

Women screaming, sirens blazing, it was about six o'clock in the morning, the sun barely piercing through the broken venetian. My eyes were hazy. The silhouette of a woman lingered on the other side of the frosted window pane of the door.

'Mr. Montgomery?' The woman's voice was muffled by the heavy door but the continuous thumping on the door was less so. My head was spinning, palpitating with the banging of the door, *how much had I drunk last night?* I checked my glass – empty – not a drop of whiskey left. The bottle next to it was of little comfort either, not enough whiskey left to make up a shot. *Ah well.* I lit a cigarette. I took the bottle and poured the last few drops into the chipped cup of cold tea which was perched on the other side of the old desk, it had only been there a day or two, that'll do. 'Mr. Montgomery?' the voice called again followed by another series of thundering knocks, it was Mary Wilkins, the woman from two doors down. It doesn't matter how many times I enlighten her with the information that I am, in fact, a private investigator she still thinks I'm a police officer. I staggered to the door and struggled to turn the key. As I opened the door screaming voices and sirens resonate across the Park. I'm intrigued. I staggered past the frantic Mary Wilkins, grabbed my coat and stick, and headed for the main door.

I limped down the three steps that led away from the door, across the cracked path, through the rusted iron-gate that was swinging on one hinge, and through one of the small breaches in the hedge that surrounded Hanley Park. I had almost, but not quite, forgotten Mary Wilkins. She was still behind me, articulating her opinions and outrage vociferously. She was terrifying. She never had children, and she had married more times than should be legal – all incredibly young and all fled within a year. I have never understood how she got them down the aisle in the first place. The sun had barely risen and yet she was in full make-up. Her lips were thick with red. Her hair was greying yet perfectly styled on the top of her head. Her body was draped in a tight sequinned dress, every lump and sag perfectly swathed without kindness. She wore black suspenders and stockings with black stiletto-heeled shoes and an open fur-trimmed coat. She looked like a harlot, less a lady of pleasure, more a woman of pain. She had a phobia of aging but her pinched face told her story. Her eyes were sunk and creased with sagging flesh, the lines on her face were like the rings of an ancient tree. She continued to follow close me. Her heels were sinking in the ground. She was as slow as me. The intonation of her voice was irksome. The sirens and screaming from The Park sounded like the smoothness of Shelton Brooks in contrast. I used my stick to push me away from Mary Wilkins and moved swiftly across the grounds towards the milling folk of Parkway and surrounding streets.