

Mathew Price didn't know what to expect of his day. He had a 1:00 p.m. Monday afternoon appointment with Marcia Hart who was one of the senior partners in the law firm of Hart, Murphy & Dix. This morning she had called personally to ask if he would be available to meet with her. Price had availed his service to many of the law firms in Chicago, but never HM&D, so he was surprised when she called and just a tad bit curious why she had. So he instantly agreed to the meeting.

Price arrived early to the 30th floor of the Harrington Building where HM&D had offices. He had never known any attorney to be on time, so this gave him an opportunity to nose around. However, Marcia Hart was immediately available to receive him and that made Price all the more suspicious and inquisitive of his visit.

He had seen Marcia Hart on television and her picture in the newspaper, but never face to face. She was much more attractive in person. Never one to discount or hide her age, Marcia Hart was a proud sixty-year-old successful woman. Tall and athletically built with a mane of silver blond hair that gently touched the shoulders of her Armani dress.

Her office had a skyline view, and Price sat in a chair facing it. She graced the seat behind her desk a long glass top monstrosity with a large computer screen sitting in one corner. There were no visible drawers in the desk. Price wondered where she hid the bottle of tequila that she had a notorious liking. Marcia Hart got right down to business without a hint of ice breaking small talk. She didn't offer him coffee, water or to see her collection of Bonsai plants. She jumped right in.

"Did you hear the news about Judge Atwater?" She asked.

Her voice had a tinge of a New York accent. It sounded strange hearing that accent coming from the mouth of a Chicagoan. The two Cities had much in common; pizza, theater, and lousy winter weather, but accents were not one of those things.

"I heard that he died," Price answered.

"We want you to look into it for us."

"Why?" Price asked a little shocked to hear the request.

Atwater, a Federal appellate court judge, had died of natural causes. There was nothing to investigate. No indication of foul play was apparent, so no autopsy ordered and the judge was embalmed and prepared for burial. His body was on its way to the state capital where it would lay in state.

"We're skeptical that's all. Will you do it?"

"Skeptical?"

"That he died from natural causes. Judge Atwater was in excellent health."

She opened a folder and passed Price four photographs."

"Who gave these to you?" Price asked. The amateur pictures showed Judge Atwater's deathbed.

"Our clients have resources."

Price lifted his gaze away from the photographs.

“Our clients are confidential,” Marcia Hart said.

Price refocused his attention to the four pictures.

“I still don’t see it,” he said.

“Notice the pillow is beside him and not under his head.”

“Lots of people don’t sleep with a pillow.”

“Not the Judge he had allergies he always kept his head elevated.”

Marcia Hart leaned across the desk to pointed out the second photograph in Price’s left hand.

“Do you see the nightstand?” she asked. “Judge Atwater always read from his Bible before sleep. There is no Bible on the nightstand.”

“Maybe he forgot to pack it,” Price said.

“It was found on the floor next to the bed.”

“There was a struggle?”

“We believe so.”

“And that makes you think there was foul play.”

“That’s what we want you to find out.”

“Price stacked the photographs and handed them back to Marcia Hart.

“How many hours?” he asked.

“Twenty-five billable hours to start. After that, we’ll renegotiate. I’ll throw in a \$50.00 per diem to sweeten the pot.”

“I’ll need forty.”

“Fine. Judy at the desk out front will have your check. Call me when you have something.”

Marcia Hart slipped on a pair of eyeglasses then turned her attention to a client file that was on her desk.

Price stood, but stopped to ask, “Why me?”

Marcia Hart looked up over the rim of her glasses.

“I beg your pardon,” she said.

“Why did you call me in on this? Your firm has investigators, top notch ones on retainer so why call me?”

She put down her glasses and folded her hands on the desk.

“You have unique talents Mr. Price. Those abilities may come in handy. You also have friends that may know certain things about certain people, and that too may come in handy. Need I say more?”

“Those friends you speak of like to stay alive, so they like to stay invisible. You understand that don’t you?”

“Understood,” she agreed.

“Those friends also like to eat, and that means that they like to get rewarded for their information. You understand that too don’t you?”

“Yes, I know. Now if you will excuse me.”

Marcia Hart slipped her eyeglasses back on and gave Price a half smile that meant their conversation had ended.

2

“Do you think he’ll find what we suspect?” Adrian Murphy said to Marcia Hart. He had entered her office from the conference room through a side door.

Murphy was of medium height; five foot ten inches and fifty-five years old. He was bald, had a growing potbelly and preferred wearing cardigan sweaters around the office and not a suit coat.

“He’s good at what he does,” Marcia Hart said as they watched Price wait for the elevator. “If there’s something out there then he will find it.”

“I hear that he’s a bit of a loose cannon.”

“Show me a private investigator who isn’t.”

“I felt better capping him at twenty-five hours.”

“The extra hours certainly won’t bankrupt us. Besides, if Price finds the truth it will be well worth the investment.”

Murphy moved to the front of the desk and watched Price step into the elevator.

“He’s not much to look at is he?”

“You don’t approve?”

“He’s not my type is he yours?”

Marcia Hart pulled off her glasses.

“He is handsome in a rugged way,” she said. “I like the salt and pepper hair, but I’d redo his wardrobe. Jeans and a sportcoat went out of fashion years ago. And who wears cowboy boots in Chicago?”

Murphy turned from the door to face his partner.

“Now don’t you go dipping into the employee pool sweetheart. Remember what happened the last time you did that? We’re still paying that one off.”

Marcia Hart sucked on a fingertip and smiled.