

PARNELL HALL



SCAM

A STANLEY HASTINGS MYSTERY

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Parnell Hall

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“I’M BEING SET UP.”

I stifled a grin. Cranston Pritchert was six foot six and skinny as a rail, and when he said he was being set up, all I could think of was a candlepin on a bowling lane. Since the gentleman seemed to be upset, I figured grinning would have been an inappropriate reaction, and if questioned I certainly would not have wanted to explain. I bit my lip, tried not to smile.

“Go on,” I said.

Cranston Pritchert opened his mouth. Closed it again. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“Begin at the end.”

He looked at me. “Huh?”

“If you’re having trouble telling your story, don’t bother. Start with the punch line. Why are you here?”

That invitation did not put Cranston Pritchert at his ease. Anything but. His lip curled up slightly. “Yes, that’s so clever, isn’t it?” he said. “Is that what you tell all your clients?”

It most certainly wasn’t. I don’t *have* any clients. At least not the kind Cranston Pritchert meant. See, I’m not the kind of private detective people immediately think of. The kind you see on TV. The kind who solve people’s problems by having fist fights and car chases and running around with flash blouses.

No, unfortunately, I’m the kind of private detective that exists in real life. The kind that does largely negligence work. I chase ambulance for the law firm of Rosenberg and Stone. That consists mainly of interviewing accident victims and taking pictures of their broken arms and legs, not mention the cracks in the sidewalk that tripped them.

I doubt if that would have impressed Cranston Pritchert much.

We were sitting in my office on West 47th Street, the one-room hole-in-the-wall affair with the sign STANLEY HASTINGS DETECTIVE AGENCY on the door. Cranston Pritchert had been waiting outside when I’d come by at nine o’clock to check the answering machine and pick up the mail. If he hadn’t been, he’d have missed me. I don’t hang out in the office much. By nine oh five I’d have been gone.

“All right, look,” I said. “We’re off on the wrong foot here. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve gotta go out on a case.”

Pritchert blinked. “You already *have* a case?”

“I do three or four cases a day.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not at all. Ninety percent of detective work is routine. My ten o’clock case is a hit-and-run. I take down all the pertinent information from the victim, turn it over to the lawyer, and I’m done.”

“What about finding the car?”

“That’s not my job.”

“What if the lawyer asked you to?”

“He won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because he can file suit without it. They don’t need to catch the driver. It’s like a no-fault situation. Even if they don’t know who did it, they can still sue.”

“I see.”

“Now, I told you all about my business. You wanna tell me about yours? If not, I gotta run.”

Cranston Pritchert stood up. He put up his hands, towered over me. “No, no,” he said. “Please

Even if you turn me down. Even if you can't take the case. I gotta talk to somebody. Won't you at least listen?"

"I'm perfectly willing to listen," I said. "You were just having trouble getting started and frankly I'm pressed for time."

"I understand," Pritchert said. "I'm sorry. I promise. I'm not going to waste any more of your time. Just hear me out."

"Fine," I said. "So, tell me. What's your problem?"

Pritchert dropped his hands to his sides. He pulled his chin in and stood there, stiff as a ramrod as if at attention, looking more than ever like a candlepin.

I looked at him, prayed he wouldn't say it again.

He did.

"I'm being set up."

EVENTUALLY I GOT THE STORY, but not before we'd gone around at least two more times. My question *Who's setting you up?* might have led to promising ground, but merely provoked the response *I don't know*. Similarly, *How are you being set up?* resulted in the deflection *I'm not sure*.

It was a while before I stumbled on the old faithful *Why don't you tell me what happened?* Which merely earned me a second helping of *I don't know where to begin*.

At which point I stood up, snapped shut my briefcase and headed for the door.

He stopped me, apologized, and I finally got the story.

"It's my company," he said, once we had both sat back down.

"Your company?"

"Yes. Philip Greenberg Investments."

"If it's your company, why is it named Philip Greenberg?"

He put up his hands. "No, no. It's not *my* company. It's the company I work for."

"What do you do for them?"

"I'm a vice-president."

"What does that entail?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What does your company do?"

"Oh. Just what it sounds like. Make investments. Buy and sell."

"On the stock market?"

"No. Not stocks. Properties. Businesses. Real estate. One of our strengths is we're rather diversified. Say we invest in a hotel. We might turn right around and sell it. We might renovate it and then sell it. We might rent it out. We might run it as a business. Or we might develop it as part of a chain. You see?"

Not at all. Business investments and real estate go right over my head. But it was probably not the time to say so.

"And you're the vice-president?" I said.

"Well, I'm *a* vice-president. Actually, there's two others."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Marty Rothstein and Kevin Dunbar."

"You have three vice-presidents?"

"That's right."

"Who's the president?"

"There is no president."

"Oh? So who runs the company?"

"The board of directors."

"And who is that?"

Cranston Pritchert nodded. "Exactly. That's just it." He ticked them off on his fingers. "There's me. Kevin. Marty. And the treasurer, Jack Jenkins. That's four. The fifth member was the chairman of the board. Philip Greenberg. He died last month."

"Oh?"

"Yes," Pritchert said. "And that's the whole problem. There's a proxy fight going on for control of the company. There's a stockholders meeting coming up. To vote in a new chairman of the board."

"Who are the stockholders?"

"The main ones are me, Kevin, and Marty."

“Didn’t Philip Greenberg own stock?”

~~“Yes, of course. It went to his granddaughter, Amy. Nearest living relative. But she has no interest in the company. She’s in her twenties. Playgirl. Could care less about business.”~~

“But she has the stock?”

“Yes.”

“A controlling interest?”

He frowned. “Not really controlling. Whoever she voted with would be in a powerful position. Still, it would take more proxies. If everyone ganged up against them—”

I put up my hands. “Fine,” I said. “So you’re a stockholder?”

“Yes.”

“As well as these other guys?”

“Kevin and Marty. That’s right.”

“And you all want to be chairman of the board?”

He frowned. “That’s putting it a little bluntly. This company is my future. I would like to control my future. I—”

I put up my hands again. Looked at my watch. “Please. I have to be in the Bronx by ten o’clock. The fact is, there’s a proxy fight going on, there’s a stockholders meeting, and they’re gonna vote in chairman of the board?”

“That’s right.”

“What has this got to do with you being set up?”

“That’s just it. I’m not sure.”

Before we went around again, I said, “Fine. Tell me about the incident that makes you think you’re being set up.”

He took a breath. “It was last week. Thursday night. After work. I went out for a drink.”

“With who?”

“Just by myself.”

“You usually drink alone?”

“You make it sound like a bad habit.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just trying to get the information. Do you normally go out with people from work?”

“No.”

“Then you, Marty, and Kevin aren’t close.”

“Well, not socially.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’m sorry I interrupted. Anyway, you went out for a drink?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“At a bar.”

“I figured that. Where’s the bar?”

“On Third Avenue.”

“Third Avenue and where?”

“65th Street.”

“Where’s work?”

“66th and Lex.”

“Uh-huh. So you went out to this bar and what happened?”

“Well, there was a girl there.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Young. Attractive. Anyway, we got to talking. And I wound up buying her a drink.”

"I see."

He frowned impatiently. "No, it wasn't like that."

"Like what?"

"Like what you're thinking. It was just very pleasant. We sat there talking and I wound up buying her a drink."

"What were you talking about?"

"Nothing in particular. Just talking."

"So?"

"So, anyway we had a couple of drinks and that's it."

"What do you mean, that's it?"

"That's all I remember."

"Oh?"

"Next thing I know, I'm sitting on the front steps of a brownstone and a guy's prodding me with his foot and telling me to move on."

"Where was this?"

"I'm not exactly sure. But not more than a few blocks away."

"What time was it?"

"About nine-thirty."

"Nine-thirty that night?"

"That's right."

"I take it the girl was gone?"

"Of course."

"I see. Mr. Pritchett, exactly what is it you want?"

"I want you to find the girl."

"Oh?"

"That's the only way I'm going to find out what happened."

"Why does it matter?"

"Are you kidding? With the proxy fight going on? Something like this is all it would take for me to lose everything."

"Uh-huh. So you want me to find this girl?"

"That's right."

"Okay. What's her name?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No."

"You didn't ask her name?"

"I did, but she didn't tell me."

"Why not?"

"I don't know why not. But it's one of the reasons I think something happened."

"How did she get away with not telling you her name?"

"She passed it off. Made a joke. Changed the subject. I don't know." He shook his head. Grimaced. "Women. I have trouble with women."

"So it seems."

"No, I mean relating. Even in business, women throw me. They don't think like me. You know?"

I took a breath. "Mr. Pritchert, I have an appointment."

"Right. Sorry." Pritchert blinked. Then he stuck out his chin. "No, I'm *not* sorry. All I said was she didn't tell me her name. Then *you* started arguing about it."

I exhaled. “Okay. Guilty. But the fact is, she didn’t tell. So you don’t know. Which makes her little harder to find. So tell me. What does she look like?”

“She’s about twenty-five. Blond hair. Short. Curly. Little turned-up nose. Blue eyes. Bright smile.” He frowned. “I’m not sure how tall she is—she was sitting on a stool. She was wearing a tan top and shorts. Red, the top was. She had large breasts. Very large. And a thin waist. A very attractive girl.”

“Uh-huh. Now this was last Thursday night?”

“That’s right.”

“Why’d you wait till now?”

“I wasn’t sure what to do. It took me a while to think it over.”

“Nothing happened to prompt your decision?”

“No. What could have?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“Well, nothing did.”

“Uh-huh. Now the girl—I take it you’ve never seen her before?”

“No.”

“You don’t have any idea who she is?”

“No.”

“It didn’t come up in conversation? You didn’t ask her what she did?”

“She didn’t talk about herself. It was all kidding. Small talk.”

“Uh-huh. What’s the name of the bar?”

“I don’t know.”

“What a surprise.”

His jaw came up. “Hey. I don’t like your attitude.”

“I’m sorry, but it would be nice to have *something* to go on. How am I going to find this bar?”

“It’s on the east side of Third Avenue. In the middle of the block. It has a yellow awning. You can’t miss it.”

“You’ve been there before?”

“Sure. Many times.”

“And you’ve never seen this girl?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? No.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“What do you mean?”

“It makes it look more like she was there just to meet you.”

“Exactly,” Pritchert said. “That’s exactly right. So you see. That proves it.”

He looked at me portentously, and I had the horrible feeling he was about to say it again.

He did.

“I’m being set up.”

“IT’S A SCAM.”

I blinked at Alice. “What?”

“Come on,” Alice said. “The whole thing’s fishy.”

“Fishy?”

“Sure. A guy goes into a bar, starts drinking with a girl, passes out, and wakes up on the street. I immediately concludes this has something to do with a proxy fight.”

“Not immediately. This happened last week.”

Alice rolled her eyes, turned back to what she was stirring on the stove. “That’s irrelevant. Or at least trivial. Never mind the speed at which he arrived at the conclusion, the fact is that he made the connection at all.”

“You’re saying there’s no connection?”

“I’m saying it sounds unlikely.”

“I agree. So why do you say it’s a scam?”

“That’s just the way it strikes me.”

I took a breath. “I’m sure it is. Would you mind sharing your thought process? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Alice tasted the sauce she was stirring, headed for the spice rack. “The proxy fight is bullshit,” Alice said. She selected a jar, turned back to the stove. “I’m not saying there isn’t one. There probably is. But it probably has nothing to do with the girl in the bar.”

“How is that a scam?”

“That’s not a scam. It has nothing to do with it.”

“Alice, you said it was a scam.”

“Yeah. But not that.”

“Then what?”

“The guy’s story.”

“I’m still not following you. Who’s pulling a scam on who?”

“He’s pulling a scam on you.”

“On me?”

“Sure.”

“Just how do you figure that?”

“He wants the girl.”

“Huh?”

“The guy wants the girl. That’s obvious. It’s the one thing we know for sure. He wants you to find the girl. All the rest of this stuff is just window dressing.”

I blinked. Off the wall as that sounded, I was not about to reject it out of hand.

You see, Alice is often right. Or at least she gives that impression. The truth is, my wife could anchor a national debate team. If she wanted to tell me black was white, I’d be hard pressed to argue.

Just as I was now.

“I’m still not following. What do you mean by window dressing?”

“Just that. The guy wants to find the girl. But he’s embarrassed to say so. So he invents a reason.”

“That sounds pretty stupid.”

“Men are not always totally logical when women are involved.”

While I groped for a comeback to that, Alice said, “So you went to this bar?”

“Yeah, but it was a washout.”

“Why?”

“The bartender wasn’t there.”

“The one who was on that night?”

“Right.”

“So when will he be on?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“You’ll go back then?”

“Sure.”

“So you figure you worked what today, an hour?”

“What?”

“On this case. You gonna bill him for an hour?”

“I wasn’t going to bill him at all.”

Alice turned away from the stove. “What, are you nuts? You went to the bar.”

“The guy I wanted to see wasn’t there.”

“So what?”

“So it’s not like I did anything.”

“You made the effort. What’s the guy want, a written guarantee?”

“No, but—”

“You say the guy’s not paying you by the day.”

“Right. Because I have other cases.”

“You could cancel them.”

“Huh.”

“The guy agreed to fifty bucks an hour, right? Isn’t that what you said? Well, Richard’s paying you twenty. Please correct me if I’m wrong, but you got a hundred and sixty dollar day working for Richard, or four hundred dollars working for him.”

“Your math is fine. I’m just not sure if finding this girl is a full-time job.”

“Well, you put in an hour already, right? Going to this bar.”

“I’m not sure I should bill him for it.”

“Right,” Alice said. “And do you know why?”

“I told you. Because I didn’t really do anything.”

“Don’t be silly,” Alice said. “That’s not why.”

I took a breath. “Okay,” I said. “Then *you* tell me why.”

“You’re afraid you won’t find her.”

“Huh?”

“You’re afraid you won’t find the girl. You’re afraid you can’t do it. In which case, you won’t want to bill him at all.”

“Oh.”

“Will you?”

I hated to admit it, but as usual Alice had put her finger right on it. That was *exactly* the case. My main problem with finding this girl for Cranston Pritchert was I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do it. Because, aside from talking to the bartender who was unlikely to be any help at all, there wasn’t much I could do.

While I hesitated, thinking this, Alice bored in, voicing my doubts. “You think the bartender will be any help?”

“I don’t know.”

“If he isn’t, what will you do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“The bartender’s your only real lead?”

~~“More or less.”~~

“So basically this guy hired you to interview the bartender?”

“That’s right.”

“Why can’t he do it himself?”

“Huh?”

“Why does he need you? Why doesn’t he go in there and ask the bartender himself?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you ask him?”

“Huh?”

“Did you ask him why he didn’t want to interview the bartender himself?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It didn’t occur to me.”

“Well, it’s occurred to you now. It might be a good idea to ask the gentleman.”

“It’s probably nothing, Alice. He’s probably just embarrassed.”

“Maybe so. But that in itself would be something. Fifty bucks an hour is pretty embarrassed.”

“You know, you’re making a lot of deductions from no facts at all.”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“No facts at all. Obviously this guy hasn’t told you everything.” Alice tasted the sauce, nodded her approval, switched off the burner. “Which lets you off the hook. You interview the bartender, report back to your client, and you’re done.”

Somehow that didn’t seem like a solution. “Then what?” I said.

Alice smiled. Shrugged.

“That’s up to him.”

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