

All the Justice You Can Afford

by Atk. Butterfly

I could tell by the looks of the gal entering the office that she didn't have much to her name. She wasn't showing off half her assets just to be stylish. Not without art-toos, she wasn't. Even without hearing the first word from her to my secretary, a stylish bob working part-time so my regular secretary could have a day off, I knew the case had to involve a murder. Had it been theft, she certainly would have dressed to show her status so the official police would give her more than the time of day. Without a doubt in my mind, people would have left her alone if she was wealthy if only because most people were smart enough not to screw around with the rich. The wealthy could hurt you in too many ways.

Soon after, the bob knocked on the glass door to my office and nodded toward the woman. It stood to reason that he'd determined her case was worth hearing about. I nodded my own head in response and perked on a smile to adorn my otherwise drab private detective features. After all, I couldn't walk around with expensive art-toos on my face or chest if only because those might make me too noticeable. Of course, I'd put on a fake if the job called for undercover work.

"This is Ms. Susan Sheney. Her fiance was murdered."

I noticed that Susan didn't even bother to cop a caress on the bob's bare bottom. Consequently, I figured she was truly distraught over her loss even though it seemed unusual for someone not in the family to bring me a case. The majority of my cases or those of any other private dick, for that matter, were almost always paid for by a family member. However, the bob had brought her to me, so there had to be a way for her to pay for my services. "How about you sitting down and explaining the situation to me?"

She sat down on the easy chair nearest my desk. The seat gave a slight uplift to her knees and provided a view of more than I expected to see. She might not have been rich, but she could afford underwear. "Detective Slagel, my fiance, Harrison Bejus, was murdered. He's an orphan, so it's kind of fallen upon me to hire someone to bring his killer to justice."

Already, my desktop screen was crowding itself with information that the bob was transmitting to me about Harrison. I could see immediately that Harrison was at least rich enough that Susan could be accused of gold digging. He was old enough that he could have been accused of molesting a minor had he and Susan been together twenty years earlier. Of course, with his money the cops would have turned their heads the other way. Hell, they might have even leaned heavy on her parents to keep their mouths shut, though I'd doubt that as they'd have probably welcomed his attention toward her in hopes of snagging some riches for themselves.

At the same time, I could see that the police weren't interested simply because there was no one with power to make them show interest. Harrison simply had the misfortune to die without any powerful relatives still living. That might even have been why his killer went ahead with the plan to kill Harrison. The job was a remote killing. It was more than obvious that someone rich wanted Harrison dead and didn't want to be caught. Poor people almost always got caught because they couldn't afford Remote-Kill units and nearly always left some DNA trace of themselves on the crime scene. The police didn't really care if the poor killed each other off. Nor did the police interfere very often when two rich people went after each other. Then again, the wealthy rarely did so without using an RK unit since they didn't want to leave any DNA traces. Without positive evidence, such as DNA provided, the police usually couldn't solve a crime.

Still, armed with those few facts and what I knew about the system, I wasn't taking the case unless I could get paid. I have bills of my own to pay. "But you're not related to him, Ms. Sheney."

"I'm carrying Harrison's child. I'm speaking for a minor who can't demand his own rights yet. I

want Harrison's murderer brought to justice."

Even before her words were fully out of her mouth, a medical report was in view on my desk so that I could see that she was telling the truth. She was carrying Harrison's child, even though she was barely over a month pregnant and didn't show any signs as yet. It became even more clear why she hadn't fondled the bob when he was beside her even though I've seen a lot of married women cop a feel. I'm not sure what it is about bobs that make women want to fondle them, even though it was considered fashionable. Maybe it's because they view bobs as non-threatening in light of the bob-jobs that bobs go through in order to become bobs. As far as I'm concerned, there's simply no tax so high that I'd go through that or even the whole erasure process. "Well, ma'am, if you're willing to sign as the unborn child's legal guardian, I'll take the case."

I didn't bother explaining my rates to her. That was the bob's duty before bringing her inside my private office. As well, she was willing to sign. Somehow, I got the feeling that she'd have gladly signed in blood if it would make justice come any quicker. Though she was saddened by her loss, she was angry enough to control that and see to it that something was done. It was up to me to see that she got justice before Christmas rolled around in another week. At least she'd have that as a consolation present.

If nothing else, I like being a private detective. People generally don't mess with you unless they're trying to hide something or keep out of jail and suspect you're after them. As well, I like the greater freedom I have over the official cops since I don't need any warrants or special permission to view a crime scene or evidence. However, in this case, I already knew that the list of suspects would be short since only someone rich could afford to kill remotely. There wouldn't be any DNA to trace, so I'd have to discover the criminal's identity by use of logic and deduction. To do that, I'd have to conduct a number of interviews and go through the decedent's business and personal records. Of course, the bob would do the record review while I did the leg work. After all, I was good at such things which is partly why I became a private detective.

I reached Harrison's place of business after a short hover drive. As usual, I let the autopilot do the driving. I couldn't see any reason for me to bother when I could be taking note of my surroundings. One never knows when something one sees will be important later on. In fact, I almost failed to notice when the hover arrived because the touchdown was so gentle. It wasn't until I heard the seatbelt tone sounding off that I realized that I was at my destination. Before I left the hover, I rechecked the dashboard panel to see if the bob had dug up anything more for me.

It turned out that the bob had transmitted more data. Harrison's firm was holding its Christmas party at that very hour. If nothing else, I wouldn't be causing any business interruptions. I could only hope that everyone was present so I'd have an opportunity to speak with as many of his employees as possible.

Admittedly, there were a few more employees on hand than I expected to see. Usually a small business needs only two or three. Harrison's firm actually employed over two dozen and they were attempting to celebrate despite their obvious fears of losing their jobs because Harrison was dead. There was a chance that they'd be grateful to see me if only because I was representing the nearest living relative Harrison left behind. In all likelihood, they'd have jobs until Harrison's son reached adult status as the laws would prevent anyone from trying to take his inheritance before then.

I was actually proud to walk in among them in my suit with my gold private detective badge hanging from one pocket. Most of them immediately began to smile and became more cheerful upon noticing me. To a criminal, I was bad news. To them, I was the best present their Christmas would see that year. Several of the employees immediately walked over to greet

me. One even carried a drink from the table to offer me.

Of course, the first employees to reach me carefully examined my engraved badge to see that my face matched the image upon it. Upon seeing that I was who I claimed to be, they were ready to talk. One, a man wearing nothing more than party paint to make him look like a Christmas tree with ornaments, asked, "Are you here on behalf of our former employer, Mr. Bejus?"

"I am. Would you mind identifying yourself, sir?"

"I'm Clifton Jones, his private secretary," the man in paint replied.

"Then I'll want to speak with you at length. Right now, you'll want to see to it that I meet with the right employees who might know anything about a competitor, associate, or acquaintance with any reasons to kill Mr. Bejus."

Clifton snapped his fingers of his free hand to get everyone's attention. "Detective Slagel wants to interview our key personnel. Jennie, you go in first with Detective Slagel. As soon as she finishes, Detective, I'll have someone else lined up. Would you like something to eat while you use Mr. Bejus' office?"

Jennie turned out to be the Vice President in charge of product distribution. She was similarly attired like Clifton except she also wore some ribbon and was supposed to look like a wrapped Christmas present. Under other circumstances, I would have enjoyed unwrapping her right then and there, with or without an audience.

"Sorry I'm dressed this way, but we were trying to lift the morale of the other employees under these tragic circumstances. Usually I'm more conservative."

I could see just how much more conservative she was based upon the ID badge she produced when we entered what had been Harrison's private office. She wasn't a Vice President based solely upon the school she attended. It wasn't my place to offer comment on how she achieved her position. If she could do her job, then that was all that mattered. All I wanted to know was who she knew held a grudge against Harrison. Quite likely, Harrison had stepped upon some toes in business. That was inevitable. To be fair, she was probably the one who actually did the toe stepping, but he was the one who would be blamed. "Had any job offers since Harrison was murdered?"

"Well, I've sent out my resume, but I haven't had any offers yet. Then again, it's been only two days." I knew about her resume already. The Fedora I wore housed more than just my head. It also provided me with a data communication center that featured a holographic display before my eyes to present information as I needed it. "What firms have you beat out in the past month?"

"Just about everyone this past month. We had an unusually good fourth quarter this year." She flashed a smile and a bit of blush showed through the light body paint on her cheeks. I figured it was reasonable to regard her personal efforts as significantly responsible for their success. Clearly, someone feared that Harrison might repeat that success in the following month. Possibly even enough to consider murder. However, it just didn't sound like a strong enough motive to me. Even if Harrison's company did well, there was no way possible for his business to completely shut out the market by itself. The company figures that Jennie showed me moments later were enough to validate that conclusion. At best, Harrison held only one percent of the market. After all, Jennie could spread herself only so far.

Much as I appreciated Jennie's offer, I needed to get to the other employees so the interviews wouldn't last all day long. I sent her out to be unwrapped by someone else and soon was talking with Brad Overstreet, Vice President in charge of production. He was at least more sensibly dressed, if one was to ignore the silly party hat he wore along with his work clothes.

"There's not much to say. I came on board six months ago after Mr. Bejus heard about my work over at Zudmark. Told me I could do whatever I wanted if I could get our production line moving at top efficiency and quality. We reached the quality mark four months ago. We hit the efficiency target two months ago. Since then, he's seen to it that I had a fresh bob every month."

I reasoned that Brad was in good graces with the government, whether Brad was fully equipped or not. It was through the efforts of folks like Brad that we'd some day reach a relaxed rationing level.

Clifton next sent in Velvet Touch, the receptionist. She clearly didn't choose to wear anything, not that I blamed her, as her job probably depended upon creating a good first impression on prospective clients. Anyway, she certainly didn't look cold because of her lack of clothing. Then again, she'd had her entire skin modified so that it was like touching velvet. It was an inexpensive DNA procedure that the government permitted and even subsidized in order to alleviate the clothing shortage. Most likely, she had her name changed when she underwent the procedure. The same procedure became expensive only when specific artwork was desired on a limited area by the subject. It appeared that Velvet, however, had managed to do a reverse art-too on her chest with a safety laser. Since the velvet would soon re-grow, there wasn't anything illegal about what she did. Of course, she might have had the reverse art-too performed at a velvet recycling center, but it looked too good for what they produced in exchange.

"What would you like to know?" Velvet asked as she brushed back a few wisps of her hair from blocking her chest. It was apparent that she worked hard at displaying her assets.

"Basically the same things I've asked your coworkers. Who do you know with a motive to kill Mr. Bejus? Can you remember anyone he fought or argued with recently that went beyond the norm?"

"Well, he used to argue all the time with Jennie about sales and distribution. She didn't want to work the customers for a shoddy product that might not sell. Of course, that all changed when Brad came on board. Then Jennie didn't mind working her ass off."

"Aside from Jennie, what about arguments or fights with competitors or acquaintances?"

"Well, I know he had an argument with his girlfriend. He wanted to get Susan a beam job, but she wouldn't accept one. Hell, if I had someone willing to pay for me to have an expensive art-too from neck to thighs, I'd have said yes in a heartbeat."

I knew exactly what Velvet was talking about. Manipulating the individual cell structure with a laser in order to produce an art-too wasn't at all cheap. It was more expensive than DNA velveting. If Harrison was willing to underwrite an art-too that large, he had to really care about Susan. Just one look at an art-too that large would cause the official cops to fall over their own feet seeing to it that no one bothered Susan. It also sufficed as a no trespassing sign to every man alive who wanted to continue breathing. "Was there anyone else you're aware of?"

Velvet shook her beautiful locks, then brushed them away from her chest once more. There wasn't much more that she could tell me, so I let her leave.

When she left, Clifton sent in another worker. He was from the accounting department. Though I felt sorry for the guy, Mace had made his own choice in having his gender erased. He seemed proud of his non-taxable status and displayed it openly. Then again, most of them did so they could move to the front of lines and get the best bargains before those disappeared. I ignored the clearview pocket-pants and treated Mace like any other interview.

"You might want to check on some of our suppliers. Delta Vee wasn't at all happy with giving us a discount based upon our bulk purchase," Mace said.

"I'm not certain I understand."

"Well, it's like this. Almost everyone offers a bulk discount rate, but usually no one ever qualifies for it. We finally did this last quarter when Mr. Bejus decided to take a chance and order additional supplies. Besides Delta Vee, Unified Cargo wasn't happy, either. They had to ship the bulk at a discount, too. Both of them lost money on our purchases."

Things were shaping up to where it appeared that there was a financial angle after all. Even so, I knew that there was an easier way to deal with Harrison than killing him. It required only that the other companies adjust their rates. Then they wouldn't lose anything and things would return back to near normal and just about everyone would be happy. Harrison would have enjoyed his brief moment in the sun because he could brag about reaching the coveted bulk purchase status at least once in his life. Consequently, somewhere along the line, there had to be a better motive.

Before Mace left, he proudly showed me a picture of his family jewels that the government had provided him. Those were kept alive in a special lab as part of the nation's gene pool in case the general population was stricken by a disease that threatened to wipe out humanity. "They keep my royal scepter like that always. It never goes limp. You ought to consider donating yours for the benefit of humanity."

"I need all of my equipment in my job."

He paused for a moment, apparently deep in thought. Then he nodded. "Yeah, I guess you would in some situations. Not everyone wants money. Well, use it in good health then."

"I intend to. Tell Clifton to send in the next person."

Shatinia entered the office and dropped onto one of the couches as if she'd been in Harrison's office before. She didn't mind letting her short skirt ride up her thighs and expose some of her charms. Then again, most women didn't if they wanted to get someone richer interested in them. After all, the majority of them weren't afraid anymore of going to hell to burn for eternity, not since the major religions had all been exposed as more interested in making profits than saving souls. "You want to know who did Harrison in? I'd take a look at Edwina Carstairs. She wanted Harrison for herself."

Almost immediately, a small image of Edwina appeared just beneath the brim of my Fedora as my DCC isolated the name I heard and called up the information automatically. Using nothing more than eye movement, I focused the image until I had zoomed and panned across Edwina's entire body. It was evident that she was rich if only because her official public photo was full buff and she wore a beamer art-too on both her front and back. Just seeing her official photo indicated to me that she had a hover standing by constantly. I doubted if she ever had to worry about the weather since she could board her vehicle in a fully sheltered hover port. Even so, her hover probably carried a full set of clothes in case she decided to take a walk outside during inclement weather.

Of course, she probably wore a little something most of the time just to show off how rich she truly was, though I suspected that would be more for the value of any mystique she could create about herself. A few eye movements directed my DCC to give me additional, unofficial images of Edwina. Almost immediately, I discovered that I was right in guessing that she normally wore a little something.

Though I found the bob to be efficient, I still preferred the bobette who regularly worked as my secretary. After all, Ellie didn't mind a little on the side and couldn't get pregnant. Of course, in my business it wasn't really necessary for her to display some skin to attract customers for me, though she often did. Like myself, Ellie didn't adorn her body with any art-toos as there were instances where I sometimes called upon her to go undercover. Yeah, even meaning that way, too. Anyway, Ellie was at her workstation wearing her best birthday suit, though she could hardly look any better unless she was wearing me. "Interviewing Ms. Carstairs today?"

"I've got to do that sooner or later."

"Then you'd best do it sooner in case her day goes rotten."

I could sense that Ellie was right. If things proceeded in that direction, I'd make a better impression before everything hit. Already, information was accumulating about Ms. Carstairs that made her even more likely as a suspect. For one thing, the information that Ellie was transmitting to me indicated that Ms. Carstairs owned a remote killer unit. The only question remaining about the RK unit was whether it had been used.

Though I first sensed that Edwina didn't want to meet with me, she had little choice. It was either accept an interview or cast immediate suspicion upon herself. Of course, my senses screamed that she was a suspect, particularly as she met me appearing exactly like the image in her official public photo as I left my hover inside her home's sheltered hover port. She obviously wanted me to look longingly at her full beam art-too and follow its lines to where her assets beckoned.

Had she been rich enough to afford full neon art-toos, I probably would have surrendered, even though I still wasn't sure how people with those managed to get any sleep with their bodies constantly glowing in the dark. I'd heard that two people with neons could really light up a room once things got hot and heavy. The way I understood it was that the salts in perspiration caused the skin cells to produce extra electrical current. That powered up the neon and that, of course, spurred on the partner to more activity.

With that much understood, it was easy to figure out who in the holo-industry got their start in a neorn, which was just about everyone. Yeah, I know that people back in history didn't glow in the dark, but we ignore that when we watch a holo. Actually, I guess most of us watch the holos just to see the stars with the rainbow neons. I could go on and on talking about Candy Hart whose rainbow neons formed a heart, but there's probably no one alive who hasn't seen one of her brilliant performances.

"I understand you're here to interview me concerning Harrison's untimely death," Edwina said.

"That I am." I was already picking up signs about Edwina through my DCC that indicated she was nervous about something.

"I'm only too happy to cooperate. Would you mind joining me in my hot tub? It's time for my daily beauty soak and I hope it won't interfere with your business here. In fact, I'm rather surprised that you're so heavily dressed seeing as we're inside a comfort controlled climate."

My detective's instincts went off immediately. I knew she was trying to get me naked, but not because she wanted my body. She wanted me away from my DCC.

At the same time, I really didn't want to put myself further on the defensive as she was quite attractive and alluring. Thinking about rainbow neons only moments earlier had been the wrong thing to think about. Because of that, I was ready to shoot on the first offer. With both barrels shunted off, I could have accepted without the slightest fears of getting her pregnant. With her wealth to cover any taxes, she could have even asked me to flip the shunts off and play dangerously. Sure, I'd done that with a bobette, but I'd never tried that with a woman I knew could get pregnant. The truth was that I just couldn't afford the taxes the government would collect if I got a woman pregnant.

"I don't mind if you use your hot tub while I interview you."

She sidled up closer to me. One hand reached out for my belt. "Let me be a proper hostess and assist you in getting more comfortable."

Before I could switch off my belt, she had hold of the buckle. Instantly, she received a charge that zapped her backward onto her ass. For a moment, she sat on the floor shaking her head

as if to clear it. At the same time, I realized that I was even more inspired because of the slight odor of musk and electricity in the air.

"Let me help you back up." I reached down to her with one hand, but she refused to take hold of me.

"No thanks. What the hell hit me? Is that one of those defensive police belts?"

I nodded. "I'm sorry you got zapped. Had I known your intentions, I'd have turned it off."

She slowly stood up with a bit of unsteadiness. After all, the charge was meant to protect me from assault so I could perform my job. Otherwise, it might be too easy for someone to scare off an investigator. Edwina was lucky that she hadn't launched a remote killing unit at me, since the belt turned back force against its origin. Manufacturers weren't permitted to produce anything that the belts couldn't repel. In theory and by law, that is. I suspected that there were probably a few weapons out there available only to the ridiculously wealthy that couldn't be turned back by a belt. I'd heard rumors that the ultra rich often dressed up like the poor, though it didn't make sense to me why anyone would want to do that. Then again, if you've got the wealth to own defenses and weapons that no one else possesses, then I guess you can dress how you want and go where you want.

"I didn't mean to... Excuse me, I don't know what I'm saying. What were we talking about?"

"You were asking me to join you in your hot tub and trying to undress me. Now you tell me, what didn't you mean to do?"

She was still shaking her head slightly. "I'm sorry, but I don't even know what we're talking about now."

My DCC wasn't letting her off the hook so easily. She was lying deliberately and she wasn't injured. At worst, her bottom was bruised and part of her back art-too would be temporarily ruined by discoloration. I decided to push her hard, even if it meant threatening her. "Where's your RK? I know you own one."

Her eyes widened. In response, I swept my own eyes about in a signal to my DCC. A moment later, I knew that the RK was hovering behind and above me. Turning, I faced the RK. "You want to tell the truth now or do I have to run a molecule scan on your RK?"

"What's a molecule scan?" she asked.

"It's a new test that came out last year. It allows us to determine where an RK has been used within the last week based upon air molecules found clinging to it. The test was so simple, it's a wonder that the developers missed seeing it before. The victim's breath causes exhaled molecules to possess a static charge. Anything moving within a meter of someone picks up some of those molecules. It takes at least a week for the charge to wear off because RKs usually don't get handled like other objects. If someone were to knife another person, there'd be molecules from both of them on the knife. Then if someone else picked up the same knife a day later, the new molecules would displace most of those already there because the newer molecules would have more of a charge."

"You're lying. There's been no announcement about anything like that."

"I don't have to lie. My DCC is already giving me a readout on your RK. It was used to kill Mr. Bejus. His dying breath is on that RK. The only thing remaining for me to learn now is why you killed him."

"You're lying, you're lying, you're lying!" she screamed with her fists clenched on her hips.

"You killed him. Now come clean and it might not go so hard on you in court."

Her fists fell limply to her sides. Sobbing, she said, "He wanted to marry that poor bitch

because she was willing to bear him a child. He wasn't treating me like that just because I made him use his shunts. Well, she's welcome to him now that he can't create anything. I saw to that."

"He doesn't need to. She's already carrying his child." I felt like rubbing it in to cover the molecule scan bluff I ran as I fished out a set of handcuffs from one coat pocket. She was still slow in reacting when I reached out for her. The second stunning she received from my touch made it only too easy to cuff her behind her back. With her incapacitated, it was similarly easy to reach out and take control of the RK. I disarmed it and jammed it into a pocket. Then I shoved Edwina toward my hover.

Sure I was tempted to take advantage of Edwina on the way to the jail. However, I preferred having the funds deducted from her estate to which I was entitled. I'm not like some detectives who are in the business only for the sex. The way I see it, one of these days I'll have enough to close the shunts and really enjoy myself at my own expense with someone I love.

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