

Excerpt from *Million Monkeys* a novel in-progress

by Jesse York

It's another late night in the city that never sleeps and I just woke up at my desk and to the fact that I'm still wearing the same Brooks Brothers outfit I'd gone to bed in the night before. The same suit I'd been wearing when I'd had my mug plastered across the front page of the metro section. The caption read: Private Dick Exposed: Caught with Pants Down at the Lonely Knickers Club.

The smell of liquor emanates like a thick cloud shrouding my desk.

Feet come down the hall—light tapping feet—the feet of a woman. And boy was I wrong, so wrong I nearly fell out of my chair. The door to my private office crashes open and there before me stands a six foot frame bearing out over two-hundred and twenty pounds. He moves his foot and the door kicks back. He stands there with a gun in his hand, fury in his eyes, and uncertainty in his manner.

The guy's face reminded you of a twisted fun house version of a broken mirror. He has a voice, raspy and harsh, like the devil gargling hot asphalt.

“Are you Sphinx Mulrone, the private detective?” he croaks.

I hesitate before answering, working to match the verdict against a list of outstanding warrants on my guilty conscience. After leafing through half a dozen possible approaches I settle on the one that seems

most suited to the man's look of intelligence.

“Perhaps?”

His shadow moves slowly across the ground until it meets square in front of me. He must have found my response amusing because a smile pulls at his lips. He laughs.

It's not a pleasant sound.

Meanwhile, just below countertop visibility another story is developing rapidly. Leather squeaks, the small familiar sound of metal twisting in a shoulder clip. The safety snicks open. I'm about to pull against a drawn gun when his mouth offers another alternative.

A thin trickle of blood appears at the corner of his lips. The subsequent burbling sound muffles an attempt to speak. His legs go slack followed by an awkward attempt to stable his weight. Stumbling backward he surrenders into a chair beside the door. The gun slips out of his hand.

The hinges on his eyelids collapse. His body stills. The door and his mouth left half-open.

I get Cassie on the phone. Cassie's official job title, or the one she's chosen for herself, is that of Director of First Appearances. It's her way of making the word secretary sound sexy. A man had died in my office tonight and I had no idea why. This could be big, so of course it left no room for the police, at least not immediately.

When the phone picks up a sleepy, soft fibered voice answers,

“What is it, Sphinx?”

*Blast it.* I hate when she makes me look so predictable. “How’d you know it was me?”

“Who else would call me at two o’clock in the morning?”

“Don’t you have a boyfriend or something?”

“Not if he called me at two o’clock in the morning.”

That response brings the devil’s smile and a few of his better thoughts to my face.

“Quick, get dressed I need you to meet me down here—”

“—like five minutes ago,” she says.

“Right, and make it swift.”

“Don’t worry I’m not one for shilly-shallying.”

We hang up without saying goodbye.

When she arrives she does so wearing the same kind of tortured outfit that makes breathing difficult, for her and for me. The skirt is long, black and hugs the sleek contours of her hips like dancers in a conga line. The blouse, a silky pink rag, skimps in all of the most intriguing places. Stiletto heels give two inches and deep definition to her legs. Her hair reminds you of a wheat field, frizzy and sun-parched. Her figure is rich, and her skin a copper glaze. Deep inviting inlets open into lazy sea-green eyes.

“You wore that to bed?”

“My mama always told me, ‘Be careful what you wear to bed, you

never know who you'll meet in your dreams'."

"And what do you dream about?"

"You should know," she smiles, "you're in them."

In my mind I have to remind myself that at fifteen years her senior she's far too young for me, but the intellectual debate always seems to stall at the part that determines that despite my age hers is still of legal tender.

"Thanks for coming," I say, closing the door behind her. "I'm going to need your ear for two minutes."

"Is that all you want, my ear?"

"I'm afraid two minutes wouldn't leave me much time for the rest of you."

"Then why not take more?"

Her smile is soft, unlike the dead body I'm about to show her, so before leading her into my office I figure it wise to sober her up.

"Listen, we've got a um..." I search for the right word, "well, a situation."

She shifts her weight forward giving me her full and undivided attention.

I continue with a brief summary of the events of the last half hour beginning with the intrusion of the unknown trespasser and ending with his death. When I finish I look at her for some hint of comprehension.

"Dead?" She studies the word as though it were new to her

vocabulary. After a moment she returns her gaze to me, the only semblance of discomfort is in the slightly visible quiver of her lower lip.

"The gun," she quizzes, "what caliber is it?"

".45."

"And the chamber?"

"Full."

Cassie crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. She seems to be reviewing the scant evidence for irregularities.

After an awkward couple of seconds I cut the silence, "Penny for your thoughts?"

"You think it was one of Maldonado's guys?"

"What makes you say that?"

"They came here earlier," she admits. "They...they were looking for you, Sphinx." She hesitates before adding, "And they left you this." She retrieves a folded note from her pocket and hands it to me.

I read it.

"When were you going to tell me about this?"

"First thing in the morning, I swear."

The swelling of the veins in my throat carries with it an open spout of rage capped only by the clenching of my teeth, tightly.

Cassie is the next to speak. "What do they want, anyway?"

Shaking my head I respond, "What does anyone want these days—something for nothing."

“Should we call the police?”

“And tell them what? That I’m being harassed by some two-bit thug.”

"The dead body," she reminds me.

"No,"

"No?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes we should call the cops. But no, I don't think it was one of Maldonado's crew."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I quick frisked the corpse before calling you. The man's pockets carried neither license nor lint. Nothing to clue me in that he was on a late night errand. Except I did find this," I say reaching into my pocket and returning with a small wooden object measuring not more than an inch from floor to ceiling. I offer it to her for closer inspection.

Curiosity puts lights in her green eyes followed quickly by a steady semblance of concentration. She nibbles at the corner of her mouth. Still she says nothing.

“You’ve got that look on your face again,” I say.

“Which look is that?”

“Like a closed door.”

Referring to the object in her hand she asks, “What is it?” Then

blushing corrects, "I mean, what does it mean?"

"I don't know," I confess. "But, I've got an idea."

Cassie beckons me to go on.

"A .45 ain't exactly the amateur's weapon of choice," I say.

"So what are you thinking?"

"State licensed hardware."

"Since when do cops carry anything other than a .357?"

With a steep glance I answer, "Since they stopped trying to actually stop crime, and decided simply to temper it."

"You mean this guy was from the old school?"

I answer with a nod.

"So what do we do?"

"I suppose we've got some investigating to do?"

"And what about this?" she says, flat palming the object.

"Something tells me this was meant for my eyes only."

"Oh Sphinx," she bemoans, "Why must you be such a maverick?"

"A product of my raising."

"You will be careful won't you?"

"I've done a pretty good job this far, haven't I?"

"Promise me," she whispers.

I like her voice. Low, controlled, poised. The type of voice you'd pay to listen to. "I'm not exactly an amateur," I remind her.

"You're a brave man Sphinx. There aren't too many like you left

in the world, and do you know why?”

“Sure,” I mutter, “Because they’re all dead.”

“That’s right!” she affirms, her deep contralto raising a notch.

“Just remember that hair on your chest is no substitute for a bulletproof vest.”