

The Mean Streets of Chicago

Trevor Hughes

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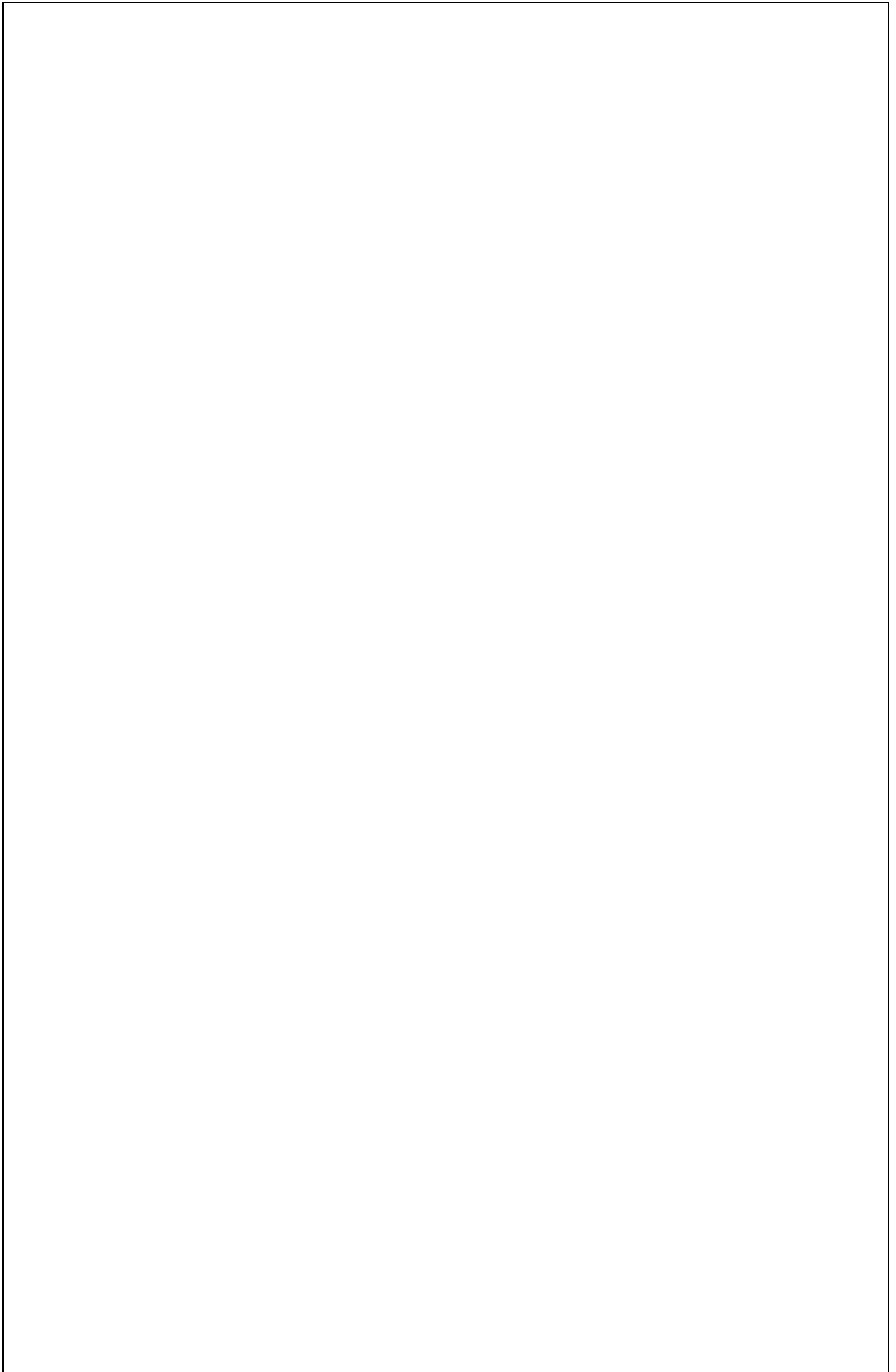
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For Karl

One of the good guys.



Chapter One

Chicago, November 1956

Jake Fist stood in the darkness of the alleyway. He'd been careless. Careless and stupid. And in his business careless and stupid was generally followed by dead.

It was the kind of night when the stars lose interest in trying to pierce the layer of smog lying like a blanket on the thick, still air. The cheap girls and crooks and hoods and the husbands cheating their wives sweltered and sweated in the alleys and the backstreets and the low-down dives; the women lying in dingy motel rooms with guys they weren't supposed to be with told their guilty consciences that a girl has to look somewhere for a little affection; the drunks told themselves it was one last drink, the junkies swore it was one last fix, the working girls promised themselves it was one final trick, and over it all not a breath of wind blew through the mean streets of the Windy City.

It had been just a couple of hours ago that he'd pulled his Chevy over to the sidewalk, flicked away his cigarette butt and leaned on the doorbell of his great-aunt Pauline.

"This is Suzie," he said, "and I need you to look after her for a few days. And no-one, repeat no-one knows she's here."

"Yes, Jake, of course," she replied. "She's a lot prettier

than the last one, Jake, dear," and Suzie had given him that woman's look: the one you get when they think you've been foolin' with one of their girlfriends. It was then Jake had looked at Suzie, and he'd felt something he thought had gone away a long time ago. Which was maybe why he'd decided to drop into Joe's.

Now he was stuck in a stinking back alley with Bruno Scarletti standing in front of him.

"How many times we gotta tell you, Fist? How many times before you start to listen?"

Jake shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I don't hear too good these days."

"Always the same, always the wise guy. Jake, Jake, how many wisecracks you gonna make when you're dead? You think dyin's gonna make you into a comedian?"

Scarletti shook his head sadly. "You could have been a good boy, Jake. What made you think you could go up against me? I'm sorry about Tanya, but that's the way it goes. And ever since then you been living in a bottle."

The feeble street lamp at the end of the alley was throwing just enough light so that Jake could make out the kicked-over trash-cans and the broken bottles and the rats and the guns in the hands of Scarletti's hoods

"You shouldn't have killed Willie, Jake."

"The Weasel? Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Sorry I wasted three slugs on him. I should've put my foot on him and stomped him out."

"There you go again, Jake, bein' the wise guy. I'm sorry, I can't help you this time."

Scarletti's eyes showed no trace of emotion in the darkness. "OK, boys," he said. "Let's get it done."

Manchester, September 2005

That's the thing about clichés. They're called clichés because everyone uses them all the time, and everyone uses them all the time because they are mostly true. Like: it always rains in Manchester.

The rain was falling in opaque sheets as I parked the car in the open-air car-park and walked, cold wet and miserable to my office through the sodden streets. I waved to the four naked models in the window, unlocked the door and walked up the stairs. I unlocked the office door, hung up my raincoat and wondered how the hell I was supposed to get through the day.

I filled the electric kettle, switched it on and went back down the stairs to check my mailbox. Nothing. Then I checked the answering machine for phone messages. None. Finally I booted up the computer and checked for e-mails. There weren't any.

I put coffee and powdered milk into a mug, sat at my desk and stared gloomily at the faded gold lettering on the rain-streaked window of my office. I had bought the stick-on letters myself, and spent half a day applying them carefully to the glass in a half-crescent exactly like those on Sam Spade's office window in *The Maltese Falcon*.

The letters spelt:

TOM COLLINS

PRIVATE DETECTIVE

I don't think my parents realized they'd named me after a cocktail. Maybe that's why I'm probably the only private eye in the history of the world who doesn't really drink. And as for being a private detective, well I wondered if they could prosecute me under the Trades Descriptions Act.

I picked up the file on my desk and read through the case notes.

Name: Arthur Golightly.

Age: 41.

Address: 17 Brickford Terrace, Worsley.

Problem: Wife keeps winning at bingo.

I don't have much in the way of office furniture. Frankly I don't have much in the way of an office, but I do have a small round table where I can sit and talk to my clients. Not that I have many of them, either. That's where, on the previous Friday I had interviewed Arthur Golightly.

"It's not right, you see," he said. "Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it? I mean, once in a while, you'd expect that, me being a fair-minded sort of bloke and all - but every time? It just doesn't make sense."

It appeared that every Monday and Thursday Arthur's wife, Agnes went off to bingo with her mother. And won. Every single time. Sometimes just twenty or thirty quid, others fifty or sixty and on one special occasion, a hundred and twenty pounds. "She must have hit the jackpot," said Arthur, gloomily. "Not that she's mean or anything; she always slips me a fiver. But every single bleedin' time? It's not normal, is it?"

Now I don't play bingo but I had to agree it did sound unusual. It also seemed unusual that she'd a) tell him about

it, and b) shell out part of the proceeds, but we detectives are a tactful lot so I kept that to myself.

Arthur had given me a photograph of Agnes. Blood-red lipstick. Bottle blonde. Not bad-looking if you liked them as tough as a dinosaur steak. Or did I detect a sense of humour hidden somewhere behind those dark-mascaraed eyes?

I looked at my watch. Two hours before I could even go for lunch. I picked up the cold, unappealing remains of my coffee and wondered again how on earth I had ever allowed myself to be talked into becoming a detective

In Chicago, private eyes are called in by the cops in the morning and asked to help solve six baffling murders. They then have four Martinis for lunch before being dragged off to bed by a Dangerous Dame and probably her sister as well.

They roar around the mean streets in a cherry-red Chevy convertible with a gun in one hand and a bottle of bourbon in the other; shoot a couple of bad guys; discover it's the Dangerous Dame and her sister committing all the murders then wander down to Joe's for half a dozen nightcaps.

Unfortunately that's not how it works in Manchester. My professional life generally involves taking surreptitious snaps of half-dressed women in the back seats of large cars their owners can't afford or wandering the mean streets in search of a missing poodle attempting to discover whether in Cheetham Hill they've stolen it, or in Chinatown they've eaten it.

I gazed through the window at the dark, heavy storm-clouds. Why, I pondered gloomily, couldn't it happen for real just once in the miserable existence of a Manchester private eye?

The minute she walked in he knew it was trouble. Trouble from the top of her pretty little hat to the painted tips of her dainty toenails.

"You always greet your guests that way?" she asked, her scarlet lips drawing in smoke through her cigarette holder.

Reluctantly Jake Fist put down his gun. "It's my doctor," he said. "Said I should take better care of myself."

She looked around the office: the peeling wallpaper, the old threadbare carpet; the Chicago Gazette lying on the desk; the half-empty glass of whisky.

"You busy?" she asked.

Jake took his feet off the desk, stubbed his Lucky Strike into the ashtray.

"Not so you'd notice," he drawled like he didn't know exactly who she was, this babe posing in front of him like something out of a Hollywood movie.

"Take a seat," he said.

It was hot and airless in the room, the traffic noises sounding faintly from four floors below, the air conditioning wheezing and groaning like a terminal asthmatic. There were two beat-up old chairs facing Jake. She pulled out one of them, perched on it, blowing smoke, pretending she was tough and unconcerned, like she was the one in control. Those eyes stared at him. Eyes as hard as diamonds, tough as tensioned steel. Eyes that could kill you at ten paces he thought, or soften and melt you till you were pliable as a pussycat, make you drool like a fool. But there was something else in those eyes. It wasn't like he hadn't seen it before. This lady was scared: scared as hell.

He took out a new cigarette, tapped it on the box.

"Something I can help you with, Mrs Scarletti?" he said.

She dropped her ash lazily onto his desk. "It's my husband. I think he's trying to kill me."

Just once: was it too much to ask?

So tonight, on this dismal wet Monday instead of beating up bad guys, solving impossible crimes and fighting off hordes of Dangerous Dames, what I had to look forward to was using all my sharply honed detective skills to follow Agnes Golightly and her old mum through the back streets of Worsley in the pouring rain.

I looked again through the window. There didn't seem any hope of golf in this weather. Not that I have the faintest interest in golf but I had sent my sometime associate Wally Holden to check out a keen golfer called Mrs Masterson whose ever-loving husband suspected she was loving someone else as well as him. I just hoped Wally would keep his head down. I didn't want him beaten to death with a seven iron

I put my feet up on the desk and waited hopefully for a mysterious message on the computer, a husky female voice on the phone or some beautiful distressed woman to walk through my door.

It was a long wait.