

THE TROUBLE WITH MURDER

A Hetty Carson Mystery

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CHAPTER ONE

Somebody killed Gerry Delaney last week. I know I didn't do it, but the cop in my face wasn't so convinced.

Murder is a horrible crime, but Gerry Delaney's murder was beyond creepy. Whoever killed him chopped off his head and took it with him. I would not want to be Frankie Delaney when he came to work and found his brother's headless body the next morning. Word on the street was Gerry had it coming. I didn't know Gerry well enough to form an opinion about this. But based on general principles, I'd have to say nobody had *that* coming.

Why would I kill Gerry Delaney? I had nothing to gain by his death.

If I killed him, I'd never get him to buy the tequila mixers I sold. And logistically, how could I accomplish it? I wasn't great with a hacksaw or with an axe, and Gerry was a big man with a barrel chest. Some of his customers even called him, "Big Irish." As for me, I was a skinny woman, a smidgen under five-

foot-six. Not to be morbid, but Gerry would have had to agree to hold still while I did the deed. This must have been a gang-related murder. As in mafia, maybe?

“Okay. I’m going to ask you again,” Officer Ed Malone said. “What were you doing in Delaney’s bar, between one and two a.m. last Wednesday, the morning Gerry Delaney was murdered? Don’t deny it. We know you were there, Ms. Carson.”

“Officer, I’m not denying it. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“That’s because we found your business card on the bar.”

“I volunteered to come in. I want to help if I can. As I said, I was trying to interest Mr. Delaney in my line. He was on my route.”

Malone sneered. “And what line is that at two in the morning?”

I ignored the implication. I mean, really. If I was a hooker I could think of a better place to drum up business than at a dive bar in downtown L.A. A bar not far from Skid Row.

“It’s on my business card. Hetty Carson, Account Manager, Mendoza’s Tequila Mixers.”

I had another card in my wallet. But Hetty Carson, Private Investigator didn’t apply here, so I kept mum about it. If my PI business had made more money, I wouldn’t be in Malone’s office explaining why I was in a dive bar selling tequila mixers just before the owner got axed. And if my ex-husband hadn’t left me with an empty bank account, I wouldn’t have become a private investigator in the first place.

I had to get out of here, and not only because a police interrogation was a real downer for any morning of the week. I needed to get back on my sales route. Mendoza’s Tequila Mixers expected results. Javier Mendoza, the owner, didn’t take kindly to sales reps who couldn’t make their weekly sales quota. So I played the female card and flashed the cop a demure smile.

I know. Here I was annoyed he all but accused me of being a hooker, and now I was feeding into that. Okay, I wouldn't get the feminist-of-the-year award. I could live with that. Just get me out of here.

Malone's eyes softened. Maybe my charms had won him over, and he'd let me go already.

Instead, he glared at me. "Don't salespeople quit at five?" he said. "From what some of the customers told me, you've been in a lot and always late in the evening."

The look on Malone's face made it obvious he thought I was more hooker than sales rep. This time I liked it less, but I didn't let on.

"Salespeople have to be persistent. I work on commission. Mr. Delaney expressed some interest and said to come in before he closed, but he was always busy. So I'd hang around, waiting for a chance to talk to him. I finally did talk to him that night before the bar closed. It was an off night. He wasn't so busy."

"Did he buy from you?"

"He seemed almost ready to order this time. It takes four to five calls or more to make a sale. At least for me. I've only been at it for eight months."

Ed Malone wasn't bad looking, if you liked the simple, military type. I thought he was about forty. At first glance, and if I overlooked the fact that he was a jerk because he sure acted like one, maybe he was the type I should have gone for instead of Leland Ross, the Harvard-educated crook I married. I let that man fool me with a big house, a Mercedes, and a ton of designer clothes he paid for. Thank goodness for the clothes. The only things he didn't take when he disappeared. Some of them went for decent prices at resale shops.

Malone pointed to the form I signed. "Ms. Carson, is this your home address, or your work address?"

"It's my home address."

It didn't take much to read Malone's mind. I had kept some of those designer clothes for myself, and now he wondered why a woman dressed like me lived in a dumpy apartment on Maple, a street not known for residential housing and in the same neighborhood as his precinct. He had to know he worked in one of the least desirable areas of L.A.

But Malone didn't ask why I lived there. "Hetty Carson. Hetty? That's an unusual name," he said.

"It was Henrietta. I changed it, *legally*, to Hetty." And dropped the married name of Ross in my divorce proceedings, but no need to go into that with Malone.

See, Officer Malone, I'm a hundred percent legal, I wanted to scream but didn't.

"Am I free to go? I have to see about making some sales today." While I did feel horrible about Gerry's murder, I wasn't going to be intimidated by this cop. I knew I hadn't killed anybody, and Malone had taken too much of my time already.

"Yes, but don't leave the city," Malone said. "We may need to talk to you again."

"Sure. Didn't Delaney's have surveillance videos?"

"We're looking into it."

By his poker-faced expression, I figured the bar didn't have great security. Surprising for a dive bar. They made a lot of money. The drinks were cheaper than those in Beverly Hills, but so was the rent. You'd think in this digital age they'd have something.

Maybe they did, and Malone hoped to gage my reaction to being caught on camera. *Sorry to disappoint you, Officer Malone. I had nothing to do with this. I didn't even flirt with Delaney.*

I wasn't here on a PI case, so I left without trying to get more out of Malone. When I walked out, I realized I could have told him I was a private investigator. If I didn't, it might look

like I had something to hide if I got a case in the downtown area and he remembered me.

But I decided it wasn't worth it to enlighten Malone. His station was in the industrial, low-rise, low-rent part of downtown known as the Garment District. I wouldn't have too many clients here. Shopkeepers and factory owners in this area didn't have the kind of money to pay a private investigator if they needed one, the exception being my landlord. If Malone's precinct had included the courthouses and the fancy office buildings a few miles down the road, that would have been a different story.

Wouldn't you know it, as soon as I stepped out of the station, I saw Frankie Delaney walking in. He looked distraught. He was by himself, and he hurried past without noticing me. That was understandable. I didn't know him as well as I knew Gerry, which wasn't much at all. I thought Frankie was a co-owner of the bar, though I wasn't sure, since Gerry seemed to make all the decisions.

I'd been to Delaney's eight times. I was more persistent with Delaney's than with the other bars I solicited because Delaney's was the biggest bar on my route. They even served peanuts, something the other bars didn't. They had to be doing well to spend money on snacks for their customers. I knew if I kept at it, Gerry might give me a small order and it would grow from there.

But right then, I was glad Frankie didn't recognize me. I had no idea what to say to him. *Sorry about your brother. I didn't kill him.*

Frankie had been there every time I was in Delaney's. The first time I made a sales call there, I approached Frankie, and he directed me to Gerry, but he acknowledged me whenever I stopped in again. It was hard to miss a woman in a business suit and heels when the rest of the women there wore tank tops and jeans or revealing outfits.

He usually said, “You’re persistent, I’ll give you that.”

“Do you know if he liked the samples I left?” I once asked.

Frankie had shrugged. “You need to talk to Gerry.”

Of course, today was different. I still wore my business suit, but his brother had been murdered and he didn’t make the connection. I was not in a place he usually saw me.

Frankie was shorter than his brother, but he had the same red hair and green eyes. He looked younger and less robust than Gerry. Maybe that’s why Gerry dealt with the vendors, or maybe Frankie wasn’t involved in business decisions, other than to help out. I didn’t know what the deal was.

The interview with Malone and seeing Frankie got me trying to remember more about the last time I talked to Gerry, and who else had been in the bar then.

I had been so intent on getting an order from Gerry I didn’t pay much attention to the other people. For all I knew, Frankie killed him. I thought the two of them were arguing when I came in. They looked angry. But could Frankie overpower his big brother? If he had help, I suppose.

Then there was the gossip about Gerry. That he had it coming. That’s the buzz I heard in the nearby shops and in the other bars. It wasn’t my business, so I didn’t ask. I didn’t want my head whacked off for being nosy. But after Gerry’s murder I no longer made late night sales calls to any of the bars. Delaney’s murder might have been a one-off, but why take chances?

Someone told me Gerry had a wife, but she was never around when I was there. Was she in on the murder—with Frankie? Didn’t they always suspect the ones closest to the victim in most murder cases?

Except this didn’t seem like something family would do, regardless of how much resentment they may have had toward the victim. Maybe the wife was never there because Gerry had

his eye on that woman, the one who wore biker leather and had weird red hair.

He always seemed to look in her direction, though he may have been staring beyond her at the front door to see who came in. But I kind of thought he was looking at her because her hair was not the normal kind of red, but the candy apple red you saw on cars and trucks. The type that came in a bottle you might think of at Halloween. It was easy to spot her, even in the dim light of the bar. I called it supernatural red.

I was more critical than most about red hair. My own was a somewhat dull shade of reddish brown. I used to highlight it blonde when I had money. It cost a fortune where I had it done, but it made me look elegant and I didn't have to be bleached as often as going totally blonde.

Anyway, supernatural red liked sitting in the second seat around the bar, the one closest to the front door and not toward the back of the room. If I went to Delaney's at night, that's when I saw her. I never saw her during the day. The fifth time I was there at night was the last time I saw Gerry, and she was there. I never got a good look at her face, between that wild mane of hair she had, and the fact that she always looked down at her drink. She may not have intended to hide her face. I just didn't go in for a closer look. I wasn't there to spy on her. I noticed her only because of her hair.

There were other customers in the bar that night. I thought a few people at the small tables in the room looked up when I walked in. They didn't have waiters, so if you didn't sit at the bar you took your drink to a table. Sometimes Frankie cleaned up the tables after the people left. But most of the time Gerry did. He also wiped up the bar after each patron and mixed the drinks. Given how popular the place was, Delaney's seemed to have a thriving business.

I knew if I kept thinking about the last time I saw Gerry Delaney, something would come to me. And it did. There was

this guy who talked to me. He was a big man. Tall and filled out, not with fat but with muscle. He wore a dark leather cap and a thick gold chain around his neck. He had on a Hawaiian shirt and a white linen suit with bell-bottom trousers. His clothes made him look like he had stepped into a time machine and ended up here instead of at a disco bar in the 1970s. You know, when people wore that stuff.

Gerry was behind the bar, talking to some customers, when I noticed the bell-bottoms guy. I had motioned to Gerry earlier to let him know I was there. He said Tuesday wasn't a busy night, and I might talk to him then.

While I waited to speak to Gerry, I leaned against a wall on the side of the room so I had a view of him.

That's when the bell-bottoms guy came up to me. He glanced at my business suit and raised his eyebrows. "You look lost," he said.

I could have made the same comment about him. But I smiled. "I'm here on business. I sell tequila mixers. Just waiting for a chance to talk to the owner."

"Is that a reason I can't buy you a drink?"

"Thanks, but I'm not drinking tonight."

"A lady on a mission, are you?"

I smiled again. He wasn't bad looking, if I ignored his outfit. But getting hit on by someone in a dive bar wasn't what I pinned my hopes on.

I saw Gerry glance in my direction and figured this was my cue to speak to him. But before I made a move, Mr. Bell-bottoms beat me to it. He signaled Gerry and Gerry nodded back.

"Nice talking to you, ma'am," Mr. Bell-bottoms said as he hurried to Gerry.

Was he another sales rep? He seemed like he was on a mission too. I hoped after he talked to Gerry it would be my turn.

The bell-bottoms guy was on a mission all right. He tilted his head at Gerry, and then he and another man, whose back was to me, went into a room behind the bar. Several other men followed them into that room too. I wasn't at the right angle to see inside, and Gerry closed the door after them.

That may have been a banquet hall. I never saw people going in that door before, but then I was not there to observe customers. I was there to make a sale. I noticed it that night only because that bell-bottoms guy got to Gerry before I did.

I had heard rumors from other sales reps that some bars used secret rooms for illegal card games, and sometimes for more sordid activities. No one knew for sure, and we didn't ask. I figured that's why these men went into that room.

No big deal. I sold tequila mixers. I wasn't there to police the bars or to check out women with weird red hair.

But now I wondered if those men had something to do with Gerry Delaney's murder. And what about that supernatural redhead? Was she there alone? Delaney's wasn't the type of place I would hang out by myself. Though if I wore biker leather, maybe I would.

That redhead stuck in my memory. There was a good reason for that, though I didn't know it then.