnifying glass. "I don't see any signs of a beating," I said. "What'd he beat you with?"

"Clubs."

"Clubs?"

"He had a flush, Mike. Queen high. All I had was a pair."

"Yeah, I'll say. But these aren't exactly evidence, are they?"

"Not really." She shrugged and her deuce plumped out like aces. "I just wanted to show you my tits."

"Look, lady, give me the whole truth or forget it. A perfect pair won't cut it. I can't be swayed that easily."

"Maybe you should switch to boxer shorts."

I swatted the Kleenex away. "Let me tell you what I think, Lola. I think you came in here hoping I'd buy your cock-and-bull story—"

"You're wrong about the bull, Mike—"

"And help you phony up an alibi for the cops."

"Please—"

"I know your type. You heard I was a drunk and a loser, and you thought you could twist me around your middle finger."

"Little finger."

"Little finger."

"All right, Mike! All right! You got me!"

As agile as a cat she lunged for her shiny red handbag. I dove under my desk. My elbow caught the sharp edge as I tucked and rolled. When I crawled back up I was holding my Smith and Wesson at arm's length.

And she was holding her diaphragm.

She stood there staring at me, trembling like a five-and-dime vibrator. "So," I said, "who's gonna make the first move?"

"I'm scared, Mike," she whimpered. But she leaned toward me and tapped the Wesson oil. I knew she'd make the right choice. That tootsie had brains. I tossed the Smith into the wastebasket and started unbuckling my belt.

"You have to understand," Lola said. "It's not easy being the wife of a famous man. I'm always under the public eye."

"Yeah, and now you want to see what it's like under a private eye, is that it? Do a little slumming?"

"Is that so wrong, Mike?"

"Save the moral judgments for after, honeybun. I handle guilt a lot better than I do regret."

I went over to the window and pulled down the shade. When I came back I showed her how I got my reputation for being a stand-up guy.

"Oooo," she said. "The last time I had a mike shoved this close to my face was at a press conference. I ended up on the nightly news."

"Yeah, well, the best you'll do now is the Playboy Channel."

"Heh-wo desting won two dree," she said. She was holding me with both hands, checking out the PA system, her plump, glossy lips stretched over my rod like the inner tube from a leprechaun's bicycle. "Mmggh," she said. The acoustics were great.

"I hope you didn't mumble like that on the news," I said.

"Mgnnh mgnnh," she mumbled. And she kept on mumbling. Sweet jeez the kid could mumble. She mumbled until I was more than ready to squeeze off a couple of rounds and blow her head off. But I shoved her away just in time. A professional doesn't blow his clients' heads off—not before he collects expenses, anyway.

"Not so fast, lover," I said.

"Sorry, Mike. I'll do it slower."

"Why don't you just tell me where you saw your husband last."

She untied the sash at her waist, her dress slithered to the floor like a dress slithering to the floor, and right there staring at me were the wetlands of New Jersey nestled in the middle of the creamiest Eastern Seaboard I'd ever seen. She pointed straight at Hoboken.

"That's where you saw your husband last?" I said.

"He was in a hurry. He just came and went."

I got down on my knees to investigate.

"What're you doing, Mike? He's not there anymore. I'd know if he was."

"I'm checking whether he left any clues."

"With your tongue?"

"My fingers are way too short, sugarpuss."

She squirmed and groaned and I started to wonder if she wasn't holding something back. I reached around and grabbed her ass and pressed her closer. It was a toss-up which of us got the worse chin burn.

"Oh, Mike," she whispered. "They were wrong about you."

I loved that low sexy voice of hers, like Orson Welles with a snoot full of helium.

"Eah? Ut'd ay thay bou me?"

I knew I was getting close to the truth. She grabbed my ears and stretched them till I looked like Dumbo, but without the trunk.

"They—ooh—said you were—uh uh uh—arrogant and inept—ooh Mike—and stupid and you look like an ape in your fedora and trenchcoat—oh God!—and that you've never solved a case in your life and—eeeeeeaaah—you couldn't eat pussy if it was served between two slices of pumpernickel." She screamed and jumped up on my shoulders and before I knew it her thighs were squashing my head like it was a rotten cantaloupe. "But you *can*, Mike! You *can* eat pussy."

I spanked her hard so she'd loosen up, but that only made her clamp tighter until I felt like I was gagging on the business end of a muskrat. Suddenly I was dizzy—dizzier than usual—and it clicked into place what her game was. She was trying to suffocate me! I staggered to the desk and grabbed the Wesson. She was moaning so loud I forgot which way you unscrew a cap so I had to break the neck off the bottle. I don't know if that scared the hell out of her, or she was having an orgasm like an eight-point-oh on the Richter scale. Either way she nearly tore my head off, shimmying and howling. Finally she climbed down panting and gave me a look that smoldered like a thousand truck tires on

fire. I wanted to grin, but that would have embarrassed the hell out of me because right then I needed to floss bad.

"God, Mike, that was incredible."

I held up the bottle so she could see it better. "You think that's something? You should see me rip a beer can in half."

"So, what're you gonna do with all that salad oil, big boy?"

My eyes turned as hard and cold as a couple of frozen Martini olives, except not green and red. "You can call me big, but call me boy and I'll slap you silly."

Her eyes turned as hard and cold as a couple of frozen Ben Wa balls. "Go ahead and slap me, Mike, but don't you *ever* call me silly."

Considering how well we understood each other, I decided not to slap her. Instead I doused her with the whole damned quart of oil. She hummed to herself while I lubed her parts. I paid particular attention to her chest. Nobody likes squeaky bazoombas. When I was finished she was greasier than half my clients.

"Okay, sweetheart, bend over and grab those dainty ankles." I whacked her on the ass to get her started.

"What're you doing?"

"Open wide. I need to probe into your background."

"Oh, God, Mike." She stumbled forward, squealing like a pig. I figured her background had never been probed before, but I kept at it until I was as far as I could go into her hidden assets.

"Jesus, Mike!"

"Am I hurting you?"

"It's all right, I'm used to it. The IRS does the same thing every April."

And then suddenly for some reason she decided to cooperate. "Okay, do it, Mike! Check me out! Oh God, check me—check me harder!" So I checked the hell out of her. I don't know how she kept her balance, galloping around the room holding onto her ankles like that. I felt like that ancient Greek guy chasing after a Cyclops with a sharp stick. Every time I'd poke her in the eye she'd shove me back, and it was all poke and shove and more poke and shove until finally I screamed and she screamed and we both screamed and jeez I thought somebody must have tied a grenade to my dick because it exploded and I saw stars flashing everywhere—the twinkle kind, not the Humphrey Bogart kind.

"That was fantastic," Lola said, wheezing like a Camel smoker. And that's when I knew I was falling for the kid. She was my type in every way: gorgeous, rich, naked, tough as nails—the hammering kind, not the finger kind.

"So, what now, Mike?"

I wiped off my investigative tool with my handkerchief, checked for any blemishes on her record. There weren't any. "Well, Lola, it looks like you were clean after all."

"Then you believe me?"

"I sure do, babe, and I think I got it worked out what happened to your hubby."

"What tipped you off?"

"Sugar, what tipped me off has nothing to do with it." I gave New Jersey a friendly tweak. "No, all the pieces tumbled into place when you mentioned the IRS."

"Oh, Mike, you're not a complete idiot after all."

"Yeah, I know."

No way was I letting Lola get back into her dress like that, all slathered with Wesson oil. Purely out of consideration I laid her on the floor and started licking it off, thinking that if I'd known I would have picked up some escarole, and maybe some of those big red onions. But even plain, she made a hell of a salad. I paid special attention to her chest. Nobody likes greasy cabbages. By the time I worked my way down to her little patch of bean sprouts my carrot was ready for some more dip.

"Again, Mike? Are you sure?"

"I always keep an extra cartridge jacked in the chamber."

We oozed along the floor negotiating my fee, while I explained my logical deductions to her. "It was the IRS all along, doll. Your old man skipped the country because he owes his left nut to the government."

"He doesn't have a left nut."

"Oh yeah? Him and Hitler. And right now, the way I see it, they're both in Argentina—except Hitler. He's dead."

"He was a rat, Mike."

"Of course Hitler was a rat."

"No, my husband. Oooo, that's nice. Keep doing that."

"Serves you right, then. You should have married a human being. Rats are too small and furry."

She was on top of me now, grinding her hips in a circle in a way that drove me loco—more loco than usual. "Hey, Mike, want to see a trick I learned when I was a working girl?"

"Whatever you're selling, honeypie, I'm buying."

She leaned down, pinched my nose shut and blew into my mouth until my ears popped. "See? That's really good for clearing the Eustachian tubes."

"Thanks, kid, I'll remember that."

I was blown away. Besides everything else, Lola was helpful. I rolled her onto her back and pumped her full of appreciation until we both collapsed in a pool of sweat, and the case was officially closed.

"Please," Lola gasped, "no more. If I come one more time I'll melt into a blob of jelly."

"We're done, cupcake. The janitor's already going to bust my nuts for this mess. He has to mop up a big blob of jelly on top of it I could get evicted."

Lola slipped into her dress like a snake unshedding its skin, and when she smiled at me, tears like little teeny tiny clear marbles rolled down her cheeks.

"Listen Mike, I have to go."

"Down the hall, third door to the right. There's probably no paper."

"No, I mean home. I'll never forget how you helped me, but we both know it wouldn't work."

"Because you're rich and smart and beautiful, and I'm poor and stupid and ugly?"

"Exactly. But if I ever need a private dick again, I promise I'll give you a jingle."

"You should probably call first to make sure I'm here."

Kissing Lola hard on the mouth, I copped a quick feel and goosed her one last time. I knew I'd never see her again. My heart felt as raw as my roscoe. Here was the classiest dish I'd ever meet, and in another minute she'd be history and I'd be left with nothing but a slimy floor and my memories.

"Hey, how about next week?" I called after her as she headed for the elevator. "The Three Musketeers?"

"Sure, hon. I'll get a sitter and phone Cynthia."

"Love ya, babe. See you at home."

I watched her stylish chassis glide down the hallway like a Rolls Royce on a silver cloud, and I thought, If ever a broad could keep a marriage from going stale after fourteen years, that one could.

