

STORY NUMBER 7 OF 8

# HELL OF AN AFFAIR

BY DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI

**I am the master of all I survey.**

Well, not really.

This is Los Angeles, after all.

Still, I like to crack that joke with people. Makes my job sound almost ...important. My business card reads: WILLIAM SHELTON, P.L.S. (professional land surveyor), GREATER LOS ANGELES TITLE CO., DOWNTOWN DIVISION. But what I really do is drive my Lincoln around in the dry heat and set up my theodolite on its tripod and make little measurements and write them down in my notebook. Then I go home to my empty apartment on West Temple Street, where I stare at the walls and try not to climb them. Just me and my tripod, propped up in the corner, waiting for me to pick it up and report to work the next day.

I don't even know what made me notice that bar on Los Angeles Street—Ray's Café, 77.5 by 47.5 feet in a commercial zone.

But the Santa Ana winds were blowing and I was thirsty and I decided to go in.

It was noon. I stepped inside and sat at a wooden table for four, as if I were expecting three friends to join me. Which seemed slightly less desperate than sitting alone at the bar. I leaned the tripod against the opposite end of the table and waited for someone to notice me.

And after a few minutes, she did.

A shot and a cold glass of beer were placed down on the table in front of me and a beautiful woman took the seat next to me. Her scent reached me first—the aroma of jacaranda trees. Her dark hair and smooth white skin were just as intoxicating.

“I know you didn’t order this,” she said softly.

All at once it felt like the collar on my Bullock’s shirt had shrunk a few sizes.

“What is it?” I asked, stupidly.

She smiled. “A shot and a cold glass of beer.”

Only then did I realize that the beautiful woman sitting next to me was the waitress.

“Is there a menu?”

“You can have anything you want.”

“What’s your name?”

She smirked and tapped her right breast.

BONNIE.

“Good to meet you,” I said. “My name’s”

“Let’s go out tonight,” she said.

A statement; not a question. As if going out were a foregone conclusion.

“I’m sorry?”

“We close at two. Come in for a nightcap just before, and we’ll hit the town. What do you say?”

Now, I should have said:

No, that’s ridiculous. I report for work at the Greater Los Angeles Title Company, Downtown Division, at 8:00 a.m. sharp, and if we go out at 2:00 a.m. I won’t be able to get any sleep, and there’s a good chance I’ll record a wrong measurement in my notebook, which could be the start of endless legal and business trouble. Surveyors have been to clean, sober, and deadly accurate.

But of course I said:

“Okay.”

Back at the office Shep was reclining in his chair, sweating out a hangover, eyes barely open. Mallahan was at the accounting desk in the back. I dug my per diem out of my pocket, put it down on the blotter in front of Mallahan.

“What’s this?” Mallahan asked. “You skip lunch?”

“A friend treated me.”

Mallahan rolled his eyes. “And you’re giving this back? Billy, my friend, you’re about as black-and-white as a nun. You don’t have to give this back. We consider it part of your salary.”

The company gave its surveyors cash for lunch, parking, incidentals. Mallahan was the partner who doled it out every morning. But I could still feel the shot and beer rolling around in

my guts. I hoped Mallahan couldn't smell it on my breath. I would have felt like a heel keeping the dough on top of everything else. I let the money sit on the blotter.

"Okay, then," he said after a few moments, scooping up the bills and depositing them into a metal box he kept in his lower-left-hand drawer. Shep and Mallahan liked to keep their cash in one place. The company had done work for various banks, but they didn't trust banks. The Depression had wiped them out once before; Shep and Mallahan swore up and down that it would never happen again.

I sat down at my own desk to complete a few field reports while Mallahan grabbed his coat and hat and headed out for his lunch break. Always the same time; always the same place—Philippe's, on Alameda. Bought the same cheap beef sandwich, the same nickel cup of coffee.

After he returned, thirty minutes later, I spent the rest of afternoon with my theodolite on La Brea, taking measurements on a lot somebody wanted to turn into a department store. The tar pits were behind me. I know it isn't possible, but I swear I could feel the heat of the prehistoric goop on my back.

And I couldn't stop thinking about Bonnie.

Her lips.

Her skin, as fragrant and soft as jacaranda trees.

At exactly 1:55 a.m., I stepped into Ray's Café. The carousing was still happening full steam ahead, even though last call had been announced. I ordered a beer and drank it quick, my eyes watching Bonnie as she glided around the tables, picking up empty glasses and settling tabs.

At 2:05 a.m., she finally came up to me. "Ready to go?"

"Sure. Where to?"

We took my dark-red Lincoln Continental up the Cahuenga Pass to Mulholland. I hugged the curves until she told me to pull over at a lookout over the San Fernando Valley. The moment I hit the brakes she was in my lap, mashing her lips against mine. I could taste the same whiskey she'd given me earlier in the day. She had a small bottle in her purse. We passed the bottle back and forth until the lights down in the valley were a blur. We kissed some more and then she told me she wanted to see the ocean. I thought we should stay put, considering how much whiskey we'd knocked back, but she insisted.

"I want to dip my feet in the Pacific."

I should have casually glanced at my watch and said something about the time but didn't. Instead I put the car in drive and sped down Mulholland.

The crack-up happened a few miles later.

I took a curve and braked to make sure we didn't skid off the edge of the cliff. The guy

behind me wasn't as cautious. Bumper kissed bumper, metal was bent, and we spun out a little. But otherwise, nobody got hurt.

The other guy turned out to be drunk, too, and didn't seem to be in a mood to throw around any accusations. The flesh on the top of his balding pate was hot pink; his eyes were droopy. So we all sat there up on the side of the mountain, convincing each other that we didn't need to involve the police. The balding man acted strangely. He seemed furious, but also eager to not bother with any formal complaints. I quickly sobered up; Bonnie drank more from the bottle in her purse. Every now and again she'd slip her tongue in my mouth. The other guy would turn his head away, as if he were both embarrassed and angry at the same time.

By the time we sorted it all out, the sun was creeping up over the horizon. The Lincoln was fine to drive, so I took Bonnie back to Ray's. She lived in an apartment nearby. I didn't see which one, because she insisted on me letting her out in front of the bar. I didn't argue. By that time I was already late for work.

"Come for me tonight," she said.

"How about dinner?"

"No. Ray's, right before closing. I'll get another bottle. You'll be there, right?"

God help me, I was.

This went on for a while. Late-night dates. Drinking. Mulholland. Feeling wasted all day long. The occasional fender bender, all of them caused when Bonnie surprised me with her tongue in my mouth, or her hand on my lap, or her fingers across the back of my neck. The Lincoln was the only thing I owned that was worth anything, a college-graduation gift from my parents back in Cleveland, and it was slowly taking a beating.

But I didn't care.

And if Mallahan noticed the dark circles forming under my eyes, he didn't say a word. I cruised the empty lots as usual, making my measurements, partly daydreaming about Bonnie from the night before and partly in mortal terror that I'd make a numerical slip, and that Shep would catch it, and that would be the end of me at the Greater Los Angeles Title Co., Downtown Division.

Some primal part of me, however, said it was worth it. Cars were nothing but lumps of metal and wiring and hydraulics; Bonnie was flesh and blood. Warm flesh. Warm blood. Her lips, mashing against mine.

I never questioned why.

Why she'd only meet me late at night, toward the end of her shift. Never dinner. Never lunch, certainly. As if she didn't exist during the daylight hours.

Why she never showed me where she lived, even though I lived downtown, too.

Why she turned down all invites to my place, even though it would be more comfortable than the front seat of my Lincoln or a scratchy blanket from my messy trunk.

I just went along with it.

Her warm lips and the scent of jacaranda trees, which is the smell that first hit me when I moved to Los Angeles, and will forever remind me of the place.

Then one night she canceled.

“I can’t,” she said, tears in her eyes, before disappearing into the back room at Ray’s.

I sat there in the café for a while, nursing a warm glass of beer. She never came out. I finished my beer then went back out to the Lincoln. Made it home in ten minutes. Went to bed, consoling myself with the thought that I’d be reasonably rested and sober for work the next morning.

But I couldn’t sleep.

The next day I told myself to get over it. The fling with Bonnie was fun while it lasted. Had to end sometime. She clearly had trouble, and it was probably the kind of trouble you didn’t need in your life. She was doing me a favor, really. I needed a few good nights of sleep in a row so that I could focus on my job again. I’d been lucky so far, but sooner or later I was bound to slip, and Shep was bound to catch me. When he was sober, he was a math hawk. That afternoon I was surveying a lot out in Culver City. My chest felt lighter, my head clearer, than it had been in weeks. I felt like I’d been given a gubernatorial pardon.

And that very night I was back in Ray’s Café, at exactly 1:55 a.m.

No tears in her eyes this time. Instead, I got a brilliant megawatt smile.

“I knew you’d come back for me,” she said.

“What’s the trouble?” I asked.

“Nothing. Not a blessed thing, now that you’re here.”

We drove out to the beach via Mulholland as usual, and, though she claimed otherwise, I knew something was wrong. The smile was there, but not the smile behind the eyes. She was working out some kind of problem back behind her gorgeous Pacific Ocean blues. Every so often I’d pull my lips away from hers and look at her, trying to see if by some miracle I’d brought her back. No such luck. She was as distant as Japan.

A lot of hemming and hawing later, she finally told me:

“I need six thousand dollars by tomorrow night or someone is going to hurt me.”

The story she told me doesn’t matter. She told it to me under the moonlight, on the beach, and with Scotch whiskey running through my veins. She kissed me while telling the story, as if her lips were drowning and my face was the life preserver. The story, if you must know, involved a wayward brother who fell in deep with the sharks preying on the illegal gamblers in the back of Ray’s Café. It also involved broken promises and pawning every last thing the brother owned

and then pawning every last thing Bonnie owned and garnishing tips and wages and finally had devolved to the threat of garnishing flesh and what the hell else God only knows...

If six grand were not thrown to the sharks by midnight tomorrow.

Like I said, the story really doesn't matter. Because fact is, I was convinced. This was not just a hard-luck story. Listening to her tell it out there, with the Pacific licking at the shoreline ...I'm telling you, it was like listening to a lost book of the New Testament.

I told her I'd help her out.

Even though I barely cleared six grand in a year, let alone two days.

The words were barely out of my mouth—

“Don't worry, Bonnie.”

—and I knew exactly how I was going to do it, too.

Professional land surveyors use simple gear—a tape measure, a level, a theodolite. We use our instruments to measure the distance and angles from a fixed location to points unknown.

Right up until the day I met Bonnie, I thought life worked the same way. You start out in a fixed location, and through careful triangulation, you can figure out the unknowns.

My fixed position, right at that moment:

I loved Bonnie.

Bonnie loved me.

Someone wanted to hurt Bonnie.

Simple triangulation ...

...that pointed me to the obvious solution.

Couldn't be easier, really.

Shep was sleeping it off in the back room, like he frequently does during lunch hours. Mallahan was off to Philippe's for his usual beef sandwich, his usual cup of nickel coffee, leaving me in charge.

I took the key from Shep's top drawer. Went back into Mallahan's office. Slipped the key into the lock. Opened the metal lid. Extracted sixty one-hundred-dollar bills—about a quarter of the money there, leaving a noticeable dent.

I also snatched an extra hundred in twenties.

(A per diem for embezzlement, I told myself.)

I closed the lid, relocked the box, replaced the key, left a note for Shep and Mallahan that lunch wasn't agreeing with me, and left the office.

That's how easy it is to ruin your life.

When I told Bonnie I had the money, she told me she wanted to meet for dinner at eight. Which was a first. Didn't she have work? No, she said. She'd already arranged it so she could work late.

She chose a woody steak house right off Olive Avenue in Burbank, across the street from the Warner Bros. lot. I sat in my apartment on West Temple, staring at the walls and wondering if Mallahan would be checking that metal lockbox anytime soon.

I wasn't worried about getting caught; at that point I was thinking that the chips of my life would fall where they may. The important thing was saving Bonnie from the sharks.

But if Mallahan were to put it together quick and send the LAPD to my front door, Bonnie wouldn't get her money.

I decided to drive around town until dinner.

I put the six grand into a small brown paper bag like it was a packed lunch and stuffed it into the crowded trunk of my Lincoln, wedged in with all of my surveying gear. My theodolite looked up at me with its cold black eye.

Almost judging me.

The 101 took me out of downtown and up into the Valley, and then I followed a curving road up to Mulholland and proceeded to drive down my own little memory lane high above the city. Before I knew it, I was recharting the peculiar topography of Bonnie and Me. The old familiar places looked strange in the naked daylight. I pulled onto the overlook where we'd first kissed and was startled by the number of houses clinging to the side of the hill. I thought we had been utterly alone up there in the darkness, perched on the rim of the bowl that was Los Angeles, where no one could see us. Now it felt like the entire city had been watching.

After a while I got itchy again thinking about how easy it would be for Mallahan to give the cops my license-plate number ("Yes, officer, he drives a dark-red Lincoln Continental, plate number 3C8...") so I kept going down Mulholland, ducking into the overlooks, checking my watch, thinking about the lunch sack full of cash in the trunk. Soon I passed the intersection where I'd had that first crack-up. Under the cover of night I thought it had been the most treacherous hairpin turn in all of Southern California, but now I saw it was a simple gentle curve.

Before I knew it I was all the way to the ocean. I stared at the sun as it slowly plummeted toward the flat gray water like a slow-motion ember.

So different out here in the daylight...

You start out in a fixed location, and through careful triangulation, you can figure out any uncertainty.

But all good surveyors check their work twice.

She was already seated at a table, a full highball in front of her. She was beaming as I

started to cross the length of the room, but the corners of her mouth had already turned down by the time I reached her.

“Do you have it?” she said, almost wincing.

I sat down, craving a slug of whiskey and a cold beer like you wouldn’t believe. I searched the room for the waitress.

“Billy,” she said, “please tell me you have it.”

“I have it,” I said.

She exhaled.

“We’re going to have dinner, and then I’m going to go to Ray’s and work all of this out. The right way.”

“What...what do you mean, ‘work it out’? Don’t you have the money?”

Oh, I still had the money, I explained. It was in a paper bag in the trunk. But as I sat on the beach, recalculating my position, I realized I was being a fool. There were other solutions. Ones that didn’t require ripping off the very men who’d been nothing but decent to me ever since I’d arrived from Cleveland.

I told her what I had in mind. The installment plans, the sliding rates, the whole ball of wax.

It was foolproof. These were businessmen; they’d listen to reason.

“You stupid bastard,” she said. She threw her full drink at me, then stormed out of the restaurant.

It was at that moment, as the expensive Scotch dripped down my face and onto my bow tie and Bullock’s special, that I realized my measurements had been way, way off, because my fixed position was erroneous.

And I had just made the biggest miscalculation of my life.

After drying myself off as best I could, I raced the Lincoln back down the Cahuenga Pass, telling myself there was still a chance to fix everything before Mallahan checked the metal box.

This was Thursday evening. Mallahan was probably home with his wife and daughters out in Glendale, peeling the top from a can of beer and not even thinking about the Greater Los Angeles Title Co., Downtown Division. He didn’t tally the cash in the box until Friday morning, after he’d doled out the per diems for the staff. I could get there tonight and replace the six grand and he would never suspect.

Unless he’d already checked earlier in the day ...

I stopped at my apartment first to change my soaking shirt. Oh, she had been good. To think that I had been so willing to plunge myself into debt for her after-dark kisses. She must have seen my tripod and bow tie and thought she’d landed her ticket out of Ray’s. Sorry, sweetie, the depot is closed.

There was a knock at my door.

My first thought was: Mallahan.

As I crossed the room, buttoning my shirt, I was already formulating my mea culpas, wondering what I'd have to do to keep the police out of this. Then I opened the door to see that it wasn't Mallahan. The man looked vaguely familiar, but I didn't place him until he narrowed his eyes and his scalp went hot pink.

"I want my six grand, you louse."

It was the man from the fender bender on Mulholland.

Much later I would learn that he was Bonnie's husband. But right then, in that moment, there was no opportunity to make proper introductions. That's because he slammed a beefy fist into my stomach, dropping me to the ground. He dragged me inside and slammed the door shut.

I spent the next few hours writhing on the floor while Bonnie's husband searched my apartment inch by inch, leaving no piece of furniture unbroken, no garment untorn. "Where's my six grand?" he'd mutter from time to time.

"My six grand or I'll kick your face in."

"Bonnie told me you had the money. So where is it? Tell me or I'll twist your ears off."

But he never followed through on the threat, most likely because I was more or less incoherent the whole time, taking deep breaths in between vomiting sessions.

At some point the big balding menace realized that he hadn't searched my car. Then I thought to myself, okay, that's it, you're done for now.

He didn't even ask for the keys. He rolled me over like I was a burrito and rooted through my clothes until he found them. I tried to grab his hand but he slapped it away.

I would have told him:

You don't even need the keys. The trunk's always unlocked, so I can get to my gear quickly. See, I usually don't have six grand tucked away back there.

But I still had trouble breathing.

The idea of the keys wouldn't leave me, though. The keys would be useless to him, but I suddenly had the idea that they'd be extremely useful to me...

That was it!

If I could make it out to the car, maybe I could drive away before he found the paper bag with the six grand in the trunk.

I had a spare key in my underwear drawer—the one place the lummoX neglected to toss, most likely because he didn't want to touch another man's underthings.

Guts grinding, I somehow made it to my feet, over to my dresser, then down the stairs, pausing every few moments to spit out a little more of my own blood.

Bonnie's husband was still searching the trunk when I made it to the ground floor. I staggered around to the driver's side, opened the door, sat down, and turned on the ignition. The lummo said, "What the..."

as I hammered the gas pedal and inertia made the trunk lid go whomp! on his head and I peeled down West Temple Street.

Served him right.

Bonnie, too.

The office was only a few minutes away, on Broadway. I started in with the pleases. Please let Mallahan have gone home to Glendale without checking the box. Please let me put the six grand back before my entire life goes swirling down the drain. Please let me erase my work and recalculate and remeasure and put everything back in proper order.

When I pulled up, I realized that I didn't have a key to the office. How was I supposed to get in?

Already I was thinking like a criminal, because the answer came quickly:

A break-in.

I would just break in the front door and replace the six grand and maybe take a typewriter or something, to make it look real. The last person they would suspect would be me—especially with all of the cash replaced in Mallahan's metal box.

But Broadway was busy this time of night—almost eleven, if my watch was correct. I couldn't possibly smash my way in with someone watching. Police headquarters was too close.

So I parked across the street and waited for my opportunity.

I ended up waiting until well after midnight. By that time my stomach had calmed a little, and it wasn't absolute agony to move. When the block seemed clear in both directions, I climbed out of the car and made my way to the trunk. There it was, still wedged in between the legs of my tripod.

Then I checked for something heavy I could use to break the plate-glass door. My theodolite stared up at me, almost saying, Don't even think about it. I settled for the tripod legs. Sturdy, metal, American-made. They hadn't let me down before.

I was across the street and about to commit my second felony, the tripod literally in my hands, inches from the glass, when I stopped...

The door was unlocked.

There was a dim light on, back in Shep's office.

Somebody was already here.

Panic flooded my veins. What was I supposed to do now? There was no reason for a surveyor like me to be stopping by the office this late at night. Maybe it was Mallahan back there

with the robbery-homicide guys, and he was showing them the metal box with the wedge of cash clearly missing...

I'd come too far. I had to at least look inside and see what I was up against.

After setting my tripod down on the sidewalk, I slipped inside, making my way through the darkened reception area and back into the inner sanctum. I heard grunting and creaking wood. A few more steps and I knew exactly who was in the office. This was knowledge I wish I could erase from my memory bank, because nobody should have to see their bosses in such a position. The empty Scotch bottles, the casually dumped pairs of shoes, the trousers hanging over wooden chairs.

Mallahan was definitely not back home with his wife and daughters in Glendale. And all at once I knew why Shep always seemed so tired and hungover most mornings ...

As Mallahan had once told me, they'd been partners for a long, long time.

I had a choice. I could either leave now, with the money tucked under my arm, and start a new life somewhere else, always wondering if the cops would be closing in on me...

Or I could set things right.

And pray that fortune did indeed favor the bold.

Before I knew it I was crouched behind Shep's desk, slowly pulling out the drawer, my fingertips feeling for the lockbox key...

"What wuzzat?"

"Huh?"

"Heard something."

"Shh, now. You're always hearing something. Calm yourself down."

"Did you lock the front door?"

"Of course I did. And Betty's asleep at home with the girls. Now come back over here."

Somehow, after what seemed like a small eternity, I roused myself from the state of utter paralysis that had set in. My fingers found the key. During a particularly fevered period of grunting I slipped into Mallahan's office. Opened his desk drawer. Removed the metal box, taking great care not to bang it on the edges of the drawer. I unlocked it. The stack of cash was there, waiting to be reunited with its brothers and sisters. I slowly unfolded the paper bag and reached inside and felt...metal.

As in the metal spiral binding of a surveyor's notebook.

The bag was packed with six notebooks. All my own, apparently collected from the sloppy insides of my trunk.

Had Bonnie's lummox done this—pulled a switcheroo? No. That made no sense. He wouldn't have still been searching the trunk if he'd found the cash.

So where did it go?

No one knew I even had the money except for me and...

Bonnie.

If circumstances were different, she would have made an excellent addition to the staff at the Greater Los Angeles Title Co., Downtown Division. Because this was a woman who knew all of the angles.

She knew I didn't lock my trunk, because of how many times I went back there for that scratchy blanket for us to use on the beach. She knew the money was in the trunk, because I told her so. And she knew that if she threw a drink in my face, she'd have a few minutes to search my car, take the money, and leave.

And as an added bonus—send her deranged lummoX husband after me, just for kicks.

I refused to believe that all was lost. I could still set things right.

I just had to find Bonnie.

Talk reason to her.

And if not...find another way.

I checked my watch and realized that it was already after 2:00 a.m. But if I could make it back to the car and over to Ray's Café in time, maybe I could still catch her there. Or force someone to cough up her address, damn it...

Which is when the lights snapped on.

Both Mallahan and Shep, naked as the days they were born, standing in the doorway, hands almost touching.

They looked at me, and then at the paper bag, and then finally at the open metal lockbox in slack-jawed confusion.

"Billy?" Mallahan asked.

I could still set things right...

I could still set things right...

I blasted past both of them and ran through the office and reception area and right out the front door—where I promptly tripped over my own tripod. My palms burned as they slid across the sidewalk. Forget it. Get up, get to your car, get over to Ray's. There were shouts behind me. Probably my bosses pulling on their clothes in hurry so they could catch up with me. But I was already behind the wheel of my Lincoln and gunning the engine and zooming down Broadway.

A plan formed in my head.

I would speed past Ray's, just to make sure the lummoX wasn't there waiting for me. I'd park around the corner, so Bonnie wouldn't see my Lincoln and run ...

Bonnie.

Her face hung in front of me like a phantom. Her smiles, her megawatt smile, her kiss, her sickening scent of jacaranda trees...

She would help me put things right. It was not too late. You can always take digits from one column and move them to another...right?

Bonnie tried to shove her tongue in my mouth as I turned onto Los Angeles Street. I spat at her ghostly image as I approached Ray's, which is probably why I didn't see the drunk stumbling in front of my headlights.

We use our instruments to measure the distance and angles from a fixed position to points unknown.

But the moment I felt my Lincoln's wheels run over that body, I knew I was definitely headed somewhere incalculable, immeasurable.