

Dear Fellow Lover of the Written Word,  
“Handy Man” originally appeared in the March/April 2018 issue of Alfred Hitchcock’s  
Mystery Magazine. Thanks for reading,

Tim

## **Handy Man**

by Tim Chapman

I was thankful when he swung on me with a right hook. He had fully committed himself, so his left didn't worry me. All I had to do was rotate a little and step into the punch; my left hand was already up in a guard position. I cupped his wrist, letting the force of the blow go past my ear, then gripped the wrist and stepped back, curling my hand down to my waist, turning his arm palm up and locking his elbow joint. Before he could bend his arm or shift position I bent my wrist upward, quickly. His elbow strained against the joint, and then I heard the tendons snap. I let go when he started screaming.

I tried to explain to him how sorry I was, but he wasn't listening to me. He was sitting on the ground, crying. I had told him I didn't want to fight him, but he was one of those big guys—big biceps, big belly, big attitude. I fished his cell phone out of his shirt pocket and called for an ambulance. I felt bad but not bad enough to drive him to the emergency room, and he was in no condition to drive himself.

This wasn't the first time I had screwed up a simple tail and stake out. Another one last month had ended with the subject spotting me in the parking lot of the fast food

joint he managed. He stuck his hand out the window and gave me the finger over the roof of his car as he drove off. The client had terminated the investigation that day, and I had gotten a good reaming from Rick, one half of DonRick Investigations.

"I don't know why I hired you, you damn freak. People can see you coming a mile off." He grabbed my empty shirtsleeve and flipped it in my face. "Why don't you get a fake arm, like a normal person? You're costing me money."

I figured I was in for more verbal abuse if I went back to the office, so after the ambulance carried Big Boy away I drove over to the Tip Top Tap, my home away from home. It's not like I'm a big drinker. I like a glass of red wine with dinner and an occasional cocktail, but the reason I spend so much time at the Tip Top is because of the bartender. Louise is an attractive brunette whose father was French and mother was Arabic. She has traits of both nationalities. She's also too smart to be a bartender, but like she says, you can't raise a teenaged son on a teacher's salary. She works the afternoon shift, so I'm used to the sorry collection of so-called human beings who spend their days in a dark room, sipping slow death and shouting insults at the television over the bar. The regulars have learned to ignore me, some the hard way. Newbies usually react one of two ways. Either they stagger over to thank me for my service, or they make some crack. I have to give the more creative ones credit. I've heard "Hey, Stumpy!" hundreds of times, but the guy who called me the one-armed bandit the day I was wearing a striped shirt was actually using whatever brain cells he hadn't killed off with booze.

The ones who think I'm a war veteran are the toughest to deal with. I wish I could accommodate them. They get a little testy when I tell them the truth about how I lost my

arm, slipping and falling under the wheels of a train. I was twelve years old, and my idiot friends and I decided to hop a freight. When I fell, my right arm was sliced off a couple of inches above the elbow. There was a lot of nerve damage, so the stump just sort of hangs there. Sometimes, when I move it flops around like it's got a mind of its own. The guys who want to salute a hero are always disappointed, and some of them get mean. One asshole accused me of being "un-American" and threw his empty beer bottle at me. I snatched it out of the air, walked down the bar and held it out to him. He started to laugh until I gave the bottle a little squeeze, not hard enough to shatter it, though I easily could have, but enough to make a web of cracks appear across the surface of the bottle. It made a noise like popping bubble wrap. When I set the bottle on the bar in front of him it collapsed into a pile of glass chips.

It only took one year of being bullied at school to convince me that I needed to make some changes. I was already doing a variety of dexterity exercises. I had been right handed, so simple tasks like brushing my teeth were suddenly complicated, difficult, and sometimes, dangerous. Zipping up my pants, for example. At thirteen I started going to the gym every day after school. I concentrated on my left arm and shoulder, overcompensating for my loss. By the time I was fifteen I could curl more weight than most men can bench press. By the time I was seventeen I could crush things with my bare hand—apples, full cans of beans; you name it. My arm stopped the bullying, but it was a blunt instrument. It had no finesse. I assumed girls wouldn't date a guy with a missing paw, so I never learned how to be gentle, how to touch anyone. Thank God for Louise.

She set a glass of cranberry juice in front of me—she wants me to have a healthy urinary tract—and gave my hand a little squeeze. "How's my guy today?"

"Been better. I screwed up an assignment. I was following yet another cheating husband, and I got sloppy. He made me on the third day of the tail. I'm trying to talk myself into going to the agency. Take my lumps from Don and Rick."

"I don't now why you put up with those guys. You've got the education and experience. You could open your own detective agency."

"Sure. And you can be my secretary. You'd have to wear a skirt to show off your gorgeous gams."

"I'm afraid my gorgeous gams have varicose veins. I know; we can call our agency The Long Arm of the Law."

"You too? I might as well go to the office."

"Don't be so sensitive."

"Sorry."

One of the tobacco-chewing idiots at the end of the bar was spasming to get Louise's attention, so she moved off down the bar. Louise is the first woman I fell in love with. In fact, she's the only one, though not the first woman I had sex with. I guess inexperience has made me oversensitive. I stayed a virgin all through college. Yeah, I went to college. Criminal justice major, though I don't know why. I knew I wasn't going to get hired by any police department. I did have a few dates, mostly girls my roommate fixed me up with. My roommate, Ron, was a black guy who had a lot of Black Power type posters on his wall. When I woke up every morning to go to class I just thought of

myself as a person, period. When he woke up every morning he thought of himself as a black person in a white society. I asked him one time if he didn't think he was being overly sensitive, maybe limiting his view of other people and the ways he could relate to them. He said, "My man, it's simply a matter of self-defense. The last time I tried believing in that 'we're all brothers under the skin' jazz, a cop saw me in my Pop's new Volvo and pulled me over for driving while Black. It really hurt me. Now, I expect it, so it's a good day when it doesn't happen." I guess I've adopted an attitude of self-defense, too.

I finished my cranberry juice and leaned across the bar to give Louise a kiss. "Dinner tonight?"

"I'm through here at seven, but I want to go home and change. Pick me up at eight?"

On my way out one of the old shitheads lounging at the end of the bar cracked, "S'matter, buddy? She charge you an arm and a leg for your drink?"

\*

Don was alone at the agency when I got back, so I went into his office, sat down and told him about my fight with the tail subject. I assured him that neither the subject nor the police knew who I was.

"You called the ambulance, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, but I used the other guy's cell phone, then hightailed it out of there."

"Okay. We'll take you off this case and put somebody else on it."

Rick and Don were in the habit of acting like 1970s TV characters. Even when they were alone they did the "good cop, bad cop" routine. Don was the good cop.

"I don't think these tail jobs are working out for you," he said. "You're like a duck out of water." Don was always mixing his metaphors. "I've got something here..." He shuffled through a stack of manila folders until he found the file he was looking for. He handed it across the desk. "Here we go—Beat House. The west coast's largest chain of entertainment stores. They sell CDs, DVDs, and books. Look at the case file."

I opened the folder and read the notes from the company. Their Westwood store had a shrinkage problem. Shrinkage is what retail stores call it when merchandise goes missing. Beat House was blaming their shrinkage on shoplifting. They wanted security guards. I tossed the file on Don's desk.

"This isn't investigation; this is a job for someone from our security unit. I don't do security. I do investigations."

"True," Don said. "But you haven't been doing them well. Look, let me call Beat House corporate. I'll see if I can get them to put you in as undercover security. You'd walk around the store in plain clothes, pretending to shop, keeping an eye on suspicious people and apprehending shoplifters. That's kind of an investigation."

The whole idea repulsed me. I could just see myself collaring weeping teenagers.

"Haven't you got anything else?"

Don shook his head. "Consider yourself lucky Rick isn't here."

\*

I took Louise to her favorite restaurant, the Musso and Frank Grill in Hollywood. It's basically a tourist restaurant, but it's been there long enough to be considered an institution. After a meal of their famous flannel cakes (don't ask) we went back to her place, a little bungalow out in the valley. Louise has a teenaged son who hates my guts. I used to think it was just because he misses his dad, but after I caught him slashing the tires on my Jeep I decided I don't really care what his motivation is. I was just glad he wasn't home.

A half bottle of Chianti later and we were lying in her big canopy bed waiting for our heart rates to drop back into the double digits. Louise is adept at dealing with my clumsiness and has a way of making me feel like my missing limb is no more off putting than an acne breakout or a bad haircut. We've been together for over two years, yet she still guides me through our lovemaking, showing me where and how to touch her and, somehow, coaxing gentleness out of the graceless extremity at the end of my arm. I leaned across her to get my wine glass from the nightstand, kissing her on the return trip.

"You know, I'd be happy to make this situation permanent."

"We've been over this," she said. "I can't even think about marriage until Jason moves out. He'll be through with high school next year, and believe me, I'm encouraging him to go away to college."

"Far away, I hope."

"Hey, don't try to get me to take sides between you two. It's not fair. Besides, he's still a kid, and he's my son. You'd lose."

Just then, we heard the front door slam shut. A minute later the little darling was in the hall, kicking the bedroom door. "Hey, Hand Job! Take your dick out of my mother and get your car out of the driveway. I want to park in the garage."

Louise shouted, "Robert!"

"Please," I said, "just let me break something small. I promise not to disfigure him."

Louise glared at me.

"A finger? The pinkie on his left hand?"

She kept glaring, so I got out of bed, pulled on my pants, and went to move my car.

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My first day at Beat House proved to be as bad as I had imagined. I showed up for work a half hour after the store opened and introduced myself to Jason, the manager. He was a no-nonsense kind of guy who laid out the ground rules right away.

"You will get breaks and a lunch just like my other employees. I expect you to get results, so no screwing around. You're here on corporate's dime and in spite of my objections, but as long as you're in my store, you'll follow my rules. Rule number one: I want all shoplifters apprehended and turned over to the police. I don't care if they cry and beg. I don't care if they're little old ladies, homeless bums, or children stealing on a dare. Shoplifters will be prosecuted. Rule number two: nobody sues us for false arrest. Wait until they're out of the store and four or five feet past the entrance before you confront



them. And for God's sake, don't touch them unless they try to run." He looked at my arm. "If you have to grab them, fine, but don't hurt anyone."

In addition to walking around pretending to shop, I was able to keep an eye on the customers through a one-way mirror set into an alcove above the sales floor and on the monitors in the manager's office that were hooked up to several closed circuit TV cameras. When I was out on the floor I also had the benefit of a couple of convex mirrors that enabled me to see around corners into the adjacent aisles. How anyone got away with shoplifting in this store was a mystery.

I only caught one shoplifter that day, a teenaged girl who sobbed and pleaded all the way back to the little table in the break room I was using as a desk. It was late afternoon, and Jason wasn't in the store. He had to come back that evening to close the store, so he had gone home right after lunch. I decided to let the girl go after a little tough love. I bought us each a soda from the break room vending machine and explained to her how being arrested for shoplifting could affect her future, then made her read and sign an agreement never to shoplift again. This was a little something I came up with on my own, and I thought it was pretty clever. It read, "I understand that shoplifting is theft and theft is a crime. I understand that the businesses that lose money to shoplifters don't just write off these losses. They raise the prices that consumers pay for their products, and they pay their employees lower wages. By stealing from a store I am really stealing from the customers and employees of that store. I swear that I will never shoplift again." At the bottom of the page was a space for the shoplifter's name and home phone number.

I watched the girl read over the paper, her hands shaking and tears still running down her face. On the bulletin board behind her was a list of store employees with a smiley face or a frowney face next to each name; Jason managed his employees like a kindergarten teacher. When the girl was finished I handed her a pen and asked, "Do you understand what you're signing?"

She scribbled her name and looked up at me. "I understand. Can I go home, now?"

"In a minute." I checked her signature against the name on her I.D. and dialed her phone number. The name on the answering machine message was the same as the girl's last name. I gave her I.D. back and walked her out of the store. Her friends were waiting for her in the parking lot, and as she climbed into their car she turned and shouted, "Screw you, hippie!" I was not looking forward to day two.

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Day two started with Jason chewing me out for not holding the previous day's shoplifter for the police. He wagged his finger in my face and raised his voice to a level that was supposed to intimidate me. "We talked about this yesterday. I want all shoplifters turned over to the police. It's simple. Stealing is a crime, and I want any thief who steals from my store punished. If you can't do it I'll call your employer and have you replaced with someone who can. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes."

"Yes, wha..."

He almost said, "Yes what?" Implying that he wanted me to say, "Yes sir," but I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and his eyes were shifting back and forth from my twitching bicep to my flapping stump. I was contracting and relaxing those muscles on purpose. I discovered this technique long ago. Some people were intimidated and some were appalled, but no one was able to concentrate on anything else. I left him standing open-mouthed in his office and went out to the sales floor.

Beat House had recently started stocking vinyl records; the kind people used to listen to before CDs and digital downloads. I liked looking at the records because you could actually see the artwork on the album covers. I was flipping through a box of Beatles records when I saw the man with the leather briefcase. He was smartly dressed in a dark blue pinstriped suit, a white shirt and a cranberry-colored tie. I wouldn't have noticed him, but he was balancing his briefcase on his knee and fiddling with one of the latches. He wasn't near a camera but was in sight of the one-way mirror, so I hi-tailed it to the back room and up the ladder to the alcove. The problem with using the one-way mirror is that the alcove is so narrow you have to crawl in on your stomach. It's not very deep, but in order to see down onto the sales floor you have to wiggle in at least as far as your knees. Hard enough with two hands, I imagine, but with one? I crawled in and got a bird's eye view of the man with the briefcase. He was in one of the DVD aisles, shoveling DVDs into his open briefcase as fast as he could. Most of the CDs and DVDs have sensor tape on their packages. If the tape hasn't been deactivated by a cashier it sets off a buzzer as it passes out the front door. I wondered how Mister Briefcase was going to cope with the buzzer. When he snapped it closed and headed for the door I pushed myself out of the

alcove. At least I tried to push myself out of the alcove. My belt buckle got snagged on a screw. It took a lot of squirming to get it free, so by the time I got downstairs he was already at the door and the buzzer was buzzing. I caught up to him out on the street. His BMW convertible was parked, top down, at the curb, and he tossed the briefcase onto the passenger's seat as he slid behind the wheel. I hollered for him to stop, but he started it up, pulled out into traffic, and was T-boned by a minivan.

Both cars stopped cold, their engines off and water and oil puddling on the pavement. The air smelled like gasoline, so I figured the fire department would be called in to hose down the street. The briefcase had been knocked to the floor, so I reached into the BMW and grabbed it. Neither driver was hurt, but the passenger in the minivan, a young woman in a flowered jumper, had bumped her head on the doorframe and had a cut over one eye. I used my cell phone to call for the police and an ambulance. When Mister Briefcase held out his hand for the briefcase I identified myself as store security. He sat down on the curb and started crying. He was giving the teenaged girl from the day before a run for her money in the sobbing department when the police arrived.

I jotted down his name, address, and driver's license number but left the driver's license with him. He was going to need it for the accident report. I told him to come back into the store when he was through with the cops and took the briefcase with me, back to the break room. He had stolen four DVDs—all John Wayne movies he probably could have picked up for a couple bucks apiece at a garage sale. Under the DVDs in his briefcase were a variety of pamphlets for a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, Dr. Rogan. That was the name on his driver's license, so I flipped through the pamphlets, and there was

his picture. My shoplifter was a doctor, and obviously one with psychological problems. Why would a guy who drove a Beamer steal a handful of DVDs? I didn't blame him for being upset. A little negative publicity could really hurt his business. On the other hand I'd been warned not to let any more shoplifters go, and I needed the job. My rent wasn't going to pay itself. I suppose I should have gone out and filed a complaint with the cops who'd responded to the traffic accident. Instead, I slid the briefcase behind the desk in Jason's office and went back to work. Jason had left to take his afternoon nap. He made it a point to close the store himself every night, even though any of his shift supervisors could have handled it. I left him a note explaining the briefcase and making it seem like the police at the accident scene hadn't wanted to complicate their paperwork by taking Dr. Rogan in for shoplifting, too. I told him the good doctor would report back, and asked him to call the police when he showed up if I had already gone home. Dr. Rogan didn't return that day.

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Louise called me on my cell phone as I was driving back to my Hollywood Hills apartment and invited me to dinner. I left the car out on Beachwood Drive just long enough to clean up and change my shirt, then headed out to Louise's place in the valley. She had decided to cook, and I caught the scent of garlic as I let myself in the front door. Louise had given me her spare key a month ago, but this was the first time I'd used it. I was immediately sorry I had. I heard Louise and Robert arguing in the kitchen.

"I don't want to eat dinner with him. I don't even want him in my house."

"Technically, dear, it's my house, but I like to think of it as our house. Either way, he's my guest and he's coming for dinner. I don't know what the problem is between you two, but I expect you to eat with us, and I expect you to be polite."

I didn't hear Robert's response. I went back outside, closed the door, and rang the bell. Louise came to the door a minute later. She gave me a peck on the cheek and asked, "Why didn't you use your key?"

"Oh, yeah. I guess I forgot. What smells good?"

"Mushroom risotto."

Dinner was uncomfortable. Louise kept trying to bring Robert into the conversation, but he kept quiet, staring down at his plate and pushing his food around with his fork. He sat in silence while Louise and I traded stories about our workdays. I told her all about Doctor Briefcase, and when I finished Robert finally spoke up.

"Your boss told you to turn all the shoplifters over to the cops, and instead you let this clown go? The guy's probably rich as hell. He doesn't need to steal." He laughed.

"God, I wish I could go to Beat House tomorrow morning when you try to explain this. You're going to get your ass handed to you."

Louise said, "That's enough."

Robert pushed his chair back and left the table. There was just as much food on his plate as when he had started, but now it was just a pile of brown mush.

"That kid really hates me."

Louise put her hand on mine. "He's just confused. He misses his dad and thinks I'm trying to replace him."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I went back to my risotto, but I couldn't finish mine, either. I had lost my taste for it.

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Robert was right; I got my ass handed to me the next morning.

"Your shoplifter didn't come back, yesterday," Jason said.

"Well, we've got plenty of contact information for him. All we have to do is turn it over to the police when we file the complaint."

"It should have been done yesterday." He tossed the briefcase at me. "Go down to the police station right now and take care of it. And don't screw this up. I had a little chat with your boss, Rick, and he promised me that if I have any more trouble with you he'll fire you."

On my way to the police station I called Rick on my cell phone to verify what Jason had said.

"That's right. I can't afford to lose this contract. If we do a good job at the Westwood location, they'll give us their security business for the entire L.A. area, and that includes the big store in Pasadena. I was pissed at Don for giving you this assignment in the first place. Screw it up and you're fired."

"I'm not the only one working this store, am I? Who do you have on the evening shift?"

"No one."

"No one? People shoplift at night, too."

"Jason doesn't want evening security. He says he can keep an eye on the store at night."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah. I argued it with him for over an hour. It's just you. You've got one month to significantly reduce the store's shrinkage, or we lose the contract, and you lose your job."

There was a crowd at the police station, so by the time I got back to Beat House Jason had gone home to take his afternoon nap. I figured the rest of the day would be a breeze, so I went to the break room, bought a soda and took it into the manager's office so I could keep an eye on the monitors while I drank it. There wasn't much traffic out on the floor, and I only had a half hour left of my shift, so I was feeling nice and relaxed when I glanced at the monitor for the camera over the Rock/Pop aisle and saw a kid in a blue-hooded sweatshirt shoveling CDs into his backpack. I hurried out to the sales floor, and as I came up the center aisle toward the doors I saw him pass his backpack through the sensors two or three times, making sure the two clerks behind the counter heard the buzzer. They both stopped ringing up their customers and started shouting at me and pointing at the kid.

"I see him," I shouted back.

The kid stood there until I was close enough to see his face, then pulled his hood back, grinned at me and stepped outside. It was Robert. I ran to catch him, but he was waiting for me out on the sidewalk.

"Hey, Hand Job," he called. "Over here."



"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I was furious. I grabbed the backpack, but he still held one of the shoulder straps. Then he grinned at me with a look that I can only describe as triumphant.

"What now?" he asked.

"This is crazy, Robert. Do you want to go to jail?"

"What I want is to see you crash and burn. If you let me go, you lose your job. If you turn me over to the cops, you lose my mom. I'll have an arrest record that will affect my whole future—school, job prospects; you name it. She'd never forgive you for that. You may be her boyfriend, but I'm her son, and blood is thicker than whatever fluids you two have been exchanging."

I was stunned. The kid had me. I really didn't know what to do. For a second, I thought about letting him go and telling Jason he outran me, that I'd lost him in traffic or something. One look at the store window squelched that idea. The two register clerks and the other employees who were working that afternoon were watching us, no doubt wondering why I was talking to the shoplifter instead of dragging his ass to the back room and calling the cops. I looked at the grin on Robert's face and a knot formed in my stomach.

"Why do you hate me, man? I didn't cause your parents' divorce; they were split up long before I met your mother."

"What, now you're going to play shrink with me?"

"No. I'm just trying to understand you. I'm crazy about your mother, and I think she likes me pretty well, too. I'm not trying to replace your dad. I've never disciplined you or tried to give you fatherly advice. I just wanted us to be friends."

"You want to understand me? Try this. I don't want you for my father or my friend. I don't want to go to ball games with you. I don't want you to take me to the movies. I don't want to have a game of catch in the back yard, though I would like to see you try that with one arm. I want you out of my life and out of my mother's life, and the 'why' is none of your business."

I didn't know what to say, so I tore the backpack out of his hand and fumbled with the zipper, trying to recover the CDs he'd stolen. Zippers were obviously designed for two-handed operation. Robert laughed at my frustration, so I tossed the pack over my shoulder and turned to go back inside. "Beat it," I said.

"Fine, but I'll be back to steal some more stuff tomorrow. That is, if you're still working here. With any luck, your boss will give you the ax as soon as he finds out you let another thief escape."

He smiled and waved to the store employees watching at the window, then sauntered off down the street. I went in and put the CDs from Robert's backpack onto the cart they use for things that need to be put out on the shelves. It was past time for me to sign out, so I got my coat and went home. Robert was right. The next morning Jason called me into his office. He dialed Rick at the agency, then handed me the phone and sat there, smiling, and watched while Rick fired me. I drove out to Santa Monica and spent

the rest of the day sitting on the beach, sifting the warm sand through my fingers and watching the waves roll in.

\*

Louise treated me to dinner the Saturday after I was fired from DonRick Investigations. I picked her up at the Tip Top after she finished her afternoon shift and drove out to a little cantina in Topanga Canyon. The place was decorated with chunky wood tables and chairs painted in bright reds and pale blues. Louise wore a colorful flowing skirt and blouse that matched the decor. She'd been there before. The Mexican food was authentic, and the selection of tequilas was impressive. It took me three or four shots—salt, tequila, lime—to get up the nerve to tell her about Robert's shoplifting spree. Even though I'm an adult, I felt a little like I was tattling on him. I didn't tell her about our conversation in front of the store, that he admitted he had purposely put me in a position where I had to choose between her or my job.

I said, "I just wish I could figure out why he hates me so much."

"I've put a lot of thought into this, and I honestly think it's all about his father. Robert idolized him when he was a little boy. The divorce was difficult, but when Thom moved to San Diego...well, it really hurt him."

"Robert still visits his dad, doesn't he?"

"Two weekends a month. The drive is just a little over two hours, but I'm sure it still seems to Robert like his dad is inaccessible."

"But..."

Louise held up her hand. "Wait. Here's my theory. Robert's angry. He's never stopped being hurt that his father left him. For a while he took it out on me, but Thom and I sat him down and explained to him that it wasn't my fault. I didn't drive his dad away. Besides, even if he is still mad at me, he has to suppress it. I'm the one taking care of him. I'm the one he lives with, and he can't really vent his anger on his dad." She let out a derisive snort. "He still thinks the guy walks on water. So, who's left? For a while he took it out on his teachers. He's been suspended from school a dozen times and was almost expelled for punching his counselor."

"So, he hates everybody?"

"Sort of. He finally got it together at school. He even got pretty good grades last year. Guess when he stopped acting out at school."

"I don't know. When?"

"When you and I started dating. You're the first man I've gone on more than one date with since the divorce."

"First?"

Louise reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "Okay, first and last. Anyway, you were the perfect foil. The guy who took his dad's place. He's not going to stop being mad at you until he stops being mad at his father."

"It's a good theory. Depressing, but good."

After dinner I dropped her off at her house. Next weekend Robert would be visiting his dad, and she and I could spend the night together. I noticed Louise's nondescript little Honda in the driveway and got an idea. Before she went inside I asked,

"Would you mind swapping cars with me this week? I've got an idea about the manager at Beat House, and I'm pretty sure he knows my car."

"You're going to follow him?"

"Something like that. It's just a hunch."

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It had rained on and off all day, and everything smelled clean for a change, most of the smog having been scrubbed out of the air. I sat in the front passenger's seat of Louise's car, a block down from Beat House, and watched the front door through a pair of binoculars.

The first evening I parked a half block up the street, and when Jason and the other employees filed out to close the store I had to scrunch way down in the seat to keep from being seen. After that I always parked at least a block away, sometimes further. Jason had a habit that intrigued me. I noticed it on the first night of my stake out. After locking the Beat House doors and walking to his car, he would drive around the block and slow down as he passed the store before going home. I didn't follow him, but after I noticed this behavior, I stuck around on subsequent nights to see if he repeated it. He did. Every night he locked the doors, watched his employees go to their cars, then drove around the block.

I had started my stake out on a Thursday night, and now it was the following Wednesday. There was still a light mist coming down, and the pavement was wet, reflecting streetlights and the lights from the few cars that drove past. Jason and the Beat House employees stepped out into the drizzle, the employees running for their cars while Jason locked up. He went to his car and, as he had on previous nights, drove around the

block. This time, though, he pulled into the space in front of the store and parked. He unlocked the door and went back in, coming out a couple minutes later with a cardboard box. He unlocked his car's trunk, put the box in the trunk and went back into the store. I called 9-1-1 as I walked up the street. I was leaning on his car's rear fender when he came out of the store with a second box.

I said, "Whatcha got there, Jason?" I have to admit, he kept his cool for a minute or so.

"None of your business, freak. If you must know, I'm taking home some cleaning supplies I brought in to clean the restrooms. They were filthy, and the store ran out of bleach."

He was putting the second box in the trunk while he talked, and he leaned way in, farther than he needed to set the box down. I was ready when he came up with the tire iron. I caught his hand as he swung at my head. I gave it a squeeze and heard his thumb pop. He gave out a little yelp, and the tire iron clanked on the sidewalk. I kicked it down the street away, just in case, but he wasn't interested in continuing the fight. He walked off, leaving his car behind. He was less than a block away when the two squad cars pulled up.

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Not only did I get my job back but I renegotiated the terms of my employment with DonRick Investigations. The big shrinkage problem at the Westwood Beat House had been Jason. Every night when he closed the store he was supposed to phone the alarm company. He and the rest of the staff would then have three minutes to exit the

store and lock the doors before the alarms were activated. Jason would gather all the employees at the front door, call the alarm company from the phone by the cash registers, and march everyone out to watch him lock the doors. On the nights he stole merchandise he'd call his girlfriend, pretending it was the alarm company, come back to the store and load up his car. Then he'd call the real alarm company, lock up and go home. He was never caught by the store's security cameras because he always turned off the recorders before closing the store.

Rick and Don practically begged me to come back to work. Actually, Rick did most of the begging. Don's only comment was, "Buddy, you grabbed the bull by the tail and looked him right in the eyes." Beat House corporate was so impressed with my solution to their problem they gave DonRick the security contract for every store west of the Rocky Mountains. I'm in charge of the whole shebang and not on salary, either. I get a percentage share of every store we cover. I have to travel a lot, but Louise comes with me whenever she can get away from the Tip Top. Last week I went to check on the Tucson store, and Louise and Robert both came along. Robert wanted to take a look at the University of Arizona. I actually got him to smile once. I told him I'd had a *hand* in solving the Beat House shrinkage problem.

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