

Smoke and Mirrors

It was a day like any other. Rain ricocheted off the sidewalk like bullets from Capone's gun as I walked to the office. No one spoke as I passed by. Heads lowered, hats pulled down, I guess they all had their own troubles.

The smell of damp and mould hit me as I opened the door. Peeling wallpaper, faded paint, rotting windowsills and the stale stink of old cigarette butts. I hung my dripping mackintosh and derby on the coat stand and went to sit behind the desk. The place was a mess but moving wasn't an option. I'd only had one client in the past month. I sure had no spare dosh for prettying up the office. Word was getting around: Jim Smoke's down on his luck.

Business had never been great but I'd made a living. You keep going, thinking that one big case is just around the corner. That's all it'd take. The special one to make your name and set you up for life. Just one lucky break.

So, anyhow, there I was lighting up another fag when in she walked. A real class act. I'd seen her hanging around for a couple of days and wondered about her. And now here she was. What was she doing in a dump like this? She minced over the threadbare carpet as if it was pure velvet and settled gracefully in the one padded chair opposite mine. Brother, was she a looker. Jet-black hair with an amazing band of white above each ear and green eyes to die for. She wouldn't give me her name. "Mirrors" I called her because of the white streaks and the way she kept checking her reflection in the dirty panes behind my desk.

The case I'd been working on for the past four weeks had been just routine so far. Who'd have guessed that Mirrors would become involved?

Big Mike Farrengo had hired me to keep tabs on Lucinda. She was having an affair with someone and he wanted names and places. She was discreet, I'll give her that. Three weeks it had taken me to track her down to Al's Bar and find out who she was meeting. After that it was easy. Dates, times, false names used: I recorded them all for Big Mike. Then I started collecting the proof. Hotel ledgers, statements from waiters and waitresses, a talkative chambermaid. It all took cash, but Big Mike can afford it.

I suppose I should've recognised the guy she was seeing straight off but his disguise was good – dyed hair, neat moustache, shabby clothes. I only got real close yesterday and the scar gave him away. Jack Giovanni. Maybe I should've backed out right then, packed up and left town even, but a man's got his pride, don't he? I'd taken on the job and I'd see it through. I had to give the evidence to Big Mike. That's what

he'd paid me for and a reputation's about all I've got that's worth keeping – except for Mirrors now, of course.

Whatever I did, a storm was on its way. Mike Farrenco and Jack Giovanni have been rivals in running the town for as long as I've lived here. Lately there'd been a sort of truce and things had been a bit quieter. Rumour had it that the two of them were talking of sharing the business. Better profits that way, and fewer losses on each side in men and money. Well, this was going to blow the whole deal wide open, wasn't it? Lucinda and Jack. Big Mike sure wasn't going to stand back and let that happen.

That's what I'd been planning on doing – going to see Mike, I mean – when Mirrors came in. We didn't have much chance to become acquainted, though. I'd just started to talk to her when the door was flung open and in strode Jack Giovanni. He was alone, which surprised me, but I guessed since he was still in his mustachio disguise it was a secret visit and even his usual squad of goons weren't privy to it.

Quite a small man, Jack Giovanni, not as tall or broad as I am and nowhere near as large as Mike Farrenco, and I could have taken him down easily – but for the machine gun he had levelled at me. He wasn't one for small talk, or so I'd heard, and I reckoned he wasn't about to explain his sudden arrival. No need. It was plain my surveillance hadn't been up to my usual standard: he'd spotted me and was intent on preventing me reporting to Big Mike. They say your whole life flashes before you when you're about to die but all I could think of was that now I'd never get to know Mirrors properly.

She must have had her own thoughts about that. She'll not tell me though, and as long as I live I'll wonder why she acted as she did.

In one swift, lithe move, she launched herself at Jack Giovanni, shrieking down his ear and raking his face with her nails. I didn't waste the chance she'd given me. A hard right hook to his jaw floored him and sent the gun flying. Why does it always hurt you as nearly as much as the person you hit? Trying to ignore the stabbing pain in my knuckles, I bent and picked up the gun.

Mirrors had jumped aside as Jack fell and now she stood watching, calm as you please. What a dame.

I didn't know what to do at first. If he came round would I have the guts to kill him? I'd never shot anybody in cold blood before and didn't fancy doing it then. As it turned out, that was one thing I didn't have to worry about. When I checked him over I saw that he'd hit his head on the desk as he went down. He wouldn't be waking up again

ever. Calling the cops wasn't on the agenda so I did the only practical thing and telephoned Big Mike. He sorted everything out. Even gave me a hefty bonus there and then, and another one when poor remorseful Lucinda went scurrying back to him.

As for Mirrors, I never did learn what brought her to my office that day but it doesn't matter. She was that lucky break I'd always dreamed of. She saved my hide and earned me a load of bread. She stayed with me, too, and she makes a great partner. She's there each morning when I come in and is always there waiting for me when I've been out on a job. I suppose I ought to change the name over the door from "Smoke's Detective Agency" to "Smoke and Mirrors". Maybe I will one day. She's never attacked anyone else after that one time with Jack Giovanni, but she earns her keep. The rats she sees off now are the furry rodent kind. She's a great cat, is Mirrors.