

“FORK LIGHTNING”

BY
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It was a cold January night and I was propping up one end of the bar in a seedy joint in Lower Manhattan whilst an unshaven, smelly boozehound slumped over the other like a discarded towel. Aside from the weasel of a bartender, he was my only other companion. I flicked my empty glass at the weasel and he poured me another slug of bourbon.

‘Got the time, mac?’ I asked.

The bartender nodded over to a battered old station clock hanging precariously from a rusty nail. It had just gone eight and my mystery client was now officially late.

Well, he could go to hell.

I was in no mood for games and was contemplating splitting when a blast of cold air announced a new arrival. I looked over my shoulder and fixed my eyes on a real looker. Her long coat was fastened tightly around a waist I could wrap my arm round twice. She took off her hat and shook loose a mane of dazzling

red hair that would have ignited a barn. Her hazel eyes caught mine taking an uninvited tour of her contours. She scowled at me as if I was the scruffy brother of the boozehound at the other end of the bar. She breezed past and sat elegantly at a table in the far corner facing the door.

I called over the weasel.

‘One for the lady.’

‘What’ll it be, lady?’ he called over to her.

‘Pardon me?’

‘Gentleman here says he wants to buy you a drink.’

‘Nothing,’ she said through a nose that looked like it had been lifted by a golf-pro, adding as an afterthought, ‘thank you.’

The weasel shrugged.

Not one to concede defeat, I had set myself to go over and see if I could defrost Lady Ice when the door opened again. This time I recognized the heavy footsteps and turned to look at two contrasting products of mother Ireland. The first was a tall lump of well-chiseled granite – Lieutenant Pete O’Hara. The second was his wraith-like and intellectually challenged sidekick, Detective Shaun Kelly.

‘Well, well,’ said O’Hara, ‘look who’s here, Kelly.’

‘Ain’t this joint a bit up-market for you, Bolt?’ sniggered Kelly.

I gave them my best sarcastic smile. ‘I was in the neighbourhood and heard there was a vaudeville act on tonight. Two Irish nancies dancing a pirouette.’

Kelly’s smile turned to a frown.

‘Why don’t you wait in the car, Shaun,’ said O’Hara, ‘whilst me and

Lightning here have us a little chat.'

After Kelly had reluctantly retreated out into the cold, O'Hara climbed on the stool next to me. It groaned in protest.

'Is this a social call, Pete, or are you and Einstein out there touring the Gin Mills?'

'Actually, I just finished putting a stiff into a meat wagon. He had a hole in his head the size of a golf ball, Funny thing is he had nothing from which we could get an ID.'

I made to get my coat. 'Well this is very interesting, Pete, but...'

O'Hara grabbed my arm. 'Hear me out, Lightning. I haven't got to the best part yet.'

I put my coat down and glanced over at the girl but her eyes remained fixed on the door. 'Cut to the chase, Pete. I've got better things I could be doing on a Friday night.'

'I can see that.' O'Hara had followed my gaze. He handed me a slip of paper. It was stained with blood, but I could make out the handwriting:

*Lafferty's Bar,
Delancey & Orchard,
Friday, 8pm.*

I handed the paper back to O'Hara. 'So?'

'So, it's just gone eight and look who we find here looking like he's waiting on someone,' he screwed his eyes into a tight stare. 'Well, Lightning, did you

have a meeting planned?’

I shook my head. ‘Just stopped by for a winter warmer on my way home, Pete. Now if you’ll...’

The hand stopped me again.

‘What makes you so sure it was me he was supposed to be meeting. I’m not the only sucker in here.’

O’Hara surveyed the room. The weasel was polishing glasses. The bum at the end of the bar was snoring into his forearm. The broad was rummaging through her handbag.

‘What about her,’ I said, gesturing at the girl. ‘Looks like she’s waiting on someone.’

O’Hara’s eyes narrowed as he looked across at the girl. She had been listening and flushed at his sudden attention.

‘What about it, lady? You waiting on anybody?’

‘No,’ she said, shaking her head nervously. She got up and started to make her way to the door.

‘Hey, where you going?’ called O’Hara.

‘I’m sorry but I have to go,’ she said and once more the door swung open letting in another blast of cold air.

‘You have a wonderful way with women, Pete.’

‘Aah, she was just a pro looking for action. Now are you going to level with me, Lightning?’

‘Nothing to level with you about, Pete.’

I picked up my coat again. This time O’Hara made no attempt to stop me and

I left him scratching his head as I made my way out. I flicked a casual finger at Kelly as I passed on my way to my Dodge.

The truth was I didn't have anything to give O'Hara. All I had was an anonymous message to my answering service requesting a meeting. I picked the venue – Lafferty's was close to home – and my service called the client back to confirm. That was it. The whole thing explained in a couple of sentences. If I'd given this to O'Hara it would lead to more trouble than I was prepared for – especially without a retainer.

So, I headed home trying not to wonder, or care, whether O'Hara's stiff and my anonymous client were one and the same.

All that changed the next morning.

At ten-thirty I opened the door to my office and immediately knew I was not alone. I immediately recognised the arousing scent.

'One of us is in the wrong office,' I said.

My red-headed visitor stepped out from the shadows. 'I need to speak with you, Mr. Bolt.'

'You didn't seem too keen to make my acquaintance last night.'

'It was only after that I realised...'

'Realised what, lady?'

'I'm sorry. It appears I was wrong.' She said abruptly and made to leave.

'Now wait a minute,' I said grabbing her arm. 'You've got some explaining to do, lady.'

She stared at my hand, so I let go and gestured to the client chair. Reluctantly she sat and I propped myself against the front of my desk.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘let’s start from the beginning.’

‘I assumed you were there to meet me.’

‘Why?’

‘Charles said he was arranging for secure transport out of the city. I was to meet him at that bar at eight.’

‘And when Charles didn’t show and the police did, you decided to make your excuses...’

She nodded. ‘And then it occurred to me that maybe Charles had asked our escort to meet us there too.’

‘And that led you to me?’

‘Well, the phone directory led me to you. Those policemen were free with your name, Mr. Bolt. That rather dreary lightning motif on your ad and signage was confirmation.’

I frowned at her critique of my marketing skills and nodded at the looseness of her hair. ‘You used your hairpin on my lock.’

She nodded, whilst self-consciously re-clipping her hair. ‘You *were* meeting Charles, weren’t you, Mr. Bolt?’

‘The truth is I don’t know who I was meeting. My client left no name.’

‘But you *were* supposed to be meeting someone at that bar at eight?’

I nodded.

‘Then it *must* have been Charles.’

‘If that’s the case, Mrs...’

‘Miss,’ she corrected. ‘Miss Susan Powell.’

‘Well, if that’s the case, Miss Powell, then Charles is almost certainly lying in the city morgue.’

She gasped at my statement and suddenly burst into tears. Chalk one up to Mr. Subtle. I offered her the handkerchief from my jacket pocket. She looked at it suspiciously.

‘It’s clean,’ I assured her.

She took it and wiped back her tears then blew her nose before offering it back.

‘Keep it,’ I said and after a couple of awkward minutes, she composed herself and straightened her tight-fitting skirt. ‘Tell me about Charles.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘His full name for openers.’

‘Charles Sturridge. He runs a rare-books store on South Street. First editions, that sort of thing.’

‘Don’t tell me. You’re Sturridge’s assistant and he fell head over heels for you. He was leaving his wife and the pair of you planned to run away together.’

‘You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you Mr. Bolt?’

‘I have my moments. Now, what else were you running from?’

She did not reply.

‘Illegal, huh?’

‘Certainly not,’ she said indignantly.

‘Okay, tell me why a book dealer ends up on the receiving end of a bullet from a professional killer?’ The single shot to the head suggested this was no

mugging.

‘You’re the detective, Mr. Bolt. You tell me.’

‘Why haven’t you gone to the police?’

She flushed at the question. ‘I... I can’t.’

I sighed deeply. ‘I’m sorry, I can’t help you.’

Her expression dissolved into one of desperation and helplessness. She opened her handbag and handed me a wad of sawbucks.

‘A thousand dollars for your help and protection.’

‘That’s a pretty tempting offer, Miss Powell.’

‘I want you to get me away from them.’

‘Them?’

She reached into her handbag again and pulled out a blue embossed hardback book and placed it on my desk. It was obviously very old. I studied the title on the cover.

The
ADVENTURES
OF
TOM SAWYER

‘Mark Twain,’ I said, hoping to impress her with my literary knowledge, ‘I studied the book at school.’

‘It’s a first edition – the 1876 original. In other words it’s a rarity of extreme value, Mr. Bolt.’

‘I don’t get the connection.’

‘Charles was selling it.’

‘I still don’t get it.’

‘There are collectors who would kill to own this book.’

‘Why didn’t Sturridge just sell the book to the highest bidder and be done with it?’

‘That’s just it, Mr. Bolt. He did. He held a private auction and made enough for us to live on for the rest of our lives.’

‘But you still have the book.’

She paused, waiting for me to catch up. The clanging sound I heard was that of a falling penny.

‘He switched books,’ I said.

She nodded. ‘Charles substituted the original with a counterfeit copy – a very good copy. They must have found out and...’

‘What do you intend to do next?’

‘Offer you the job you were hired to do, Mr. Bolt. Get me – and the book – out of the city. I’ll take my chances in another state. Find a new buyer.’

I shook my head.

‘What’s the problem?’ she asked frowning.

‘It’s against the law.’

‘The police wouldn’t know. How could they?’

‘They may *look* slow, Miss Powell, but they catch on eventually.’

‘Please, I’ll make it worth your while.’ The way she brushed her hand down her thigh left me in no doubt as to what she had in mind.

‘Put the goods away, Miss Powell.’ At least those were the words I thought I heard myself saying. I considered deliberately for a moment then wrote an address on a piece of paper and handed it to her. ‘Meet me there at midnight.’

She nodded and folded the paper.

‘Have you got somewhere to lie low until then?’

She shook her head, so I scribbled another address down for her.

‘In that case there’s a hotel on the next block, East 55th Street. It’s run by a friend of mine. Give him my name. And don’t use your own.’

Her perfume lingered long after she left and I absorbed the aroma as I consulted my files then made two phone calls.

The address I’d given Susan Powell was a pier, from which a jetty extended out into the Hudson River. I arrived early and turned off the ignition to my Dodge then sat back and waited.

At just before midnight a cab pulled up and a perfect set of pins planted their feet onto the asphalt. Susan Powell paid the driver and the taxi dissolved into the night leaving a lingering plume of exhaust fumes. I flicked the headlights on and off and she walked hurriedly towards my car. She was carrying a large bag – presumably a few clothes, some money and the book. I got out of the car, took the bag from her and put it in the trunk.

‘Let’s go,’ she said urgently.

I grabbed her arm.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Change of plan,’ I said.

She yanked her arm free and made for the trunk. I pulled her back, more roughly than I had intended and she twisted into me. Her face was a matter of inches from mine. At that moment I wanted to kiss her. But instead, with more than a little self-restraint, I pushed her away.

‘Get in the car.’ I said opening the passenger door. ‘Wait there.’

She got in and folded her arms angrily.

I walked back round to the trunk, opened her bag and began searching through her clothes. No sign of the book, but underneath was a stack of dough large enough to make a banker smile wider than a Cheshire Cat. I flicked through some of the bundles - there was close to a hundred large. I tossed them back into the bag and closed the trunk.

‘Where’s the book?’ I said pulling open the passenger door.

‘Never mind the book,’ she said, then urging me. ‘Come on, we need to go.’

I shook my head but found myself staring down the barrel of a bean-shooter.

‘Put the gun away, lady.’

I think I heard the pop first, or did I see the flash. Whichever, it was the pain in my left arm and the warm sensation of blood trickling from the ends of my fingers that stole my attention after I hit the ground. The engine of my car started and I pushed myself up to see the Dodge lurch forward into the darkness.

Suddenly, there was a blinding light, which I hoped wasn’t the gates of St. Peter opening to welcome me. I heard the roar of more engines being fired up and made out two pairs of headlights emerging from the glare as if being brought into focus by some kind of lens. The cars bore down on my Dodge,

which swerved to the left to avoid them.

It was the wrong move.

It seemed like some kind of nightmare being played out in slow motion as I watched my car lurch off the pier and into the dark gloom of the Hudson. The engine hissed a final breath as it descended into the inky blackness.

I forced myself to my feet and watched until someone started playing spinning tops with the dockyard and I fell to the floor clutching at my arm. I blinked my eyes for focus only to find them home in on the roughly chiseled features of Lieutenant Pete O'Hara.

'Hello, Pete. Glad you could make the party,' I said, before passing out.

A few days later, I sat in Pete O'Hara's office nursing my arm in a sling. The medics had got the bullet out and ballistics confirmed it as a match to the one retrieved from Charles Sturridge's skull.

'They've pulled your car from the drink along with the broad, a H&R .22 Special and a hundred large in soaked Benjamins,' said O'Hara.

'Did they try turning the engine?'

O'Hara threw me a look. 'Just how did you figure the dame for the killer?'

'The oldest motive in the book, Pete.'

'Money?'

'Jealousy... and the money. In the final shake-up Sturridge couldn't leave his wife. The money didn't come from the sale of any rare book; it was withdrawn from his personal bank account. His life savings and retirement plan. She stiffed

Sturridge when she found out he couldn't go through with it then cleared his wallet and ID to buy herself time. But she missed the scrap of paper in his trouser pocket. She made their meeting to see who, if anyone, Sturridge had lined up as escort. You alerted her to me, so she had to find out how much I knew. She broke into my office to look for any clues that would tie me to Sturridge... and, therefore, to her. When she found nothing she concocted this story about a first edition *Tom Sawyer* and the double-cross. But it was all a lie. There are no first editions and any collector worth his salt would know that. I checked with a pal of mine in the trade.'

'So, she intended using you as the fall guy to get her out of town.'

'When she was prepared to throw her body into the bargaining pot, I got suspicious...'

'...and called us,' said O'Hara, scratching his head then shaking it in disbelief. 'You sure got lucky on this one, Lightning.'

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow. I gestured at my arm. 'You kidding me? A bullet in the arm? Lucky?'

'Yeah,' chuckled O'Hara, 'sure you did. As long as you kept up your insurance payments, you'll get yourself a nice new car to replace that battered wreck we fished out of the river.'

'Insurance payments?'

My heart sank deeper than my Dodge.