

*The sinister park prowler plays his murder game with a . . .*

# Sleuth Girl

**By Don George**

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THE stage props were perfect. Twilight settling like shopworn star dust over distant towers; clipped-winged mallards rafting on a shadowy pond; muted city sounds overtoning pastoral stillness; a lone park bench screened by fragrant bushes; a soft-throated girl . . .

Yet Detective Wilcy Whitaker was annoyed.

"Hey, call off this damned squirrel," he whispered huskily, shaking one bulging coat pocket until an inquisitive nose showed, then two bright eyes and a furry, reddish-brown head.

The girl sighed and stirred. She took a peanut from a paper bag. "Here, Red." The squirrel leaped from blue serge to flowered print. "You're jittery," she accused in an undertone. "On such a night."

"Damn right I'm jittery. Of all the dopey assignments, waiting for a killer to get the drop on you."

"Then that boy the other night died?"

"Yeah, and the girl's still hysterical."

"Do you think he'll find us here?"

The pride of the Twentieth Precinct hinged his thick red neck a point to port and eyed the rhododendrons cautiously.

"No sign. Maybe he's wise this is a plant."

"You'd better make it look real—Wilcy." She leaned closer until her hair obscured his view. "And lower that stage whisper. He's smart, the Prowler is."

"All right. Ease over then. But keep your lamps peeled. And don't park on my gat," he whispered fiercely.

He shifted his holster, then settled down and surveyed the close-up skyline of her profiled face regretfully.

"Jeez, if that guy wasn't waiting to horn in." He shook his craggy head, pushed his hat back off his brow. "It gets me how you ever made the force."

"Brains, mister, brains." She released the restive squirrel and smoothed her skirt. "But don't let that

scare you off. Duty's duty."

"Sh-h-h." He scanned the dim path, drew one square-toed boot underneath the seat in readiness.

"It's only Red."

Detective Whittaker glared at the darting shadow on the grass. "I'd like to drill the beast."

"Don't you dare," she flared, then guiltily resumed her careful undertone. "I've raised him since he was a pup."

"Why you brought it along beats me."

"Atmosphere. This pitching-woo act's got to look real, hasn't it? This is the third night and the Prowler doesn't tumble. Why?" She looked at Whittaker accusingly. "Corny technique, that's why. Here, Red, nuts!"

Red high-tailed up as Detective Whittaker scratched his slow-speed brain. "Why, damn it, you've been yapping duty, duty all the time. You high-heeled rookies give me a pain. Corny, eh? I'll show you."

The girl slid away and Detective Whittaker's hand descended heavily on the nuts which Red was about to claim.

"Ouch! You little devil!" Whittaker bellowed, past all discretion. "Bite me, will you? I'll bat your ears in."

"Don't!" The girl waved the peanut bag frantically. "I think—Oh-h-h!"

The ducks had long since bedded down. The distant street lights winked indifferently. The park was silent now . . . deadly silent. And the girl and the man, too. For directly in front of them a shape had loomed, indistinct, motionless.

"Hold it, tough guy, or you'll get bit again—with lead."

Detective Wilcy Whittaker held it.

"Now, sister, frisk him. Toss me his gun."

Whittaker's mind began to move again. "Whatdaya mean, gun? We're just looking at the scenery. Beat it. Scram!"



“Nuts,” said the intruder.

The girl tensed. “Look,” she urged, “if I give you his gun and my purse and—and rings, will you go?”

“You catch on fast, sister. I ain’t on the make like him. You streamlined dames oughta steer clear of made-over flatfeet.”

“Smart, eh, Prowler?”

“Naw, ya gave yourself away yelling like a traffic cop. Toss, kid.”

She withdrew Whittaker’s gun and tossed it to the path just beyond Red’s frisking tail.

“Now what?” Her jaw was tense.

“The bag. Not the paper one. The one with the dough. And don’t go monkeying with it.”

The girl gave up trying to extricate the pearl-handled persuader from her purse and tossed.

“Now the ice on your mitts.”

“Shall I throw them too?” Her voice was edged with strain. “They’re valuable.”

“Bring ‘em.”

SHE advanced carefully, removing an imitation Emerald ring from one hand, and then, transferring the peanut bag so clumsily that several peanuts spilled, tugging loose the nice glass diamond from the other.

“Slip ‘em in my pocket.”

She hesitated, spoke clearly and firmly. “Nuts.”

“Step on it!” His gun hand moved almost imperceptibly.

She stopped. Then, stepping back again, she leaped sideways suddenly, threw herself onto the grass and screamed.

“Get him, Wilcy! Get him!”

Detective Wilcy Whittaker pulled in his neck, hunched up his shoulders and launched his massive body even as he cursed her for a fool and himself for a bigger one.

Then, in midair, his small eyes bulged. The Prowler wasn’t throwing lead. The Prowler was dancing around on the path like a jitterbug. He was clutching his side as if he were shot. And his gun was gone!

Even as the blurred scene exploded in his brain, Detective Whittaker was living up to the Twentieth Precinct’s pride in him. He was smashing his quarry down with a bear-like paw, down and out. The bracelets did the rest.

“You’ve killed him. I’m sure you have,” the girl cried, crawling to the unconscious gunman and pawing at him.

“I hope so.” Detective Whittaker breathed heavily, half in conscious pride, half in anger. “And I’d like to wring your neck. What’s the idea, trying to get me plugged?” His voice rose another octave as he watched the girl. “Get away from his pockets! That’s our evidence in there.”

“It isn’t, it’s Red.”

“Huh?”

Detective Whittaker stared unbelievably at the inert ball of fur she held.

“You squashed . . . Oh, Wilcy, he’s alive!”

Wilcy Whittaker looked from the Prowler to the girl to the squirrel. He curried the back of his neck. “You long-haired cops sure have wrecked the force. Come on, we got to book this guy.” When she made no move, he raised his voice defensively. “Well, it got in the way, didn’t it? Just like you did when I was going to make the pinch.”

She stroked the soft red fur and sniffed scornfully. “You make the pinch!”

“I suppose you did it, rolling on the grass. Brains—hell.”

“Red helped.”

“Nuts.”

“Exactly. Nuts. I slipped some in the Prowler’s pocket with my rings.”