

Detective Mullen in: The Chinese Identity

For GenderTension

By TheSpiralledEye

Chicago, 1932.

It all started with the murder of that Brightway girl. Pretty dame, legs as long as a highway and men would do anything to drive those roads all the way to the tunnel, if 'ya know what I mean. Never met her myself, at least not alive; she was one of those fancy types who wouldn't even notice an old gumshoe like me if we passed in the streets. It's a shame she hit her twenties right at the end of the decade, she'd have done well in the party scene ten years ago. And now she's dead, strangled by some sick bastard who left her body out in the open. Anybody with eyes and two days on the force can see one of the gangs is responsible. The kid probably got mixed up with one of the bootlegger boys thinking crime was all glamorous and found out the hard way it never ends well. Least not for most.

Chicago has always been a mean town and because of it, the people who lived there were meaner still. The Great Depression had not been kind to any of them and now the city's only masters were violence and crime; the only two partners who worked hand in hand without offing one another the moment they got the chance. The roaring twenties were done, leaving everybody out on their asses just in time for the gangs to take hold.

But I ain't no pansy, I was raised by these streets and whether people want to admit it or not, I'm the best detective to ever be thrown off the force for drinking on the job. My name's Dick Mullen and I take the cases the 'real' cops are too scared or stupid to solve and this is the story of how a simple murder turned into the strangest case Chicago has ever known.

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Mei Wei lifted her cigarette holder to her lips and drew in a long breath, holding the smoke in her lungs for a moment before breathing it out her nose. The Madam was standing on the street arguing with a white police officer again. Every week the same song and dance, didn't they ever get tired of it? Nobody turned to watch anymore, save Mei Wei and even then, it was because she had nothing better to do. Every week the officer would come by The Golden Serpent Boarding House and demand to see her records, the madam would argue back and forth until finally the right amount of bribe money was passed over, usually with the promise of a free night with one of the ladies of the house, and then he'd be on his way.

It was an open secret that Madam Zhao's boarding house was actually a bordello; everybody in Chinatown and the surrounding area knew it. But as far as the police were concerned, it was a halfway house for troubled young women with nowhere to go, like Mei Wei. The life of a prostitute in Chinatown was not a glamorous one, but it kept a roof over her head, food on her plate and meant she didn't need to worry about her broken English. Most of her clients were either Chinese or only here to get an 'exotic experience', sometimes she pretended to speak even less English than she did

just to make them feel better about themselves. An extra dollar tip here or there was worth her dignity in that regard.

Hands passed cash in the street below, the officer did not even attempt subtlety and why should he? If anybody saw the exchange, they would never be fool enough to report it. The officer, Mark she believed his name was, looked up at her and made a face, yelling something about her nose. Madam Zhao looked up at her in the window and sighed, saying something to officer mark in hushed tones before waving at her to go back inside.

“Quit being nosy girl, you’re making our client uncomfortable!”

“Yes ma’am.” Mei Wei shrugged, taking her cigarette from the holder, and stamping it out.

Madam Zhao was a good boss all things considered; she kept her rooms tidy, helped girls afford medicine when it was needed and didn’t let her clients slap them around too much. It was about as good as you could get, especially when you had nowhere else to go. Mei Wei looked around her small room, another luxury her line of work afforded her. The area contained only a bed, changing screen and box where she kept her meagre belongings. All of which were the clothes Madam Zhao was lending to her, for a fee of course.

It had been almost a month since that fateful night where she had stumbled into the streets of Chinatown with nothing but a faded trench coat, mumbling incoherently. That coat was the only clue she had to what had happened to her after arriving in America; her mind was fuzzy, all her memories had this strange gleam to them, like they were made of glass; they didn’t quite seem real. Fortunately, it had been another one of Madam Zhao’s girls, Min, who had found her and brought her back to the boarding house.

They bathed her and discovered that beneath all the grime of the city, there was a lovely body; with warm brown skin and jet-black hair with double lidded eyes. A beauty like her, Madam Zhao had informed Mei Wei, would do well in this line of work and lacking any better options, she had accepted.

She had come to America for a new life; adventure in the great wide world beyond her simple rural upbringing. She knew the laws; she knew there were far more men from her home country than women in America, there she might stand the chance of finding a good husband and a happy life, or at least stood a better chance than she did if she stayed in her tiny village and married a farm boy. But now, after her line of work, a farm boy would be a catch. No man wanted spoiled goods, especially not good that had been spoiled four or five times a night for months. At first, this had been a source of great shame for her; to use her body to make money as a common whore but as time went on that feeling faded. Sex, funnily enough, was fun when you had the right partner and she was sick of pretending otherwise.

She watched all those other women hold their noses up at her as they walked over to the factories and manual labour jobs which were the only other alternatives. They thought themselves so much better than she because they worked long, hard days as maids and seamstresses while she made more money lying on her back. It still stung a little, if she was honest but Mei Wei assumed that would fade in time as the shame had. Besides, for the first time in her life, she was *popular*.

The sound of footsteps on the stair caught her attention and a moment later Madam Zhao herself burst in with a frustrated look on her face.

“You just cost me an extra five dollars, girl!”

“Sorry ma’am.” Mei Wei replied awkwardly, “I was just bored you see and I wasn’t even really paying attention. I just wanted to smoke but then I saw you both and my eyes just fell onto you more or less –”

“Girl, be quiet.” Madam Zhao shook her head in disbelief.

“Oh right, sorry Ma’am, I just wanted to explain so you didn’t-”

“Quiet!” The older woman rolled her eyes, “I thought all you country girls were the quiet type. No wonder you couldn’t get a husband nattering on the way that you do.”

“I just have a lot to say.”

“Evidently. Well hopefully you can learn to use that mouth for something better tonight, you’ll be entertaining our dear officer. Free of charge, for a full hour.”

Mei Wei’s jaw dropped. An hour of free work! She opened her mouth to complain but a thick finger pressed against her lips.

“No more lip, that’s how much money you just cost me in extra bribes. You know we need to keep the police on our side here. If we close down there isn’t room anywhere else in Chinatown for girls like us and the white streets of Chicago will chew you up and spit you out in five seconds flat. Understand.”

She just nodded and Madam Zhao finally took her finger away and began rummaging through Mei Wei’s limited clothing. She tossed a cheongsam style dress through the air at her; it was made from cheaper material than normal and was probably bright red and gold at one point but had since faded. Most of the buttons were fake, for decoration only; it had been specially designed to be easy to remove and put back on with only the loosening of two or three ties. To any not in the know she would look like a well dressed Chinese woman, then once she was alone with her client she could easily shed the clothing like a snakeskin, work and put it back on. A perfect dress for working out of the bordello without raising suspicion.

“Wear that, if he asks you to go home with him, go.”

“And miss a whole nights pay?” Mei Wei cried.

“Count yourself lucky I am being lenient and for God’s sake girl, keep that mouth of yours in check!”

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Mei Wei smeared the red lipstick across her skin, having already used some of her precious charcoal to darken around her eyes. To others of her own culture, she likely looked ridiculous but in her short time here Mei Wei had learned to uphold the stereotypes when serving white men. It was easy money really, all she had to do was writhe and moan, pretending they were ‘so much bigger’ than Chinese fellows when really, there was rarely any difference. A knock at her door came right on time and she quickly put away her things and knelt down, eyes demurring on the floor before beckoning her client inside with exactly the kind of soft, submissive voice they expected.

Officer Mark walked in with an arrogant swagger and Mei Wei did her best to keep annoyance off her face; this man really thought he was so impressive. He spoke a few quick words in English she didn’t understand before repeating them, slowly and loudly. She recognised a few this time, ‘get up’ was in there so she rose to her feet. The man circled her, examining her body like a piece of meat before raising his hands to the ties on her dress and pulling them free. Mei Wei shivered from the sudden cold but let him think it was anticipation. Rough hands stroked the curve of her hips before rising up to cup her breasts; unlike many of her fellows, Mei Wei had been blessed with large curves which men all of all station seemed obsessed with for whatever reason. He pinched her nipples and a genuine gasp escaped her lips; even if she didn’t want to admit it, Mark did know how to touch a lady.

She let him trail his fingers along her dark olive skin, moaning when appropriate. At first it was just for show but to her horror, Mei Wei found the cop was actually turning her on, disgusting as he was. She was almost glad when he finally dragged her to the bed, she wanted to get this over with before she got too caught up in his touch. But to her dismay, he did not pin her down and enter her as expected. Instead, his hands found her hips and pinned her in place as his face moved between her legs. A genuine flush filled her cheeks and a real moan escaped as a tongue parted her folds.

“I love how you oriental bitches sound.” Mark growled before continuing to lap at her pussy.

Mei Wei hated how good it felt; she had learned to enjoy sex where and when she could in this job but the last thing she wanted was to have a man like Mark make her cum! She shuddered, quivering and squeezing her legs around his neck in fake orgasm in the hopes that would make him stop but if

anything, she began going harder, sucking at her clit and diving his tongue deeper into her hole. It was useless, she couldn't fight back anymore. She began to babble and beg as she always did when getting close; English and Chinese melting together in a mix of 'please' and 'more' until finally she began to crest. Swearing in her native tongue Mei Wei threw back her head and came, humiliated to feel a squirt of juice escape her as she did so.

Mark groaned, saying something she could not understand, climbing up her exhausted body and thrusting inside before she could ever catch her breath. After one strong orgasm already, she had no fight left and held him close, quivering as he finally came inside her, leaving Mei Wei exhausted and embarrassed at her own behaviour. Mark sat on the bed next to her, going so far as to pat her head patronisingly.

"That's quite the mouth you've got there, doll." He teased. "Next time, I'll see if you can suck as well as you talk."

Mei Wei bit back a retort and instead made her voice as sweet as possible while speaking in her broken English.

"Oh yes, very good mouth. I show you."

Like all men, he took the compliment and smile as genuine without a second thought. She regretted the offer immediately as he stood, half hard cock read for her. Mei Wei fought off an eyeroll and took him into her mouth, distracting herself by running her fingers down the jagged scar on his leg, focusing on how ugly it was rather than how nice and relaxed she felt after such an orgasm. Grateful he finished quickly she stood to clean herself off while he lounged on the bed.

"Was it hard to get passage to America, did you sell yourself like this?" He asked, it took her a moment to register what all those words meant but she shook her head, then furrowed her brow.

...How had she afforded passage to America? Her rural village was...where was it? The name of the province took some time to come to her head, Guangzhou, obviously, how could she almost forget her own province's name? She had hitch hiked with various trade carts to reach the port and then purchased a boat ticket last minute for a fraction of the usual cost. But how did she get the money?

"How. You. Come. America?" Mark repeated, obviously taking her silence for stupidity.

"Boat. Big boat." She replied, not really caring to elaborate, mostly because she was not sure she could.

“Oh well, you may be dumb but you’ve got a fantastic pussy.” Mark sighed, mostly to himself before turning and saying, “I ask Madam for you again. Tomorrow. Police station. You come. And bring a friend.”

“I come.” She repeated with a nod, trying her best to look eager.

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Mei Wei serviced another three men that night, but her mind was elsewhere. Nobody had cared to ask her about her past before, not even when she arrived at The Golden Serpent. Oh, they had asked what happened to her, if she had any family, all the usual things but her story of coming to America from a rural Chinese village had been enough. She had swiftly learnt that asking about prostitutes’ histories was a big taboo, since most of them had sad, dreary tales they had no desire to relive. But not that Mark had opened that door she found herself curious; that glassy, artificial feeling to her memories seemed more suspicious than ever and that blank period before stumbling into Chinatown ate at her.

The next night as she made her way to the police station the thoughts still plagued her mind even as she desperately tried to focus. As requested, she had bought Lin with her and they walked arm in arm, the other woman regarding her worriedly.

“Are you alright, Mei?” She asked, “You’ve barely spoken the entire walk here, normally I can’t get you to shut up.”

“I guess I am just thinking about my life.” Mei Wei replied, “It almost feels like everything that happened in my life before The Golden Serpent was a dream, like it wasn’t real. I think I want to solve the mystery of what happened to me that night you found me. I need to know why I forgot.”

“Yeah, there’s the chatty Mei I know.” Lin giggled, “Honey, honestly? It was probably some nasty business you are better off not knowing. Let it go and focus on giving these guys a good time, if we please them, maybe they’ll lower their bribes.”

She walked up the desk, letting Lin tell the duty officer that they needed to give an important statement to a detective and that they would likely be with him for a while.

“Yeah, I bet it will. Bet the statement is real private too, no disturbances allowed.” The man behind the desk chuckled, “Look forward to seeing you around, dolls.”

As they approached the door, Mei Wei could hear muffled voices through the door. Lin pressed her ear to the wood.

“They are arguing about somebody called ‘Mullen’.” She whispered, “Apparently he’s gone missing.”

“Mullen...” The word rolled off Mei Wei’s tongue awkwardly, there was something about it that struck a chord. Some flash of memory perhaps. She did not have much time to ruminate on it however and the door was flung open, barely giving Lin enough time to move out of the way.

The men exchanged a few more heated words before one of them, a man she did not recognise, noticed them. She watched his eyes look her up and down before sneering and walking past without so much as a tip of his hat.

“Lovely company he keeps.” Lin said in Chinese, keeping her face placid to hide the bite of her words, “Let’s get this fucker off and get back.”

Mei Wei nodded, hardening herself. She would not gain a single ounce of pleasure from this toad of a man again. She was almost tempted to make the sex bad just so he’d never come visit her again but that was out of the question; Madam Zhao would never forgive her.

Officer Mark was sitting with his legs up on the heavy wood desk, coated in files. He waved them in and made a big show of carefully stacking the papers to one side of the desk, talking with a deep baritone that told Mei Wei he was likely bragging.

“He’s telling us about his case, how he’s a very important and busy man.” Lin explained quietly, Mei Wei fought back an eye roll. Weren’t they all?

Eventually he walked over to them, smiling as Lin demurringly removed her Cheongsam.

“Clever seamstresses, you oriental girls are.” He grinned, “Let me.”

Mei Wei let Mark undress her, trying her best to appear demure by keeping her eyes low. He turned her around and pushed her up against his desk, bending her over the wood so that her round ass was on full display. Despite herself, memories of their first night together stirred wetness between her legs and she felt her pussy quiver as the sound of a fly unzipping met her ears. She was determined not to cum this time, oh she would pretend of course to satisfy the client but the idea that somebody as vulgar as Mark was able to make her moan for real was embarrassing to say the least.

He thrust in and she gave a breathy gasp, grabbing hold of the table edge to keep herself in place as he began to thrust. Somehow, he kept hitting that little bundle of nerves deep down inside her and despite herself, Mei Wei began to moan for real. It just felt so good, she *hated* it; she *loved* it. No matter how hard she tried to fight it, orgasm was building, desperate not to give in her eyes flew open and scanned the papers on the desk in need of a distraction. She found that name again, Mullen, scrawled across a piece of note paper. She felt herself drawn to it, even as her pussy began to clench around the cock inside her.

‘Focus on the name, not the pleasure.’ She reminded herself.

There were other words on the note she didn’t understand, she tried to sound them out silently between groans as Mark’s thrusts began to get harder. The worlds seemed to melt in front of her, if she could just focus and remember what they meant in Chinese! A low, deep moan escaped her mouth, she was cresting, right on the edge. She could feel Mark’s balls slapping against her outer lips, Mei Wei couldn’t help it, she came, loudly, whole body quivering as he continued to fuck her through it until he too followed suit. For a moment, she felt him leaning against her, cock going soft in her passage.

Mei Wei had no idea what made her do it, but she took the opportunity and snatched up the note. The police officer was still far too horny to care, pulling out and ordering Lin to clean him as Mei Wei got up from the desk, eyes locked to a folder where the note had been pinned.

‘Brightway Heiress Murder’

It was odd, Mei Wei knew she did not know those words in English and yet she did. She got up and slid the note into her cheongsam, ignoring the lovely afterglow of her orgasm and reminding herself just what a bastard the man who caused it was. He was going at Lin now and Mei Wei walked up behind him to rub at his shoulders as lovingly as she could without feeling ill. Her mind was still stuck on that name, Mullen, perhaps she knew him? It suddenly occurred to her that the trench coat she had been found wandering in, the one currently under her bed, was a man’s. Perhaps it was Mullen’s, whoever he was, perhaps he knew what happened to her.

Thankfully, Mark was spent quickly after having them both and dismissed them without so much as a glance at the file with the missing note. They bowed, taking their leave and Mei Wei started to feel her heart race; the note in her dress felt like a stick of dynamite ready to explode at any moment. When they were far enough away from the station she took it out and showed it to Lin.

“What does this say?”

“Did you steal something from that man’s desk?” Lin whispered horrified, “Mei Wei, this is serious, if he finds out, the whole house could be in trouble! All of China town! You know those white fellows look for any excuse to make life harder for us!”

“Please, just tell me what it says!”

Lin made a face, she was never the sort to cause trouble, likely why the Madam had sent her with Mei Wei in the first place. For a moment, she was scared Lin would deny her but then she sighed and took the note.

“It says ‘Mullen last seen down at docks near the fish packing plant September 8th.’”

“That’s two days before you found me here!” Mei Wei beamed excitedly, “This could be it, the clue I have been looking for! Oh, thank you Lin, thank you!”

“Keep quiet! For God's sake don’t let anybody know I helped you with this at all.” She hissed, “Now keep quiet and let’s go home. If anybody asks me about this, I am throwing you straight under the cart, understand?”

Mei Wei nodded, keeping all the excited words bubbling behind closed lips. She wasn’t sure why, but somehow, she was sure this was it, the key to finding out what happened to her all those weeks ago. Now that she had the thread, she wasn’t going to stop pulling until the whole damn blanket was unravelled before her.

As soon as she was back in her room Mei Wei stashed away the note and dragged out that trench coat, it was worn and faded from years of wear. It was the sort of coat worn out of habit rather than any sense of practicality, the fabric was so worn it offered little protection from the elements. A spark of curiosity lit itself in her mind and she began searching through it; she had checked the pockets already of course but this time she went through them with a fine tooth comb, finding no other clue save the old grit and stains of cigars.

The smell was stronger than the cigarettes she so carefully budgeted for; woody and full of earth. They made her nose screw up in distaste but also made her shoulders relax with familiarity; she had definitely smelled these before somewhere. She was not sure how, but Mei Wei was sure this was Detective Mullen’s coat and that he had given it to her to cover her nakedness that night. He must have saved her from something truly awful like Lin said, but what?

I followed the trail, I talked to the old boys down at my precinct and they are so far in the pockets of the bosses they may as well make their houses out of lint. There was no way Miss Brightway would see justice if I didn't step in. Clues lead me to follow the heiresses' last hours and let me tell you, they took me places no respectable lady should be going.

The street wasn't dead, not yet anyway but it was on its last legs. Nothing but crumbling houses, half made of cardboard inhabited by only the most desperate of souls. A group that is growing in number by the day now. If Miss Brightway had come this way, she was surely under duress or desperate. It led into Chinatown, one of the few spots of concrete in this jungle I'm not at home. The problem with these little communities is that given the choice between a white guy and one of their own, they'll protect their own, even if they're the scum of the earth. The people I try to talk to could give Johnny Tightlips a run for his money, even if I spoke perfect Mandarin I think they'd still walk away saying "no understand". Still, if I was the sort to give up that easily I wouldn't be the cities best PI now, would I?

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It was easy enough to sneak out the next morning without arousing suspicion; Madam Zhao and the girls often slept late after a busy night. If Mei Wei was going to find out the secret to her past, she needed to find this Detective Mullen, even if he was missing. She couldn't go asking around the police station, even if they were included to help her, which they certainly were not, asking about a detective right after notes on his file went missing would be too suspicious. No, her best option was the Tong. The local community group with plenty of shady ties around Chicago, ostensibly they existed to help new arrivals find work and help foster the local Chinese community but really, they did plenty of drug smuggling and work with the local Chicago gangs.

Madam Zhao was right, the white streets of Chicago were seldom safe for a woman like her to wander alone. If she was venturing out of Chinatown, she needed direction and preferably, protection. When she arrived there was a young man around her own age wearing an expensive looking western suit sitting in the window, a cigar hanging from his fingers.

"Yize, you're just the man I needed to see." She beamed.

Yize had been a client of hers many times. He was one of the few who found her chatty nature endearing and had even paid for extra time with her on occasion just to talk. He was rough around the edges, a known gangster, but he had always treated Mei Wei and her fellows with at least some respect.

"Mei Wei!" He grinned, stamping out his cigar, "How's my favourite girl?"

"Flattery will get you everywhere, you know that?" She teased, "I need your help, I want to go into Chicago, I need to find a Detective."

Yize's happy demeanour soured almost immediately.

"If you have troubles that need...taking care of, you know me and the other tong boys will do it. Those gweilo bastards will never help out a girl like you. Especially not if a white man has done something."

"No, nothing like that." Mei Wei took a deep breath, "I think this detective can help me figure out what happened, before I arrived in Chinatown, my memory from that night and the few before are blank. I want to know what happened."

"Why this specific detective? What's the name?"

"Mullen, Dick Mullen."

The reaction was immediate. What was left of Yize's good mood fled entirely and his face looked like thunder.

"Dick Mullen is a gweilo bastard who came round here trying to pin the murder of some white girl on us." Yize sneered, "You don't want anything to do with him."

Mei Wei remembered the document she saw, the one mentioning a murder and the name Brightway. She may have been new in town but even she knew better than to rat on her own people; the tongs were not above making an example of somebody, especially not a whore. Yize may have been fond of her but if he got wind she had been helping this detective, she knew better than to think he'd protect her.

"I just want to ask if he knows me, or saw me." She tried, "Please, if you know him you must know where his office is?"

"Sure I do," Yize shrugged, "It's over on Olsen Avenue, but going there won't help you. Word on the street is somebody bumped him off and he's not been seen for days. I'd put a buck on the on the big gangs giving him a pair of cement shoes after sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. Doubt we'll be seeing him again."

Mei Wei felt her heart sink. She knew he was missing but if the mob bosses really had taken care of him she had no hope.

“Oh, it was my only lead, I really did want to know what happened to me. I know there is something important I’ve forgotten!”

“Easy, motormouth.” Yize lit a fresh cigar and offered her one, likely to get her to stop babbling nervously. “Just forget it, you have a good thing going. I might even pay you a visit later.”

Normally, a visit from Yize was a happy occasion, he was easy to please and relatively kind but now that she had finally started to unravel this mystery the idea of spending her nights laying down, literally, seemed very unappealing. This curiosity was like a tiny spark burning within her that was steadily growing to a flame. Even as she shared the smoke with Yize and chatted about life her mind was elsewhere, quietly plotting the faster route to Olsen Avenue.

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Going to the tong was a last ditch effort, I knew I was onto something. Pretty, rich white girl like Miss Brightway coming to Chinatown, there is no way she didn't stand out like a sore thumb. A young fellow by the name of Yiza or something gave me a warm welcome and by that, I mean a slug to the face and a cigarette burn on my neck. Were I a betting man, now that I think about it, I am, I'd bet my whole savings these tongs end up giving the gangs a run for their money one day when they get sick of running their little spit of Chicago soil.

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Mei Wei could feel eyes on her as she walked; she stuck out of the crowd filled with browns and beiges in her bright red cheongsam. As she walked through the shanty towns then to the streets proper, away from the bay and into the full concrete jungle where each face found hers and hardened. She was the outsider here and she watched as women’s eyes narrowed at her dress with envy. Not that they would ever wear ‘oriental’ clothes, but just the fact that she could apparently afford such colourful cloth made her an object of envy. Mei Wei did her best to hold her head high, ignoring the stares and instead focusing on the street signs till finally she arrived.

It was an odd little street; with buildings that looked as though they needed a fresh coat of paint five years ago. Dick Mullen’s Private Investigations was written in faded white across the window of a dingy looking office. At first, she tried knocking but wasn’t surprised when nobody answered; there was a pile of unopened mail on the doorstep after all. Still, she came all this way, she was not about to let a locked door stop her. With a quick glance over her shoulder Mei Wei slipped into the alleyway and found a window, taking out her hairpin and jimmying the lock as best she could. It was strange, she’d never done anything like this before, yet it seemed second nature, the lock springing open after only a few seconds.

With much difficulty she managed to wiggle her way up onto the window sill only to get stuck with her ass halfway out the window. With a strained wiggle she finally fell in the whole way, giving a huff of embarrassment; very much glad nobody else saw the uncoordinated display.

“Okay, Mei Wei, now what?” She whispered to herself, looking around the gloomy room.

She had landed in the main living space, containing a desk and a number of filing cabinets, each and every wall was covered in newspaper clippings; everything from serious crimes to seemingly useless puff pieces. It was now, standing in the middle of the dust coated room, Mei Wei realised she hadn't really thought past this point.

“Mullen had been investigating the Brightway murder,” She said to herself, “So if I follow his tracks, maybe I find him and then...I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

There was just one problem; all of Mullen's files and notes were in English. Sneaking a single note away was one thing but she could hardly fill up a box and drop it out the window to carry back home. She looked for any familiar words but ‘murder’ turned up worryingly often, just how many people got killed in this town anyway? Eventually though she spotted a file sitting on a chair by the window, the word ‘Brightway’ written across its front. Mei Wei dove on it, noticing the bottle of scotch and full ashtray on the table beside the chair. She could almost imagine him, this private eye in his faded trench coat, sitting here sipping his whiskey and smoking while he mulled over the case. The vision was so real she could almost taste the alcohol on her tongue. Without thinking she picked up the bottle and swirled it a few times before taking a small sip, the drink was room temperature, the taste slightly off from days of sitting out in the open but the burn on her throat felt like home and she sighed in contentment.

Mei Wei settled herself into the chair, swirling the whiskey in the bottle as she opened the file. As expected, she could only read every other word but she had to try; there was no way she could convince one of the better English speaking girls to translate this for her. She started with the obvious words she knew and then, using a mixture of guesswork and contest pieced together what else she could. It was hard, whole areas were left a mystery to her and yet a smile formed across her lips. She could practically feel the gears in her head whirring, her mind being challenged for the first time in weeks; it felt good.

She had always known she was destined for more in life; more than the simple life of a Chinese peasant, more than some immigrant whore, he was her proof. She was smart, she could figure this out. Mei Wei scrambled about the office finding blank paper and pens with which to write her own notes and translation ideas; writing out the parts she had no idea about with as much precision as she could.

From what she could gather, Stella Brightway was the only daughter of a major shipping baron within the city. One of the few who spoke out against the iron grip the gangs had on their fare city; even going so far as to brag that his was the only ‘clean’ business sin Chicago. Miss Stella was a party girl, and according to Mullen's personal notes, had been seen with some shady individuals in the weeks leading up to her murder. She'd been found strangled to death in one of the local parks on

the edge of two different gang territories. According to Mullen, this was a normal tactic, to leave murder victims right at the edge of your territory with a rival to send a message. That meant the murderer was likely a member of either Tony Allegro's crew or The Grey Caps; two of Chicago's biggest rival bootleggers and hit men. There was being between a rock and a hard place and then, there was that.

"Girl, you really got in over your head." Mei Wei breathed.

There were pages more notes, but she had no idea what any of them said. Taking these files wouldn't work but maybe if she asked a person here or there just to translate one sentence or two at a time, that might not arouse suspicion. Plan formed, she spent the next few hours writing, enjoying the buzz of whiskey on her tongue until the bright midday sun splashed across her page. Madam Zhao and the other women would be up by now, likely looking for her. She bit her lip; the temptation to stay and keep working was strong but she knew she had to go. She gathered up her papers, stuffing them inside her Cheongsam and then arranging the room exactly as she'd found it, just in case, before dipping out the window, a sly smile on her face.

~

Mei Wei felt like one of those femme fatales from the movie posters stuck all over the concrete walls surrounding the entrance to Chinatown as she snuck back to the bordello. Her cheongsam crinkled as she walked, papers still smuggled against her skin. As expected Madam Zhao was none too pleased, face switching from relief at her safety to abject fury within moments.

"Where have you been? If I find out your moonlighting girl-"

"No, not at all!" Mei Wei held up her hands in defence, "I went for a walk you see, I just got caught up in my own head, I thought if I followed my own footsteps backwards, I might be able to figure out what happened to me before coming here!"

"And where did those footsteps take you? Hm?" The madam asked with eyes narrow, "Must have been quite the trip with you gone all morning."

Mei Wei barely held back a smile; she had planned her response carefully but ensured to give it her natural, bullet fast diction and babbling nature so as to not arouse suspicion.

"Well you see I was walking when my memory of the night ran out, so I started to pace and I met this nice new arrival, Chinese girl from Beijing and we got to chatting and the next thing I knew I

was sitting down on the bench with her having a good old talk about our villages. They are really similar see, but in mine we mostly grew sorghum whereas hers-

“Yes, yes, I see.” Madam Zhao sighed, shaking her like a frustrated school teacher.

“Sorry, Ma’am.” Mei Wei said sheepishly, “You know how I am when I get talking! Just totally lost track of time and I made it back before work hours started!”

“Yes, I suppose, just...get out of my sight girl. I swear, sometimes I regret taking you in, more trouble than you’re worth.”

There was no real bite to her words, she sounded more like an exasperated mother than anything and Mei Wei knew better than to push her luck. She slipped up the stairs to her room, barely holding back an excited squeal as she laid out her notes, now all she needed to do was translate them without arousing suspicion and she could start looking for Detective Mullen; once she had him, Mei Wei was sure the case of her missing memories would be cracked wide open.

~

Chinatown's a funny place. The more things change, the more they stay the same I suppose. Oh, the faces may be different, the signs may all be written in those letters that look like grass blowing in the wind but at its core, this is still Chicago and nobody knows the city better than me. I went to check out the local precinct; no changes there, the coppers running the joint were just as corrupt as the rest of the city. Most of them were on the take; I could tell. After as many years in the business as me you get a second sense for this sort of thing. Though I have to wonder, which boss do they answer to? Something told me it might have been those tong fellas, though I can't rightly be sure. One thing is for certain though; these guys know more about the Brightway murder than they are letting on. One of the officers, Mark I think his name was, pointed me in the direction of Tony Allegro's crew; but the news had reported the body was found in Grey Cap territory, not on the border like it had in actuality. Something fishy is going on in Chinatown and I planned on finding out what.

~

Investigating Dick Mullen became Mei Wei's secret obsession; like an undercover agent each night she would write out a few words from her notes and ask her white clients what they meant. Slowly but surely building up her knowledge on Mullen's case and in tandem, the man himself. Her English was improving rapidly and each night, when her work was done for the day and her pussy sore from exertion she would curl up, whispering phrases to herself in an effort to hide her natural accent.

There were several speedbumps though, sometimes when she asked for a word or phrase to be translated it was something that raised alarm bells; such as 'bludgeoned' or 'internal corruption', which she had to explain away by saying she was reading crime novels. By far the biggest hurdle was a word nobody had been able to identify, Ruyouzun. Mei Wei had asked three separate men what it meant and all of them had told her there was no such word.

Despite the setbacks though, she was getting closer; it seemed Mullen himself had been in Chinatown a few days before his disappearance even had a run in with Yize. If she could ask him more about it that might help but judging by the way Yize had reacted just to his name, that would be a bad idea. There was also one other big question forming in her mind; why did Officer Mark have a file on this murder and Mullen? From everything she had translated, this was way out of his jurisdiction. Mullen mentioned coming to the Chinatown precinct in his notes but she was yet to translate why. She was halfway through translating the newest words her white client had given her when a knock at the door made her jump; she really needed to stop doing this between jobs and wait until the morning. She hurriedly stuffed the papers beneath her mattress and fixed her dress.

"Come in!"

Speak of the devil and he shall appear; it was Yize.

"Hey motormouth." He smiled, "Madam Zhao tells me you're in hot water."

A cool sweat formed on the back of her neck. Had she been less careful than she realised?

"Oh? Me, never. No, I'm not in trouble at all!"

"Oh?" Yize laughed, "So was Madam Zhao lying to me a moment ago about you getting so caught up chatting you spent half the day wandering the streets?"

Mei Wei gave a sigh of relief.

"Yes, well, maybe I did that. I am sure she will forgive me soon! Shall we have some fun?" She offered, swaying an arm toward the bed.

She was eager for the night's work to be done so she could get back to working; but to her surprise Yize shook his head.

“Actually, I have a favour to ask you.” He said, “The madam tells me you are popular with that white officer, Mark?”

Mei Wei nodded, biting the inside of her cheek.

“Well, me and the boys down at the tong think he’s up to no good. We want you to be our ears and eyes on the inside.”

“Me?” Mei Wei balked, “But my English is awful, how can I spy on somebody if I can understand every second word they say?”

“Maybe it would be more apt to call you our eyes on the inside only.” Yize mused, “See, we and the boys down at that precinct had an...agreement when it came to imports from the homeland. We think he and his buddies have been taking things from some of our more specialised shipments. Specifically, a very rare jade necklace in the shape of a dragon scale.”

He unfolded a piece of paper to show a detailed drawing of just that, if the necklace was half as pretty as the picture Mei Wei was sure it would be worth a fortune.

“It’s called the Ryuzun Scale.” Yize explained, “Ever since the the Japs took Manchuria I have had contacts back home sneaking artifacts like this out to keep them safe. I think those gweilo bastards took it when it was due to arrive last month.”

“That’s it!” Mei Wei cried in shock, Ruyouzun wasn’t an English word at all, it was badly written pinyin Chinese! Mullen had been trying to write Ryuzun!

Her outburst was so loud Yize took a step back and she flushed.

“Sorry I just...that makes me so angry! To know one of our national treasures was taken!” She lied, “Of course, I will help!”

“I swear, you could power Chicago with all your energy.” Yize chuckled, putting the picture away and loosening his tie. “Now that’s all sorted, I did pay for an hour of your time so perhaps I will take advantage of your offer.”

Mei Wei just nodded, getting down on her knees while he unzipped his fly. Luckily, she had done this so many times it was second nature, Yize being easy to please being an added benefit. Even as she was sucking him down her mind was far away, already putting together the new pieces of her puzzle and eagerly awaiting Yize's orgasm so she could get back to her *real* work.

~

With most of Mullen's notes translated now, Mei Wei split her time between working on the rest while travelling to the places across Chinatown the detective had visited. Mullen was right about one thing; a white, blonde heiress would have stuck out in this part of town and there was no way people didn't notice her. The biggest advantage she had over her dear detective though, was that she was one of these people. So, when she asked about Stella, people answered.

Mrs. Wang, the groceries wife, had seen her coming in via the side streets with her hair under a wrap multiple times in the weeks leading up to her death. Fang, Yize's sister had even seen her in the Tong at one point, though she was too drunk to remember when. From what Mei Wei could gather, the heiress had been sneaking into Chinatown to visit somebody but who and for what reason, neither she or Mullen knew.

It was on the third day of conducting her discrete interviews that Mei Wei realised she was just as invested in solving Stella Brighway's murder as she was finding Detective Mullen for her own reasons. Slowly putting the pieces of the case together was enthralling, maybe she might even keep working with Mullen when she found him. If she found him, the fact that over a month had passed now meant things didn't look good for the old boy. In those quiet moments right before falling asleep she would imagine what it would be like, to work as a private investigator full time and not have to worry about sleeping with men for money anymore. She would dream of walking the Chicago streets in that faded trench coat, smoking cigarette between her fingers, passing through the darkened streets hot on the trail of her newest lead.

Her dreams may have been filled with adventure but one of the downsides to conducting this little investigation in secret was that she still had to work. Whatever satisfaction she had forced herself to find in her work as a whore evaporated now that she had something better to do. She took her clients as they came, mind elsewhere as she moaned and writhed in faux ecstasy until the night was finally done. Then, came the night she had been both anticipating and dreading; the night Officer Mark called upon her. Yize had clearly been chatting to her Madam as she was requested to go down to the station to service him and stay for as long as he requested.

"I told him you are on retainer for him and any of the officers in exchange for lesser bribes." Madam Zhao informed her with a pleased smile, clearly happy to have her profits increase. "Show him a good time girl and if you find any information out for Yize that's just extra."

Mei Wei felt almost like an undercover operative heading down the precinct and that filled her with more excitement than anything. She may not be in that trench coat but she really did feel like an undercover gumshoe; willing to do anything to get her next clue. She knocked on the now familiar

door to Mark's office and was called in, shocked to find yet another officer with a scar on his cheek standing against Mark's desk with him.

"Maybe the woman should wait outside?" The man with the scar said but Mark shook his head.

"Don't mind her," Mark told his companion, "A whore, barely speaks a lick of English."

He turned to her with a charming smile and indicated for her to sit with a kind smile on his face as though he hadn't just insulted her openly. Then again, Mark had no idea just how good her English was getting, she decided to play the fool, sitting demurely for the men to finish up.

"As I was saying, the tongs like to act like tough guys but no matter what they do, they ain't no mob. The second they get too big for their britches Tony Allegro or one of the other bosses will put them down. We have to take advantage of the situation while we can, no other gang in this city would let us get away with this sort of behaviour."

Mei Wei pretended to inspect her nails but her ears were burning; Yize was right, the cops were up to something shady.

"I think you're underestimating them." Scarface answered, eyes continually sliding over to Mei Wei, "They're Orientals, crafty like snakes, sneaking a pack of drugs here or there isn't going to arouse suspicion but after what happened with..."

He trailed off, eyes locked on Mei Wei who was doing her utmost to look bored.

"You're sure she doesn't speak English?" He hissed.

"Positive, I made sure of it. Watch," Mark replied, "Hey, whore, you stink like the fish market on a summer's day."

Mei Wei continued to look at her fingernails, insides burning with rage at the insult. Instead, she focused on Mark's odd choice of words, 'made sure of it'? What did that mean? Was he implying he chose Mei Wei as his favourite whore because she seemingly didn't understand him? Still, it was an odd turn of phrase, perhaps her colloquial English had not improved as much as she thought?

“See, no clue. This one is dumb even for a Chinese girl, I don’t think she could learn English even if she tried.”

“Yeah well, still. I think we should talk another time. I’m going on patrol.” Scarface excused himself and Mei Wei gave him a soft smile and wave while secretly hoping he’d trip and twist an ankle.

Mark rounded the desk as the door closed, taking her chin in his hand and smiling down with predatory glee.

“I do so look forward to your visits.” He cooed, “I love feeling you shiver underneath me.”

“I like you too.” She lied, exaggerating her accent a little and making sure her eyes were wide and docile.

“Of course you do.” Mark grinned, “Now, lay yourself over my desk, I want to fuck you raw.”

Hating every second of it, she unbuttoned her cheongsam, mind fully focused on the prize she was after. Stella Brightway’s file, if she could just get a few moments alone in this office, she could smuggle it out but the odds of that happening were slim to none but as she was sitting herself up on the table and spreading her legs Mei Wei saw her solution. A key, sitting on a little ring hanging from a loose nail on the desk; Mark’s file key. She already knew picking the lock on his office window would be a walk in the park but once she was in, getting into his filing cabinets quickly and silently would be impossible. But with that key, she could get in and out within a few minutes.

Mark was already pumping his cock up to hardness, pressing it against her hole roughly. Despite herself, Mei Wei shivered; she may hate him with all her heart but damn, Mark was good at fucking. As he slowly filled her passage she focused her thoughts on the key, trying to ignore the pleasurable burn filling her. As he began to thrust her thoughts turned fuzzy, the pleasure instantly building and distracting her. Her concentration was split too many ways; the key, her act, the wonderful building ecstasy between her legs. She had to think of a way to get that key without Mark noticing but as he bit down on the curve of her shoulder Mei Wei saw white and moaned for real. Orgasm was fast approaching, no matter how hard she fought to keep it down. Her legs began to shake, arms trembling as she braced herself against the wood.

“This is right where you belong.” Mark growled, “You whore.”

“Yes, yes!” She replied, hating how genuine the breathy pleasure in her voice was.

She was right on the edge when the idea came to her, just in time. Dramatically she fell back against the desk, cumming hard and writhing enough to send papers and knick knacks flying, her hand gripping the side of the desk, subtly slipping a finger into the key ring while the other flailed. Mark groaned, filling her up with seed as he finished before scowling.

“Look at the fucking mess you’ve made.” He pulled out roughly, making Mei Wei quiver with the loss.

“Sorry, just feel too good.” She pouted, doing her best to hide a victorious smile as she subtly brought her hand behind her back, key still around her pinkie.

“I suppose I can’t expect you to have much self-control.” He grumbled, “Well, I would make you clean this up but you wouldn’t know how to organise any of these papers. Just get dressed and go.”

“Yes, Mr. Mark. Good time. Call again please?” She pulled on her cheongsam, slipping the key into one of the little pockets she had sewn on the inside for keeping her notes secret.

Mark just continued to grumble and complain about the mess, telling himself he’d organise it in the morning. That meant all she had to do was wait until later tonight and that file would be all hers.

~

I had it, everything was finally coming together! Now I just had to get some proof. My suspect was as crooked as they came, no doubt they had covered their tracks well. If I could just catch them at something else, something small enough that the commissioner had no choice but to launch another investigation, I could find the proof I needed to get them tied to Miss Brightway as well. It was raining like every god in existence had decided to have a pissing contest but I wasn't about to let that stop me. This meeting down at the fish packing plant could be my only chance and I was going to take it or my name's not Dick Mullen...

~

It was easy to sneak herself into a dark corner across the street from the precinct; she would simply tell the Madam Mark wanted her attention for many hours so she had all the time in the world to wait. When the lights finally dimmed and Mark and the other day officers finally walked out she knew it was time to strike. She crept across to the side of the building, taking out her trusty hairpin and slid it into the down lock. After a few seconds it sprung open and quietly as she could she lifted the heavy pane of glass and wood up. After taking a moment to ensure the coast was clear and the night watchman hadn't heard the scrape of wood she hopped up and through the window with much more grace than her first break in.

Keeping low to the floor, lest anybody see her shape through the window she crawled over another filing cabinet, sliding the key into the lock and slowly turning it.

The hinges squeaked as she drew open the drawer but still, no sound of approaching footsteps. She ran her nails down the tabs until she reached B but found nothing, next she tried S for Stella, then M for murder before finally reading every file individually. She tried every drawer but nothing, the file was missing. For a second she panicked, why wouldn't it be here? She did not have time to go rummaging through the entire office and going out into the hall to the records room was out of the question, whoever was on security detail for the night was sure to find her; but then she remembered. This case was out of Mark's jurisdiction, he was probably looking into it off the books and that meant the file was somewhere secret. Praying to any God who would listen, Mei Wei put the key into the desk and breathed a sigh of relief when it turned. Inside the drawer was a mess of items, bullets, gum, ticket stubs but no file.

Her palms were sweating now, she can't have come all this way for nothing! Unless... carefully she took a manicured long nail and ran it along the edges of the drawer bottom, finding it suspiciously high. With a little bit of fiddling with her deft fingers she lifted the bottom, revealing the hidden compartment beneath and inside, a single file with Stella Brightway's name on it.

"Bingo."

~

She wasn't fool enough to open the file then and there, maybe it was risky taking it with her, who knows how often Mark checked that drawer, but she had to. The longer she stayed crouched in the darkness of the office the higher the risk she was discovered, no the best option was to sneak back out and then tomorrow slip it back through the window, hoping it ended up under the desk for Mark to find later.

She was hurrying back to the bordello, thoughts and theories racing through her brain so quickly she didn't see Yize until she'd already smacked right into him.

"Damn girl, you've got a skull of iron." He groaned, rubbing at the red patch on his chin where her forehead had slammed.

"Is that your way of calling me thick?" She teased, the file hidden in her dress feeling like a red hot iron.

Yize didn't reply, his brow was furrowed and Mei Wei felt a cold sweat break out on the back of her neck as she realised he was looking at her feet. Slowly, filling with dread she looked down, a photograph, showing a blonde woman smiling at the camera with a playful wink; Stella Brightway. Slowly, Yize reached down and picked it up, staring at it for a moment before his eyes raised to meet hers; cold and hard.

“Where did you get this?” He asked slowly, a threat laced in every word.

“In Mark’s office.” She replied immediately, thinking on her feet. “I thought maybe we could use this as blackmail to get him to back off on your operations.”

“How would a picture of Stella Brightway do that?” He asked, clearly not believing her, Mei Wei swallowed. “You were asking about that PI Mullen the other week. Why?”

“Like I said, I thought maybe he might know about my missing memory.” Mei Wei’s mind was racing, she had to think of something, all of a sudden Yize seemed very, very dangerous.

Fang had said she saw Stella coming to the Tong more than once hadn’t she, could it be that...was she coming to see Yize? Somebody in his potions, a respected member of the community, hooking up with a white woman, that wouldn’t look good. Had Yize killed the woman to keep her quiet? What did that mean for Mei Wei; the emptiness of the streets suddenly seemed much more threatening than they had a moment ago.

“Come to think of it, you showed up here right after he came snooping around.” Yize muttered, “Are you and that bastard Mark working together?”

“T-together? What are you talking about?”

“What did he promise you?” Yize growled, “Immunity if you sold out your own and pinned that woman’s murder on me?”

“No!” She cried before foolishly adding, “...did you kill her?”

“If I did, do you really think I’d tell a whore like you?!”

Mei Wei’s trigger finger twitched, odd since she had never held a gun in her life and certainly didn’t have one now. Yize took a step forward and she turned to flee, her lithe body slipping out of Yize’s grip as he tried to stop her. She dashed through the bright lantern lit streets of Chinatown, heels clacking hard on the concrete. Heavy footfalls followed her, Yize in hot pursuit. Had you asked her even an hour ago if she could outrun the man, Mei Wei would have insisted it was impossible but the body can do amazing things and soon, those footsteps became quieter and quieter as the distance

increased. She ran right out of Chinatown, out into Chicago proper, following some invisible instinct, ducking into side alleys and darkened streets until she found herself back at a familiar dusty alley, window still unlocked.

Mei Wei wasn't sure why she'd fled to Dick Mullen's office, but one thing was for sure, it was safer here than back at Madam Zhaos. Already Yize likely had his tong fellows raiding the place, it would only be a matter of time before they found her notes hidden beneath the mattress; she just prayed they didn't think Mark had supplied the information. She winced slightly in guilt, her friends and employer didn't deserve the hell she was bringing down on them, but what else was she supposed to do? Let Yize kill her too?

She collapsed into the chair by the window, drawing down the blind and reaching into the side table drawer, thankful to find a bottle of whiskey waiting. The burn of alcohol on her throat helped calm her breathing and stop the heavy pound of her heart. That had been close. After taking the time needed to find her calm, she opened her cheongsam and took out the file, it was crumpled and she sent a silent prayer to whoever was listening that nothing else had fallen out.

The contents were surprisingly little; though she did note they were copies, likely smuggled out of whatever precinct was actually in charge of investigating Stella's murder. Mei Wei's stomach began to sink as she read through the file, English no longer the major barrier it once was; there was nothing new here! If anything, this was more barren than Dick Mullen's personal notes! What were the police playing at? If this is the sort of attention a rich heiress got, it was no wonder so many every day murders were left unsolved. She flicked through the papers, hoping to find anything of use and stopped, there was a nondescript white envelope at the back. Eagerly she ripped it open and photographs spilled out and Mei Wei felt her jaw drop; Stella Brightway, all of them but not the sort of shots you saw in the social pages. These showed her naked, often clad in nothing but a necklace; sometimes posing on a bed, other times with her mouth wrapped around a cock. Mei Wei was frozen in shock, photographs like this had to have been taken on one of those new, more portable cameras; what was a girl like Stella doing posing for pornography?

There was also something distinctly amateurish about these photos; blurriness, strange angles, especially the blowjob ones. It was almost as if the person holding the camera took them. A light bulb lit up in Mei Wei's brain, these photos weren't pornography, at least not the commercial kind that was swapped in seedy bars, this was somebody's personal collection. Having worked as a prostitute, she had no shame about examining each photo for clues; her eyes scanned the images until they locked on a speck, a notch of dark grey skin on the man's leg in a distinctive, jagged line.

Mei Wei's blood went cold, she knew that scar. Intimately. It hadn't been Yize Stella had been coming to visit in Chinatown, it was *Mark*. How a lowly Chinatown officer had managed to woo a heiress evident from that necklace hanging on her chest. Even in the blurry black and white, Mei Wei could make out its general shape, a scale. She was willing to bet were photos able to be made in colour, it would be blazing green jade. The Ryuzun; Yize had been right, Mark and his cops were stealing from their smuggled goods and it looked like he'd used those artefacts to win young Stella's affections.

In a flurry of activity, she located the original notes made by Mullen and read through them again now that she could. Looking for anything else she had missed in her copies. There! In the final paragraph of notes Mullen ever made, observations showed that Mark picked up goods from some of Yize's less trustworthy men under cover of darkness on the third Sunday of every month. That is where it ended and everything seemed to click into place. From what she had heard, Dick Mullen

went missing almost exactly a month ago, and Stella was murdered only a few weeks before that. He must have gone to confront Mark and get proof of the crooked operations! She swore under her breath, if Yize had been a little more trusting of the detective, maybe she wouldn't be in this mess and Mark would already be behind bars. The chime of a cock on the wall made her jump; tonight was the third Sunday of the month, maybe it was crazy...but perhaps she could finish what Mullen started. She reached into the desk drawers, searching around until she found an old revolver and a handful of bullets; with practiced precision she loaded it, surprised with how intuitive it felt. Perhaps she had used a gun before, no, surely she'd remember such a thing. When the gun was loaded, she looked around further for a disguise, hiding away her long black hair in a broad brimmed hat and covering her bright dress with yet another faded trench coat found sitting in a pile under the desk. It was even more worn than the one back in her room at The Golden Serpent, but it would do.

~

Mei Wei approached the fish packing plant just outside of Chinatown with a strange mix of dread and anticipation; her heart was racing with excitement, the rush of knowing she was about to finally solve this case. Not only that though, there was a strange sense of familiarity, like she had been here, done this all before. It didn't even occur to her until she was sneaking through a hole in the chain-link fence that she had utterly forgotten her original goal of finding Mullen, so distracted with the murder case it had languished. She gave a mental shrug, Mullen had likely been killed and knocked into the bay, she was going to have to figure out her missing memory on her own. She was sure she tied into all this somehow; she was the one odd, left over piece of an otherwise completed puzzle, she just had to figure out how she fit.

The water lapped against the docks surrounded the canning facility but otherwise, the air was silent. Not even the gulls were out this late. The tranquillity was ruined by a loud splash and a gasping breath followed by swearing. She crept forward, kneeling behind a crate and peered round the corner.

Mark was there, as was Scarface and another officer from the precinct she didn't recognise. No sign of any of the members of her local tong though. The men were taking turns jumping into the water, coming up spluttering a moment later.

"It's no good, Mark." Scarface sighed, "Just face it, the damn thing was washed away. We've been here every night for a month and we've got nothing but wet clothes to show for it."

"It has to be here, you saw what it did to Mullen, we can't let something as valuable and powerful as that damn necklace just get washed away!"

"Well, I don't see y-you s-swimming." The other officer complained only to be silenced with a sharp look.

"We've been here over an hour pass the meeting time, those tong boys clearly don't want to play dice anymore so that necklace is all we have."

Mei Wei had to bite her lip to keep from gasping; that confirmed it, Mark killed detective Mullen too. With the necklace if she was hearing correctly, though how he did that she had no idea. It suddenly occurred to her that she had no plan, it was her word against these three; what other proof did she have? Perhaps she should have gone back to Chinatown after all and gotten some back up, explained to Yize and got him and the boys to come with her. That was a good idea, she took a step back, hoping Mark and his cronies would still be here when she returned only for the sound of her shoe hitting metal to ring out loudly across the dock. A loose can. A single loose can was probably going to cost her everything.

Me Wei held her breath as tension filled the air, the telltale sound of a gun hammer being pulled back made her swallow.

“Come out! We’re the police, we won’t hurt you.”

‘Dirty liar.’ she thought, ‘still, two can play at that game.’

She placed the gun, finger still poised around the trigger, into her pocket and stepped out, keeping her head bowed so her face was in shadow under the hat. A cold wind blew and Mei Wei felt her long hair sweep free to blow in the evening breeze.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? This is an important police investigation you’re interrupting!” Mark yelled, Mei Wei angled to gun in her pocket as best she could.

“Oh really?” She asked, raising her face, “Is that what you call covering your own corrupt tracks.”

Scarface swore and shook his head. Mark’s face twisted with rage and then to her shock he growled a name, but not the one she was expecting.

“Mullen, I fucking knew things were too good to be true. Seems that memory loss was temporary after all.”

“Mullen?” Mei Wei’s eyes went wide, “What are you talking about?”

For a moment they stared at one another before Mark burst into laughter.

“Oh my God, you’re serious, what are the odds?” He chuckled with a cruel smile, “Seems no matter what body you’re in you really are a detective at heart.”

His words seemed to be coming from far away, that sense of déjà vu getting stronger and stronger with each second. Her vision wavered for a second, Mark staying still but this time it was members of Yize’s tong standing behind him, the night sky ever so slightly different. She had done this before. A month ago. As Dick Mullen. She felt lightheaded by the revelation; all those memories of China, the fuzzy indistinct recollections...they were all fake?

Mark clearly sensed her shock and took advantage, running forward, gun in hand. She barely moved in time, as the bullet blew a hole in the pier where she had been standing mere moments ago.

“Why kill Stella?” She yelled, dodging under Scarface’s fist and climbing up and behind more of the stacked crates.

“She turned soft, the minute she found out that necklace was stolen she decided she wanted to come clean; fool, she’d have sunk us both.”

Splinters cut at Mei Wei’s cheek as another bullet ricocheted off the craft she was hiding behind. She took a deep breath, trying to remember how to shoot; foggy memories of days at the police academy floated to the surface as she turned and fired, missing Mark and his boys by an inch.

“So you killed her and left her body on the edge of warring gang turf hoping they’d take the heat for you.” She hissed, “Coward!”

“Like you would have done any different in my position.”

“I did! I was a cop once too, before this gig.” She crept along the crates, if she could just distract them long enough to sneak behind, keep him talking. “How did you even do this to me?”

“The necklace,” Mark replied, “I don’t know how it works but it’s what did it. I should have chased after you when the change took hold and finished the job. If I have one regret, it’s that.”

Mei Wei’s blood boiled as memories continued to return; cornering Mark at the edge of the pier, him calling him a bitch, the flash of green...Mark had known all along who he was and Mei Wei shivered knowing what she had let him do to her body. Even more disgusted at herself for enjoying it.

“Did you like me fucking you, Mullen?” Mark taunted, “When I saw you in that window I couldn’t believe my luck, I really got to put you in your place.”

Just a little bit further now...

“There you are!”

A hand yanked her hair back and she cried out, Mark grinned wildly, before yelling at his cronies to go get the car started. Mei Wei sneered at him, there was no way she was letting this guy kill her too! She kicked backwards, right into his crotch making his grip loosen just enough for her to get away, she toppled into the railing, hearing it screech as the rusted metal gave way and she went tumbling down into the water. Head over heels in darkness broken up only by silver bubbles she blinked, lungs already burning. Then she saw it; she had no idea how they had missed it but there, a tiny hint of gleaming green in the watery moonlight.

Ignoring her lungs Mei Wei kicked down, reaching into the mud and drew out the necklace that had caused all this, hastily placing it around her neck before kicking for the surface. She broke through the waves with a gasp, cold night air turning her lungs to ice just in time to see Mark looking down at her with hateful glee. Gun aimed right at her heart.

“Luck’s run out, Mullen.” He sneered.

He pulled the trigger.

The air was knocked from Mei Wei’s lungs once more but instead of burning pain, there was only a dull ache at her breasts. She looked down at the water in surprise, expected to find blood where there was none. What there was, was a tiny chip in the necklace. Eyes flew to the pier where Mark was still standing, eyes wide with a red stain spreading across his shirt. He gaped at her for a moment before tumbling down into the icy water. Mei Wei made no move to help him.

She dragged herself up on the pier, soaking wet but oddly fulfilled; she had her answers and more importantly, the villain of the story was sleeping with the fishes. She would go back to Chinatown, find Yize and explain everything as best she could and hopefully convince him and a few of his boys that they were here with her to hear Mark’s confession, at least in an official capacity. For now though she flopped down on the wood, feeling the water leech off her and tried to catch her breath and come to terms with everything that had happened in the last few minutes. Had she always known, deep down, that she was Dick Mullen? Was that why she had felt so strongly about solving his case before her own? Because on some level she knew they were the same? Mei Wei allowed herself a few seconds to close her eyes, feeling the rise and fall of her chest, the gooseflesh forming on her long legs; she remembered now, what it felt to be a man and yet this body still felt like home. Perhaps that was for the best as until she could work out how this pendant and whatever magic infested it worked, she was stuck with it.

Knowing every second spent here was risky, Mei Wei slipped out into the streets again, spotting the car and other two officers waiting under a streetlamp not far away. They did not see her slip away, if they were waiting for Mark they were going to be there a while. She sighed, exhaustion finally catching up, it had been a very long night. She hoped there was still some whiskey in that little cupboard back at the office. She could really use a drink.

~

Chicago, 1933

Mei Wei sat with her feet up on her desk, holding up the evening paper.

'ORIENTAL DETECTIVE FINDS STOLEN LAZARUS DIAMOND'

She made a face at the first word, it was always 'oriental' with these journalists, that or woman. Never just detective or Private Eye, which is what she was deep down, why they got so caught up on the semantics she could never know. It had been a big case, she'd been on her feet for nearly three weeks now tracking the smuggling ring down and retrieving the museum's stolen jewels. She should have charged that curator more, he looked good for it. After all the walking she'd done she could use a new pair of heels.

It had been almost a year since the case of Stella Brightway and it still pained her somewhat that she had to lie on the stand and say Yize and his guys were with her in order to corroborate the story. Frankly, the DA seemed a bit suspicious of it all but let it slide; any story of him clamping down on police corruption was good press. Ironic as that seemed.

She still wore the pendant around her neck; any magic it once had now gone thanks to the damage the bullet did. She had looked into every history book, written letters to every person in the homeland she could find; none of them had the answer of how or why the pendant transformed her. Records of its magic were half legend, likely exaggerated or in some cases completely fictional. There was simply no way to tell the facts apart and with it now broken, there was no way to test it. Still, Mei Wei felt as though she had made her peace with the situation. It took a lot of time to work out the dual memories in her head; her life as Dick Mullen was still fuzzy in places and she often had to remind herself that the childhood growing up in China was entirely made up. Still, taking the name Mullen made her feel more solid on her feet; a mixture of her two lives.

She moved out of The Golden Serpent a week after the showdown with Mark; then out of Chinatown entirely back to her original office in downtown Chicago. It felt wrong, staying within that little community. Thanks to Mark, she would always look like part of Chinatown, she spoke the language fluently, she knew the people, but deep down she knew she wasn't really one of them, no matter what Yize or Lin said. Mei Wei was pretty sure her friends believed she was making it all up, being Dick Mullen but accepted it as just another quirky of their chatty friend.

Mei Wei Mullen has become synonymous with crime solving in Chicago; where at first people snickered not only at the idea of a woman private eye, but a Chinese one, now they gave her the respect she had earned. Better known as 'My Way' Mullen, she had a knack for getting things

done and opening doors that by all rights stay closed to somebody of her 'background'. She still had her connections in Chinatown; the girls at the Golden Serpent were expert ears and eyes on the street and Yize and his crew were more than happy to work with her. White cops on the other hand? That was still a challenge, one she took head on. Take the bull by the horns, or by the dick, either worked she found.

She was just getting ready to sit back with a cigarette and some whiskey to finally relax when a knock at the door disturbed her. With a sigh she stood to answer. A man and a woman; white, looking far too suburban to be locals.

"Can I help you?" She asked.

"We're looking for detective Mullen." The man replied brusquely. "Are you his secretary?"

It was going to be one of those meetings. Her name was written on the damn door for goodness sake.

"I am her." She smiled sweetly, knowing her eyes looked anything but. "What can do I do for you?"

She waved the bewildered couple inside and sat back behind her desk; she could practically feel the discomfort wafting off them in waves. These were the sort of middle class, suburban dwellers that probably hadn't even spoken to another non white person in their lives. Middle America; Mei Wei's ;east favourite kind of clients, they always made getting to the point difficult.

"You're a detective?" The woman blinked.

Case in point.

"Yes, and if you have a case you would like me to take, may I suggest we skip all the unnecessary questions about how and why I am a lady detective?"

The man cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Your English is very good."

“Thank you,” Mei Wei said curtly, her patience thinning after a long day, “But can we get to the point?”

The woman shifted uncomfortably.

“It’s our daughter,” She started, “She’s run off with some boy and we can’t find her.”

Ah runaway daughters; a tale she knew well. As the parents talked it became more and more obvious why the poor girl fled with the first guy who got sweet with her. These people were a nightmare, conservative in the extreme and most egregious of all, dreadfully boring. As they described the girl, Mei Wei realised the case would be an easy one. She knew the girl, Cathy, her name was, currently down in Chinatown with a local butcher’s boy. Mei Wei did her best to hold back the excited smile, just wait until these two milk toast people found out their daughter was shackled up with an ‘oriental’. They may just die right there on the spot.

It would be a simple thing, she’d go talk to Cathy and if she wanted to, report back to her parents, otherwise it would just have to be one of those unfortunate cases that was beyond her, rare but they happened. Sending that poor woman back to this pair felt like punishment of the highest regard.

“I am sure I can look into this.” She announced when they finally finished, “I’ll need my deposit up front of course.”

“Yes, of course.” The man could barely hide his disdain, “This should be plenty.”

It was a fraction of her usual commission fee, a rip off and the look in the man’s eyes told her he knew it. Sometimes, in moments like this, she missed being a white man who could command respect by simply being instead of having to claw even the barest amount out of every person individually.

“I think you’re missing two bills,” she added sweetly with just enough edge to her voice, “Not your fault of course, there is a sign with my name and rates outside, you must have missed it.”

Willfully.

There was a beat; Mei Wei could practically see the man’s love for his daughter warring with his own masculinity; to be put in his place by not only a woman but one of a lesser culture, it was

unbearable. Love it seems, won out in the end as it often did and he placed the remaining paper bills down and Mei Wei gratefully scooped them up.

“You may go, leave your number on the notebook there.” She pointed to the one by the door, “I’ll call you in a few days.”

“If this is some sort of scam-”

“Then it is certainly an elaborate one.” Mei Wei finished for him, waving a hand at the wall of newspaper clippings showing her exploits. “With all these other cases under my belt.”

The waspy couple left without another word and Mei Wei sent a silent apology to their daughter; no doubt she would be thrilled to know her parents wanted to drag her back home. Muffled voices from the otherside of the door were accompanied by another knock and Mei Wei groaned; her whiskey still waiting by the side table. The door opened and she was about to chastise whoever it was for coming in uninvited but stopped when she saw their face and smiled instead.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“Yize, you know you don’t have to pay for my affections anymore.” Mei Wei teased.

She wasn’t sure what they were, definitely not a couple, but that didn’t stop them going to bed every few weeks if the desire so took them. Which was often.

“Met your latest clients out on the stairs.” He raised an eyebrow before sitting himself on her desk, “Charming couple.”

“Their daughter is Cunyuan’s new girlfriend.”

Yize whistled.

“I warned him getting involved with a gweilo girl was a bad idea.”

“Don’t use that word.” She growled, pouring herself a whiskey, “You know I am one too. Really.”

“Sure, whatever you say Mei.”

For a few minutes they drank in peace, simply enjoying the last of the warm evening sun filtering through the blinds as the night life slowly reared its head.

“She seems alright, I guess.” Yize shrugged after a while, “Are you sending her home?”

“I’ll ask her what *she* wants.”

“How novel.”

Deep down, Yize was still a man of his times.

“I still think doing this is a bad idea, you’re going to get hurt one day, Mei.” There was genuine concern in his eyes but she shrugged it off.

“This is who I am, it’s in my blood. Besides, what would I do back in Chinatown? Become a whore again, we both know I am too good for that. Plus, you’d have to pay to get me into bed and we both know your wallet is happier with this arrangement.”

Yize just smiled and shook his head.

“I don’t expect you to come back, I don’t know what went down on that pier but you’re not the same as you were.”

Mei Wei just took a sip of her whiskey, he knew, he just didn’t believe it.

“I suppose I should know better than to try and change your mind. You’re a stubborn goat, you know that?”

Mei Wei just threw back her head and laughed, raising her glass in a toast.

“It is Mei Wei or the highway, doll.”