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Police say murder
Location: basement
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Joe Diamond

The Private Eye

JOE DIAMOND TRUDGED UP THE stairs of his office building, fedora dangling from his hand. It had been a late night in his trusty Chevrolet, unused camera tossed on the passenger seat beside him. Damned stakeout. At the beginning of his career, he'd found them exciting, but now they just made him tired. If he wasn't careful, he'd end up like those old codgers down at Velma's, playing Euchre every morning and complaining about the price of a cuppa.

Light gleamed behind the frosted glass of his office door, and for a moment he stared at it blankly. After a few seconds, his tired mind connected the dots to Enid Phillips, his new secretary. She worked part-time at Doc Fern's new first floor practice, and the doc had recommended her in glowing terms. Joe had never had a secretary before – he'd always run a one-man show – but paperwork had never been his strong suit. Hopefully Enid would be able to dig him out of the hole during the two days a week she worked for him.

He entered the office to find her up to her elbows in case files. He could barely see her over the stacks; one tottered at the edge of the desk like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He grabbed it before it toppled. Her eyes met his, twinkling. She had a matronly figure, deep brown skin, and a smile that could light Arkham. Good thing, too: she'd need a sense of humor to wade through all this mess.

"Not a morning person, are you?" she teased, giving him a good once-over.

He shrugged as he hung his hat by the door.

"Late nights come with the job," he said.

"There's coffee," she offered. "You want me to pour you a cup, or should I just bring the whole pot and you can consume the manna right from the source?"

"Is both an option?"

She kept up a steady stream of teasing banter which only ended when he settled in at his desk with a cup of coffee, no milk and two sugars. Enid sat opposite him, primly smoothing her skirt over her knees before setting her legal pad on her lap.

"How's it going?" he asked, blowing on the steaming drink. "Some of my cases get pretty dark. If it's too much, you'll have to tell me."

"Honey, I've been alive long enough not to be shocked by anything people are capable of. Besides, I don't have to read all the gory details," she replied.

"Well, I used to consider myself unflappable too, but it turns out I can still be surprised."

"I'll take your word for it. To answer your question, I'm making progress on linking each case with your bank statements. Your books should be shipshape by the time I'm done. I already caught a few cases that may not have been fully invoiced. That stack there needs reviewing."

She pointed to a sheaf of files at his elbow. The coffee was cool enough now. He gulped it down with the speed of a man used to wolfing his food and drink on the run before opening the top folder and glancing inside.

"You won't find an invoice for this one," he said, shutting it and sliding it toward her. "I wrote it off as a favor to the Fairmonts. Best investment I ever made."

"Noted." She scribbled on her pad. "I'll add that to the file. Next?"

He opened the next file, revealing a close-up photograph of mangled human remains clipped to the top of a stack of papers. Hurriedly, he closed the file, hoping to avoid feminine hysterics, but Enid didn't even blink.

"Looks like that fellow had one heck of a bad day," she observed. "I have seven kids; I'm not afraid of a little blood. Besides, I've seen it already."

Impressed, he opened the file again, inspecting the contents. The body had been mangled beyond identification, features obliterated by churned flesh. The photograph was smudged, the background unclear. It was the sort of case that should have stuck with him, but he

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didn't remember a thing. Maybe he'd grown more callous than he'd realized.

He pushed the photo to the side to scan the page, hoping to stimulate his memory, but the paper was badly stained. Deep black blotches obscured most of the text, leaving nothing but scattered words and phrases. The remaining words were so truncated that they did little to jog his memory. "Victim was found... murder... basement... said that the... carved on the bo—"

Frustrated, he drummed his fingers on the desk. The entire case record was splattered with that unidentifiable gunk, rendering it useless. Was that ink? He sniffed at it, his nostrils filling with a yeasty scent that unsettled his guts. He tossed the file back onto the desk, breathing deeply through his nose like he did when faced with a particularly fragrant corpse. Eventually, his belly stopped heaving.

The file had opened upon landing, the papers scattered. Enid collected them with unflappable calm.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she observed.

"I don't remember this case," he said, his voice a little wobblier than he'd have liked. "How could I not recall... *that*?"

"You do have a lot to keep track of, but this one seems like it ought to stand out. You're not a tippler, are you? No judgment intended; my Reggie used to drink like a fish on a Saturday night, god bless his soul."

He shook his head, eyes still glued to that picture.

"Alcohol dulls the instincts," he replied.

She picked up the file to put the papers back inside and promptly froze.

"Hold on now. 66... I think that says Hill?" she said.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Where?"

She held out the file, pointing to a faint scribble on the back cover. He could barely make out his own cramped handwriting.

"66 Hill Street," he agreed. "Maybe I'll swing by over lunch. See if whatever's there jumpstarts my memory."

Although he did his best, the casual act didn't fool

Enid. After only a few days in his employ, she already had his number.

"Why don't you go now?" she suggested gently. "You won't be able to rest until you do."

66 HILL STREET WAS TUCKED AT THE EDGE of town near Miskatonic Park, but the only thing left on the lot was a building-sized hole in the ground. Joe knew this neighborhood had flooded during that catastrophic storm but hadn't realized how bad it had been. The block was deserted, its buildings demolished, leaving nothing but piles of rotten timber and debris in their wake. Whatever had stood at 66 Hill Street was long gone as were both its neighbors, foundations gaping like empty sockets after a trip to the dentist.

Joe banged a hand against the steering wheel in frustration. He supposed he could stop by the precinct – surely the cops would have records on the murder – but that sort of question didn't exactly inspire confidence. No, he had to figure this out on his own. There had to be something here that would trigger his memory.

The ground squelched as he picked his way across the churned yard, trying to reconstruct the





building in his mind. The jagged remains of a stump jutted from the ground where a large tree had shaded the building. Broken pavers suggested a front walkway leading to a house or small business judging by the dimensions of the foundation. But try as he might, he couldn't dredge up a mental image of the structure, and he was usually quite good at remembering case-related details.

As he neared the empty pit, a familiar yeasty smell assailed his nostrils, unsettling his stomach. He swallowed against the sudden gush of saliva at the back of his throat and took a closer look, but the stone walls of the basement were cloaked in darkness, their depths shadowed. He squinted into the deep black but failed to make anything out. The sun was choked by sullen gray clouds, but he still ought to be able to see something.

He dropped to his knees at the basement's edge, heedless of the water soaking his trousers. The scent was stronger here, coating the air like fumes from a gasoline can; his head swam as he inhaled. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, leaning down to rub the cloth against the edge of the wall. It came away coated with a damp and clinging black substance. Was that mold?

It smelled an awful lot like the gunk in his case folder. But that didn't make any sense; he hadn't written up the case paperwork here.

Maybe his mind was making connections that simply didn't exist. He took a closer look at the black and stinking growth. The scent filled his head, colors melting into gray. From somewhere distant, he heard himself mutter an oath he couldn't feel himself speak. Then he knew nothing.

WHEN HE SWAM BACK UP OUT OF THE depths of unconsciousness, he found himself on the soggy ground staring at a pair of sensible shoes beneath trousered legs. He followed them up to a suit much like his own, topped with a fedora similar to the one that had rolled off his head into the mud. He retrieved it as he sat up slowly.

"Give it a minute," said the figure in a surprisingly feminine voice. "Deep breaths."

The face beneath the hat brim was delicate. A woman with long blond hair, dressed in a very masculine suit. Her eyes were steely as she looked at the husk of the basement just a few feet away.

"What happened?" he asked, groggy.

"Spores," she said. "Got a light?"

He still wasn't thinking clearly, but his mother had raised him right. When a lady asked for a light, a gentleman complied. He fished a box of matches from his pocket, his hand trembling, and held it out to her. She snatched it as he clamored to his feet, still dazed. His suit was soaked, the jacket matted with gunk. He brushed at it for a minute before giving up the battle. It would need to be cleaned.

A whump drew his attention back to the ruined basement, where curls of acrid smoke began to climb into the sky. The young woman stood next to it, silhouetted by growing flames, his matchbox in her hands. As he watched, she dropped another lit match into the deep black pit.

"W-wait!" he stuttered. "You can't – that's the site of a murder investigation! At least I think it is..."

"I know," she responded calmly.

As he gaped, she pressed the box back into his hand, her touch gentle.

"I know this must be confusing," she said. "The mold messes with your mind. You've got to burn anything it touches. Including that suit, I'm afraid."

"But it's my favorite..."

"I can see why. Good tailoring is hard to come by. But you'll have more suits."

"I don't... what's..."

"Why don't you head back to the car? You'll feel better once you get some fresh air into you."

His jumbled brain thought that sounded like a grand idea. As he staggered toward the car, he shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. Maybe she was telling the truth. He was normally quick on the draw, but at that moment it felt like he was trying to think with a brain made out of steel wool. He sagged against the car door, gulping down pure, sweet oxygen.

Slowly, his faculties returned to him. He looked up to find the woman standing before him, eyebrows arched. Behind her, the basement belched out smoke. In the distance, he could hear sirens.

"You had better go before the fire brigade gets here," she suggested.

"You had better come with me. I have questions," he shot back.

"Let me head you off at the pass. My name is Ari Quinn. I guess you could say I'm a fellow investigator from out of town. You're Joe Diamond. If I had to guess, I'd say you're trying to put together the pieces of what happened in that basement."

"Damn straight I am. There was a murder, but..."

"But you don't remember. And you won't. That stuff plays with your mind. I wish I had more time to chat, but I've lost too much already. I've got places to be and things to burn."

"What about the murder?" he persisted.

"What murder? What evidence? Be warned; if you try writing down what you saw today, the spores will grow on them too. That's how it spreads – the knowledge itself is infectious."

He wanted to scoff at this, but all he could think about was that file on his desk and the sickening feeling he'd had when he held it. Deep down, he knew she spoke the truth.

"Fire," he said thoughtfully. "Burn it down."

"Before it spreads," she agreed.

He shook the matchbox, eliciting a satisfying rattle. The sirens drew closer, and she headed off down the street toward the park.

"How do I find you?" he called after her.

"You don't," she called back. "That's the thing about our job. Some cases you just never solve. Trust me; it bugs me as much as it does you."

A firetruck turned the corner onto Hill, siren blaring. He hesitated, looking at Miss Quinn's retreating figure, but he was out of time. He couldn't afford to be messed up with accusations of arson.

Besides, he had a file to burn.

