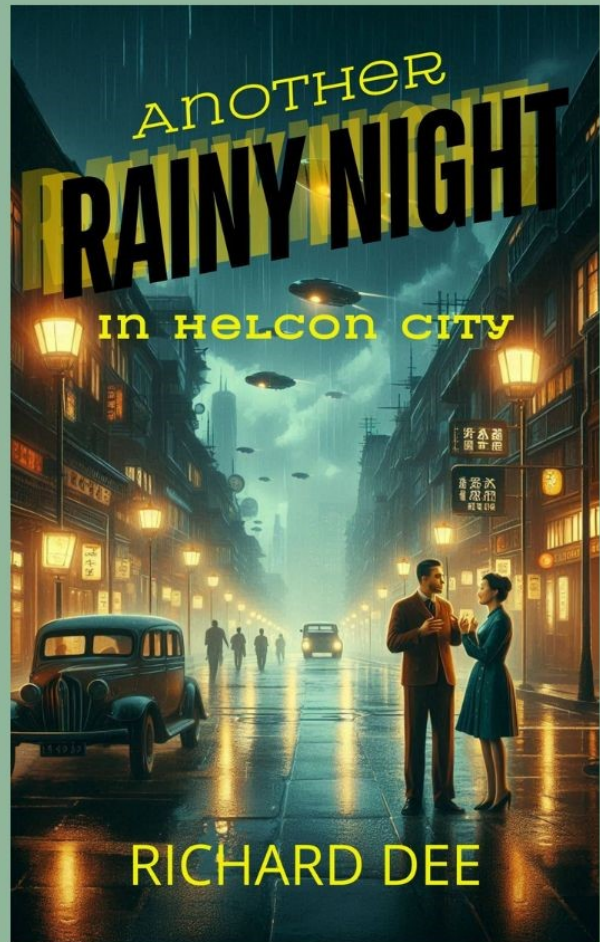


**A private eye who's  
down on his luck.**

**A grieving widow,  
looking for answers.**

**A dead cop, with  
enough secrets  
to blow the  
town apart.**

**The people that just  
want it all to go away.**



***Something's got to give.***

# Chapter One

I was on my second whiskey of the day, out of this glass anyway, when it happened.

Things had been slow since the Corla incident. Work had dried up, it seemed like nobody wanted a private investigator who couldn't work out what his own wife had been up to. Even in a place like Helcon City, people noticed these things.

I was leaving the office earlier and earlier every day. I always seemed to end up in Sam's, it was just too close to the office. Hell, it was even on my way back to my empty apartment. Sam kept a quiet bar, he didn't believe in wall-to-wall sports screens or blaring propaganda. All the patrons kept to themselves, which suited me just fine. I had never been one for the social niceties.

The whiskey and the solitude provided me with a way to feel sorry for myself. When I shut the door to my apartment, the whiskey helped me to see the place through different eyes. And because I did my drinking in Sam's, I could always kid myself that I wasn't one of those sad acts drowning his sorrows in an empty apartment.

I would have to do something to earn some money soon, Sam was making more and more 'pay your tab' noises, the trouble was, my heart was no longer in the job.

I had my head down, watching the amber liquid in my glass, so I never saw her approach. The first thing I knew was the light touch of her warm fingers on my arm. Just for a second, I forgot the loneliness I'd felt every day for the last two months.

"Buy me a drink," she said. "And then take me outside."

Her voice was soft and musical, I turned. She was pretty too, with long golden hair, blue eyes you could get lost in and dressed to show off a few decent curves. Although the implication of her words was clear, what she was offering wasn't for me.

I lifted my left hand. "Sorry sugar," I said. "I'm flattered but I'm already taken."

Which was a lie. Corla was gone and I hadn't wanted to take the ring off. It all seemed so soon, so raw.

"You don't understand," she said. The soft voice was gone, replaced by urgency and fear. "There's a man over there, dark suit, blue tie. He's watching me. He's been following me around for the last couple of days. He never speaks. It's freaking me out. If I leave on my own," the voice faltered for a second. "Well, I think he's going to kill me."

I looked in the mirror behind the bar. I could see an overweight fellow taking an interest in her while pretending not to. It looked like it was decision time. Was I just going to tell her to take her chances, out there in the rain? Become another statistic in Helcon City.

"I know who you are," she added. "People say you used to be good. Can you keep me alive? I can pay you."

Flattery just might get her anywhere. "What have you done to deserve that?" I asked. "Something like that seems pretty extreme to me."

She didn't answer, her eyes were filling with tears. "Please help me," was all she said. The voice had gone back to soft, beguiling even. Maybe she was in trouble, maybe she was just a good actress. Perhaps it was all a setup and I'd be mugged when I stepped outside, not that they'd get much. There was only one way to find out.

I drained my glass. It looked like I had just taken on a new job. "Come on then," I said. Taking her hand, we stood and started walking out. I listened for the sound of Mr Blue Tie getting up. "By the way, who are you?"

"I'm Dolores Kovac," she said. I recognised the name, or at least the Kovac bit. Mike Kovac was a cop. The word on the street was that he was dirty, on the mob's payroll. The other thing I knew about him was that he was very recently dead. Nobody was officially interested in the reason for his sudden, lead-induced demise. It had just been chalked off as a falling out among thieves, good riddance for a bad apple.

We reached the door. I pulled it open. Outside the streetlights sparkled as the rain reflected the light back. I pushed the contact on my belt, activating the anti-static shield that kept the rain off. Beside me, I heard the click as Delores did the same. The rain swerved around us and bounced into the gutter.

"He didn't do it," she said.

"Do what?" I scanned the street. There were two cabs outside. I ignored them. It would be easy for us both to get in one and drive away but it would only delay the inevitable confrontation. Before I committed much more to the job, I wanted to know who Mr Blue Tie was working for. There was an alley to my right, that would do.

"What they said, work for the mob."

Cars whistled past, silent with their induction motors. Above us, in the gaps between the hi-rises, the air was thick with flashing lights, as ships from the nearby port flew overhead. Probably filled with lucky people getting away from Helcon City. I'd had my chance. Corla and I should have taken it.

"You can tell me later," I said. "Right now, just come with me. Quickly."

She ignored the puddles as I dragged her down the street and into an alley. I peered out, back at the door to Sam's place. Blue Tie was in the street looking this way and that. Come this way, I thought. I didn't want to have to chase him down the street, in the rain. It was undignified.

"Whatever happens, stay here," I said. She nodded, holding my arm like it was keeping her afloat in a storm.

Blue Tie lumbered towards us, his feet splashing in the puddles. He had no anti-stat, just a hat to keep the rain off. Dark patches were already showing on his jacket. I let him get past me and pulled out my pistol. It might have been noisy in the street but he heard the sound as I worked the action.

"Hold it right there," I shouted. "Hands where I can see them."

## Chapter Two

He complied, apparently unfazed. “You’re making a big mistake,” he growled.

“Let me be the judge of that,” I said. “Who are you and why are you after the lady here?”

“Can I turn around?” he asked.

“Sure, but do it slowly and keep your hands up.”

He spun, slowly. Up close, he had a fat face and folds of damp flesh around his neck where rain had soaked his collar. Wispy brown hair poked out from under his hat, plastered in streaks to the skin. His jacket had ridden up, stretching across his ample stomach. “I gotta message for her,” he said. “And you, if you’re working for her.”

“Go on then,” I said, “let’s hear it.”

“The word is that she’s poking her nose in,” he said. “People don’t like that. Her best plan would be to go somewhere else and start again. I hear that Persephone is a nice place.”

He stopped. The action of speaking with his hands up had made him wheeze. After a pause, he carried on. “She should use some of the money she got from her husband's life insurance.”

“Is that it?” I asked.

“Do you need more?” he sounded puzzled.

“In my experience, there’s always an ‘or else’.”

He tried to shrug, the jacket button strained. “Just the usual.” He glanced around, then pushed past me and Delores and vanished down the alley. I wondered what had made him rush off.

A patrol car stopped beside us, the light from a flashlight illuminated my face, blinding me.

“Everything OK here?” said a voice from the vehicle.

“No problems, officer,” I said. “The lady and I were just chatting.”

“Why the gun? Lower it now and show me some I.D.”

“She was being threatened,” I said, pushing the gun back into my pocket. “He ran off when you arrived. I’m a private investigator.”

“Sure you are,” he said. “And I’m chief of police. Lady, what do you say?”

“This man works for me,” Delores said, coming into the light. There was a double take when he recognised her. “Hello, Mrs Kovac,” he said. “Is that right?”

“How ya doin', Jeff?” she smiled. “It’s OK. Mr Reyder here is looking out for me, there’s no drama.”

He looked at me, you could see the name register in his head. Two people who had history, both trouble, in the same place. A third, unknown, who he had seen running down the alley. It was too late to catch them now, not if he wanted to stay dry. There was nothing worth bothering about here. It would make good gossip in the station house but that was it.

“Well, OK then, if you say so. Stay safe,” he said, as the car pulled away.

Delores came to stand beside me in the glow of a streetlight.

“Thank you,” she said.

“That’s OK, let me walk you to your house. In case he’s still hanging around.”

“Sure, do you know where it is?”

That was a stupid question, it had been plastered all over the news for days after Mike had been found dead, while everyone scrambled to dig up the dirt on him and senior men in the Helcon City police panicked at what they might find.

“Of course you do,” she added, as we set off.

“What do you want from me?” I asked her.

“I want you to find out the truth,” she said.

“Is that all?” Finding out the truth in Helcon City was like peeling an onion. Every layer was a different version of the truth. It was up to you to stop when you got to the layer you wanted, one either side could be dangerous.

She shook her head. “Find out what got him killed and who did it. What were they hiding? Perhaps clearing my husband's name will get everyone off my back.”

Nothing much then. “That's a big job,” I said. “It'll cost a fair bit.” And I didn't just mean the money.

“I can pay you,” she said.

“From the insurance?”

She laughed. “Blue Tie man was way off the truth. I haven't got any insurance money, not yet. They won't pay up, not while there's a criminal charge hanging over Mike. I can't get his police pension either. Because they said they were going to fire him for misconduct. I work shifts in a care home, it's just enough to pay the bills. If you can prove he wasn't crooked the insurance will have to cough up.”

This would be one of those performance-related jobs. If I didn't perform, I didn't get paid. What would Sam say about that? I had an idea.



“I’m gonna need some cash up front, for expenses, you know how it is.”

She smiled, “I guess.” We had arrived at her house. It looked bare, different now that the cameras and microwave transmission vans had gone.

“Wait her,” she said on the porch. She used her thumbprint to open the door and vanished inside, shutting the door behind her. A minute later she was back. She handed me an envelope, “Here’s five hundred,” she said, “It’s all the cash I have lying around.”

It would have to do. Half of it would have to go to Sam, it would keep him quiet for a bit. With the rest, I could eat and pay a couple of the more pressing bills. With luck, despite what I said, it shouldn’t take me long to find the truth. As long as it was the right truth.

“Thank you,” I said, “I’ll be in touch.”

I was wondering if I’d get invited in for coffee. Not for any other reason than to thank me for walking her home and saving her life. And believing her, or at least not dismissing her story out of hand.

“Goodnight.” She shut the door.

As I walked away, I couldn’t help but think that by exonerating a dead man I would probably be implicating a live one. They could both cause me trouble, in different ways.

But with nothing else to do, I might as well have a try.

## Chapter Three

The next morning, on my way to work, I went in to see Sam. I'd put on a clean suit and paid a bit of attention to how I looked. I needed to shape up, I'd let myself go and, after all, I was working a case.

He looked surprised to see me. I wasn't part of his normal breakfast clientele, which mainly consisted of workers at the end of a night shift. It was evening to them and they were having a swift drink before they went home to sleep.

Even so, automatically he reached for the bottle and a glass when he saw me. "Hi, Rex, how come you're all dressed up? The only time I see you in a suit, you're either on a date or in court. Which is it today?"

"Neither one, Sam," I replied. "Just trying to look the part."

He smirked, his mind putting two and two together and getting about seven. "You need a livener?"

I shook my head, "no thanks, Sam," I said. "It's a bit early for me. I've come to sort my tab out."

His eyes lit up. "That's good," he said, "the managers been on at me about outstanding tabs."

He thought for a moment, decided the time was right for a little gentle interrogation. "The lady you saw, last night, Mrs Novak, wasn't it?"

"Kovac," I said.

“Yeah, whoever,” he replied. “I saw you leave together. Is she the reason for the spring in your step?” He waited, savouring the prospect of some juicy gossip.

“She’s got a job for me, Sam,” I said. “Nothing more, it’s purely professional. I got some money up front.” I put two-hundred and fifty on the table. “How will that do for covering my tab?”

He looked at the notes. “That’s a pretty good chunk out of it,” he said. “It’ll buy you a couple of weeks grace.”

That was a relief. “In a couple of weeks, Sam, I should have the rest for you.”

I turned to go. “Just watch yourself with her,” he said. “I know you shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but her man was in deep with the mob.”

“She says not, according to her, it was a set up. What have you heard?”

Sam smiled wryly. “Just the usual rubbish,” he said. “The word on the street is that she knew all about what Mike was up to. According to some, she might even have been part of it. If you’re trying to clear her name, it’s not going to be easy. Just watch your back.”

“I’ll be careful, Sam.”

“Sure you will,” he said. “Even so, if I was you, I wouldn’t have taken the job.”

I reached for the notes, “then perhaps I should give her the money back.” Sam grabbed them and shook his head. “Too late for that,” he muttered. “It looks like you’re in there to the finish.”

My office was in a run-down block, up on the second floor. The frosted glass door still bore the name Rex and Corla Reyder, Private Investigators. One day, I’d have to get it changed.

Inside, the first room had a secretary’s desk and a threadbare couch, a coffee machine and filing cabinets. Two doors led to my office and a small kitchen/washroom. These days, there was no

secretary to say hello. I'd had to let Mercie go after Corla, there wasn't enough work to justify her job. My typing had improved, maybe there was a new career opportunity there?

I'd hardly started my second coffee when I had a visitor. Two, to be exact. Both of them were in uniform and neither of them seemed happy. They didn't bother to introduce themselves, just sat and waited for me to speak.

They looked around my office with a kind of disbelief. I suppose I had let the place go a little but it was no worse than the local precinct, and the smell was definitely more wholesome. I had even managed to find two clean coffee cups for them.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, when they had made themselves comfortable.

"I overheard some scuttlebutt," said the senior one, "it seems you've been consorting with the wife of a crooked policeman."

"I wasn't aware that it was a crime," I said. "I was just protecting the lady. Someone was trying to hurt her and it seemed right for me to step in."

"You're on the wrong side of this, Rex." The other one said. "Our advice is to stay out of it. Tell the lady that what's done is done. She might consider leaving Helcon City, a fresh start would be good for her."

"Persephone's nice, so I hear," said the senior man. That brought me up short. I'd heard that before.

"That's exactly what Mr Blue Tie told me last night," I said. "Is he one of yours?"

They exchanged glances. "I don't think so." Junior said, a little too quickly for my liking. "And what sort of a name is that?"

"It describes him," I said, "he didn't leave me a calling card."

“Look,” Senior policeman insisted. “She's trouble. Her husband was trouble. Defending a bad cop won't look good on your CV.”

“But what if she's right?” I said. His look told me what he thought of that idea.

“Consider this as your last chance to walk away,” he said. They both got up and went to leave.

“Thanks for the coffee,” Junior said. Although they'd hardly touched it.

“You've already lost one lady,” Senior said, over his shoulder as he went through the door.

“That was unfortunate. Losing another could be seen as careless. Don't make the same mistake again.”

“What do you mean?” I called after him. “Corla was an accident.” But there was no reply. They had already shut the door. I could hear laughter. A second later, I heard the outer door slam.

His comment, and the laughter, had shaken me. Perhaps that was the idea.

I sat for a moment and considered my options. I'd agreed to help Delores but it looked like everyone was against me already. What did I expect, after all, the facts screamed out that it was a waste of time.

Then I wondered, did I agree to help Delores as an attempt at some sort of atonement, because I didn't save Corla? Or was that too simplistic?

I'd taken so her money, whether I liked it or not, I was going to have to do something to earn it. That meant I'd have to research the true story of the demise of Mike Kovac, not the version that the media had dished out.

To start on that, I needed a favour. I needed Evelyn, she worked in police records. If I asked her nicely, she might get me a copy of the official reports. There was only one problem. She had once been our best friend. And she still hadn't come to terms with how it had all ended.

## Chapter Four

“No.”

That sounded pretty final. “But, Evelyn, please,” I had to try again. I didn’t want to sound desperate, even though I was.

We were seated in Donnies, a place that passed for a good restaurant in Helcon City. It was as good as I could afford these days and the food wasn’t that bad. It was better than my home cooking for starters. The wood panelled booths gave you a bit of privacy too.

We had history in the place, it had been where Corla and I had had our first date, where the three of us used to meet up for meals, drinks and parties when we were younger and poorer. When I’d asked for her help, Evelyn had reluctantly agreed to see me for a late evening meal.

If she wondered why I was calling her, when we had hardly spoken in the two months since Corla’s funeral, she never said. It had been a bad day, when we had laid Corla to rest. There were only us two and the priest, it was raining and we were both still raw with grief. Me for my wife and her for the friend she’s grown up with.

We’d cried on each other’s shoulders, got very drunk and ended up in bed together. She’d left before I woke, a note on my pillow said that we’d made a mistake. My calls had all gone to voicemail and after a while, I’d given up trying to call and explain. I hadn’t wanted to lose contact with her, she was the only connection I had to Corla. In desperation, I’d sent her a long message, so she could read it without the pressure of having to answer.

She replied and agreed that we should talk, but that things were different. We’d spoken a couple of times, I’d asked her out and she’d always said no. This time she said yes.

Evelyn had arrived with a hat pulled down, so I didn't recognise her until she slipped into the seat opposite me and took it off. She only relaxed when she was tucked away in a corner of the booth, out of casual sight. We made small talk, about how it had been too long, how I was managing on my own and all the little things about our lives. We agreed that we should never have lost touch and dined on Donnie's famous Bar-B-Q, which brought back too many memories. When we couldn't avoid the subject any longer, I told her the real reason why I had wanted to see her. That was when the trouble started.

"Come on Eve, it's just a file," I persisted. I handed her a blank drive. "All you have to do is stick this in your machine and press copy."

"I'd do it for you," she said. "Without a second thought. If it was anyone else's file. But Mike Kovac? He was bad news. Trouble with a capital tr."

"My client says different."

She raised an eyebrow, "your client wouldn't be female, would she?"

"You know I can't tell you that," I said.

She gave me another look. "I hear Delores Kovac's been doing the rounds. She's seeing all the P.I.'s, trying to get someone to help her. So far, they've all said no. Looks like she's reached you."

I decided to be honest with her. She deserved that. "She asked me to help her while I was in Sam's. I had to protect her from a stranger who was trying to make her leave town. That got me interested. If someone was after her to shut her up, I figured there must be something in her story. So I agreed to help her. Then, next morning, I had two police come to the office. I'd never seen them before. They told me to leave her alone."

“There you are, then. Perhaps you should take their advice. That was part of why I agreed to see you, I hear things at work and I heard that you were seen together.”

“I was going to walk away,” I said. OK, I was lying but she wouldn’t know that. I played my trump card. “Then they bought up Corla. Told me I’d be making a mistake with Delores, like I had with Corla. I didn’t know what they meant, somehow it felt like a threat.”

She stopped, the words that she was about to speak remained unsaid. A shadow passed over her face. “Now why would they do that?” she asked.

“Unless...,” I let the comment hang.

“They know something about what happened to Corla?”

“Yeah, exactly that,” I said. “And they think they can use whatever it is to keep me quiet.”

“But there’s nothing,” she said. “No surprises.” She should know. Evelyn had looked through everything she could find, in an effort to help me make sense of it all. Corla was seeing another man, it happens. There was a hit and run. It happens. Nobody was ever found, the camera at the intersection hadn’t worked. These were all things that happened. There was nothing suspicious. Just another tale of a marriage that had ended badly.

“There’s another possibility,” Evelyn said.

“What’s that?” I couldn’t think of anything.

“What if the two things are connected. Corla’s death and Mike Kovac.”

“That’s crazy,” I said. “How can they be connected, I never met Mike Kovac, he wasn’t the man that Corla was having an affair with.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “You’re the detective. I’m just the girl who works in the archives.”



I didn't like to admit it, but it made sense. If there was something like that, it would explain a lot.

"What are you going to do then?" I said. "You have the power to make my job easier, but I'm going to carry on, whether you help me or not. Because you've put a doubt in my mind."

"You know," she said. "I wasn't going to help you. I told you to get here first so that people wouldn't see us arrive together. Everyone in the precinct has been on eggshells since Mike was found. They've been watching Delores do the rounds, I guessed it was only a matter of time till she got to you. But, if the police are threatening you with something about Corla to keep you from investigating, I'm not so sure anymore."

She picked up the drive and put it in her purse. "I owe it to her, as much as you. Leave it with me," she said. "Now, what's on the dessert menu, after all, it's on expenses, right?"