

# ***“LIGHTNING NEVER STRIKES TWICE”***

**BY  
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Her perfume entered the room before she did. The scent assaulted my nostrils in a way that had been foreign to my senses since that rather dubious Turkish massage parlour I wandered into on a case some months back. Silhouetted against the hallway light was a shape that would need rotating every hour to let the sand run through.

‘Are you George Bolt, the private investigator?’ Her voice held the poise of a performer and the purr of a cheetah.

‘Like it says on the door, sugar,’ I replied confidently and then realised from her confused expression it hadn’t yet been stencilled on - I had only recently rented the office.

Looking down at the client’s chair over a nose Michelangelo would have been proud to have carved, she elected to remain standing. Her face was strobe lit by the red neon glow from the sign hanging outside my window on the wall of the hotel next door. It was then I understood why her figure had looked so revealing in the silhouette – she was wearing a black laced one-piece that would get you arrested anywhere in this city but on stage. Matching stockings,

suspenders and high-heels completed her costume. A raincoat hung loosely over her arm. This dame was every condemned man's last request.

'You have something on your chin,' she said.

I wiped away the drool and dusted down the client's chair.

'Thank you,' she said, delicately crossing her legs as she sat.

I walked back behind my desk and sank into the large battered red leather chair.

'It once belonged to a dentist,' I explained, noticing her look of curiosity. 'The hand grips are worn through, but the rest is okay.'

She pulled a lace handkerchief from her small handbag and dabbed at her eyes. Her tears were not of laughter and I felt a pang of guilt at my levity.

'Aren't you a little under-dressed for strolling through the city at six in the evening?' I offered.

'I left the theatre in a hurry, I...'

She dabbed at her eyes a second time.

'Okay, how can I help you, Miss...?'

'Sparkle. *Mrs* Nancy Sparkle.'

She pulled a creased 8x6 from her handbag. The picture was of a distinguished looking man in his late twenties or early thirties. He was dressed in a black costume, including top-hat and cape. The cape was decorated with a variety of stars. The man looked vaguely familiar.

'This is my husband,' she said. 'His stage name is The Great Caruso. Have you heard of him?'

I hadn't, but I wanted to make her feel better.

‘Sure, sugar. He’s a magician, right?’

She smiled and my heart melted like a Hershey Bar in the desert sun. Almost immediately her smile dropped again and I dived to catch it.

‘He produces white rabbits from a hat and saws you in half... but each half is so beautiful he can’t decide on which to keep so he puts you back together again. Am I right?’

She ignored my compliment.

‘He’s disappeared,’ she said urgently.

‘Disappeared? When?’

‘This afternoon... on stage... during the final act of our matinee performance.’

‘What? You mean while you were performing?’

‘Yes. He does this trick where he shows the audience a large cabinet... both inside and out... and then he gets in. I shut the door, spin the cabinet around a couple of times and then tap on it with his wand. When I open the door, the cabinet is empty.’

I stared back open-mouthed waiting for her to finish. After a short pause I realised she had finished.

‘Well, isn’t that what’s meant to happen?’ I chuckled.

‘Of course it is!’ she replied indignantly. ‘It’s the last trick of the act, but he is supposed to come out from stage left and take the applause before the curtain falls... only this time he didn’t.’

‘Have you reported it to the police?’

‘Yes, but they say he’s probably out getting drunk somewhere... or

something like that... and said I was to call back tomorrow if he doesn't come home.'

The cops were as blunt as my pen knife, but they were probably right.

'Okay, listen,' I said resignedly. 'Give me the name of the theatre and your home address too. I'll have a snoop around – no charge. In the meantime, you go home and see if he turns up. I'll pop by later and if I feel it needs investigating further we'll discuss the fee then.'

The Hermes Theatre was a small establishment a couple of blocks from my office in Midtown Manhattan. The manager was an old army buddy of mine named Tony Marino. When I got there the front entrance was locked so I made my way to the stage door around the side of the building.

'Where's Tony?' I asked the old caretaker who was stooped over just inside the doorway.

'Downstairs.'

I noticed the caretaker's position wasn't down to a back condition.

'What're you doing?' I asked hesitantly.

'Cleaning up after them goddamned rabbits. These ain't raisins I'm sweeping up here, buster.'

His windpipe whistled like a balmy night breeze through the rafters of an old house. I caught the smell of cheap booze as I dodged round him and called out for Tony. He emerged from a dressing room holding a white rabbit by its ears.

'That magician's fired when he finally turns up. This is the sixty sixth of

these bastards I've scooped up in the last couple of hours. They've been eating my stage back there!

'Must be a helluva top hat they climbed out of,' I quipped.

Tony threw me a look that slapped me across the chops.

'That dumb broad of his hire you, Lightning?'

'She's worried about her husband.'

'Aw, he'll be out on the booze again. He'll turn up... and when he does I'm going to take the damage his goddamn rodents have made out of his wages.'

'Where's the cabinet he used in this afternoon's act?'

'Still on stage, if these rabbits haven't eaten it already.'

'Mind if I take a look?'

'Go ahead,' Tony said, shrugging as he dumped the rabbit into a wicker basket on top of a number of its cousins.

I walked up the steps and onto the stage. The old caretaker was now up there too, chasing dust with a long-handled broom causing him to sneeze.

I inspected the cabinet. It looked every inch the magician's stage-prop and was neatly positioned over the deception for his vanishing act.

The trap door was closed.

'How do I get underneath?' I asked the caretaker.

'Out the back of the stage and down the stairs,' he crackled, whilst wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

The wooden steps were as steady as a rope bridge in a force ten gale and I held my breath as I descended. At the bottom I fumbled for the light switch. In the middle of a large room filled with stage props I saw the device The Great

Caruso must have used to descend from the stage. I had a quick look around but found no clues, so I left and walked along the narrow corridor back to the magician's dressing room.

Tony emerged flicking through a stack of dollar bills.

'Find anything?' he asked.

I shook my head as I passed him and entered the small cramped room. I caught my reflection in the mirror flanked by a line of light bulbs. The mirror was cracked and I felt an icy chill slither up my spine as a shape moved behind me.

'He must have taken his things,' croaked the caretaker.

I tried not to show he'd startled me and pretended my shocked lurch was because I'd slipped on some more rabbit droppings.

'Few more here to sweep up old man,' I said nonchalantly.

The caretaker got down on his knees and began brushing the droppings into a dustpan.

'Did you see him after he came off stage?' I asked.

'Nope.'

'He just disappeared, huh?' I pondered.

'Looks like the matinee crowd got their money's worth don't it?' was the caretaker's deadpan response.

It was at that very moment the answer to the mystery came to me.

After a quick phone call, I took a cab downtown to Nancy Sparkle's apartment.

Having tipped the driver – I suggested a horse in the 3:30 at Saratoga – I walked toward the crumbling brownstone building. Two young boys were sat across the top of the steps.

‘Whad’ya want mister?’ squealed one of the snot-noses tossing a baseball into his gloved hand.

I spun them each a dime and they moved aside excitedly.

The building was the kind of place even the rats would vacate. It was hard to tell whether the rot was holding the wood together or breaking it apart. I took the stairs to the first floor and knocked on the door of Nancy’s apartment hoping it wouldn’t splinter or fall off its hinges.

‘Who is it?’ Nancy called out.

‘Bolt.’

‘Just a minute.’

I heard the rustling of papers and the hasty re-arranging of furniture. A few seconds later a key turned in the lock and the door creaked unhappily open.

Nancy Sparkle was wrapped in a silk robe that took no prisoners. She dragged deeply on her cigarette and blew smoke up at the stained ceiling.

I walked past her and scanned the room. I could see the papers she must have bundled together poking out from under the cushion of a threadbare armchair.

‘Nice place,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t go lighting any more matches around here if I were you though.’

‘Everyone’s struggling to make ends meet... it’s not just us,’ she replied defensively.

I couldn’t dispute her answer. The war had certainly taken its toll.

‘Put something on, sugar, we’re going for a ride.’

‘Where too?’ she asked hesitantly.

‘You’ll see,’ I replied mysteriously.

Her nervous expression told me what I needed to know. Reluctantly she sashayed into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

I immediately went for the armchair and pulled out the papers. Flicking through them I ticked off all the questions in my head with the answers I had been expecting. I smiled in self-congratulation and walked over to the phone and dialled a number I knew well.

‘Lieutenant O’Hara,’ answered an Irish accent as thick as its owner.

‘Pete, this is Bolt. I’m ready for you now.’

Nancy emerged from the bedroom just as I put the phone down. She was startled to see the papers lying on the chair.

‘The game’s up, sugar.’ I said pointing my service pistol at her impressive chest.

She caught my gaze. ‘Maybe we can come to some arrangement,’ she smouldered and started to unbutton her blouse.

‘Put the goodies away, sugar. The only arrangement you’ll be making is with the DA. Now sit down.’

She sat on the couch and slowly crossed her legs, showing more than enough stocking in a further attempt to tempt me. I shook away the jolt of desire that burned in my stomach.

‘You didn’t need to hide those insurance documents,’ I said. ‘I’d figured this out before I got here.’

‘Figured what?’ she challenged.

‘The Great Caruso.’ I tossed it out like a hand grenade. ‘There was something familiar about the photograph you showed me. I checked and your magic act has been running for a year. But before the war it was known as the Great Mantini for two years... and before that The Great Soretto for eighteen months. Need I go on?’

Nancy looked startled. ‘How can you know all this within the space of a couple of hours?’

‘An army buddy of mine – Max Palermo – confessed to me once as we chewed the sand at Iwo Jima with Japanese grenades were going off all around us. Max was a qualified magician – he used to do these neat card tricks for the guys all the time. Anyway, we both thought we were going to buy it out there and decided to confess our sins to each other. I told him of the time I stole a bag of wheat from Corelli’s Consumables. I didn’t know there was a hole in the bag and Corelli followed the trail of grain all the way to my parents’ bedsit. They beat the crap out of me for it.

‘Max topped that easily. He told me about this scam where he and his wife set up a magic act, only one of the tricks would go wrong. He’d be decapitated by the guillotine or his assistant – his wife – would really be sawn in half. The insurance would pay out on the spouse’s identification of the body. In each case the body was some draft dodger or hooker.

‘Max also told me how the girl he married was this dynamite young blonde – some fantastic make-up artist. It was you, Nancy? Or should I call you Marsha?’

She flushed at the use of her real name.

‘I spoke to another buddy of mine... this time on the force at NYPD – Lieutenant Pete O’Hara. A man’s body was found in an alleyway two blocks from the theatre. The face was battered beyond recognition but he was wearing a magician’s cape and an inscribed wedding band on his finger.’

‘But hiring me was where your luck ran out, sugar. Max wasn’t to know you would run into an old pal of his in your attempt to authenticate your story. It took me a while to realise where I had seen that face in the photograph before. You did a good job with the make-up.’

Nancy nervously rummaged for another cigarette.

There was a knock at the door.

‘It’s open, Pete,’ I called out.

The bulky frame of Lieutenant Pete O’Hara entered the room followed by a shorter patrolman. Handcuffed to the patrolman was the old caretaker from the theatre.

I walked over to the caretaker.

‘Hello, Max,’ I said confidently.

I pulled at his obviously fake grey thatch.

It didn’t move.

The hair was real.

As was the disgusting moustache and the wheezing windpipe.

‘Don’t move,’ said Nancy.

She was now standing with a silver .22 in her hand instead of the cigarette she had suckered me into believing she was retrieving from her bag.

‘I don’t get it,’ I said.

‘Drop the gun, Lightning.’ This voice was deeper... and male. It held a familiar Italian accent.

Stood in the doorway was Tony Marino.

I let my gun fall to the floor and stood to one side next to Pete, the patrolman and the caretaker.

‘Come on honey,’ Tony said to Nancy.

She ran past us and into Tony’s arms.

‘Let’s get out of here, Tony,’ she urged.

‘Wait for me downstairs, honey.’

‘It’s too late to run now, Tony,’ I said. ‘You’ll have to kill us.’

My companions shuffled uneasily.

‘Shut up, Lightning,’ said Tony. ‘And turn around... all of you!’

Slowly each of us began to turn. The patrolman and the caretaker got into a tangle as their handcuffs forced them to turn into each other. Tony was momentarily distracted and I saw my chance.

I dived for my gun and in one swift, twisting movement fired at Tony. The blast reverberated around the small room like a cannon. The cockroaches ducked for cover as the bullet hit Tony full in the chest and he dropped to his knees. He tried to raise his arm in an attempt to shoot back, but Pete O’Hara kicked it aside and the revolver spun away across the floor.

I nodded my gratitude to Pete and got to my feet.

‘I see where you got your moniker, Lightning,’ said Pete.

‘Well, it wasn’t for my technique in the bedroom,’ I replied.

Nancy ran back into the room from the hallway. She screamed when she saw Tony's body lying on the floor – a pool of blood seeping into the worn carpet like ink into blotting paper.

I grabbed Nancy around the waist to pull her back and Pete cuffed her wrists together.

'It's over, sugar,' I said.

'So the body we found really was Max Palermo,' said Pete, shaking his head. It was all clear to me now.

'Yes, Pete. Nancy came to me because she knew Max had told me the story on that Pacific beach. You see Nancy had fallen for Romeo on the floor there. What better way to trick us into thinking this was just another of Max's scams than use me. She double-crossed her own husband. Tony killed Max and they planned to kill me too and then fly off to Mexico and collect on the insurance. The tickets are over there on the chair with the insurance papers.'

'Well, I'll be a leprechaun's uncle,' said Pete scratching his head.

The patrolman released the caretaker and led Nancy out to the squad car. Pete called for the meat wagon and I nodded to him on my way out.

Once outside I pulled up the collar of my raincoat to beat away the chilly evening breeze. I tugged at the brim of my hat and buried my hands deep into my pockets. The same two snot-noses were sat across the steps blocking my way. They looked up at me expectantly.

'Sorry kids,' I said stepping over them. 'Lightning never strikes in the same place twice.'

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