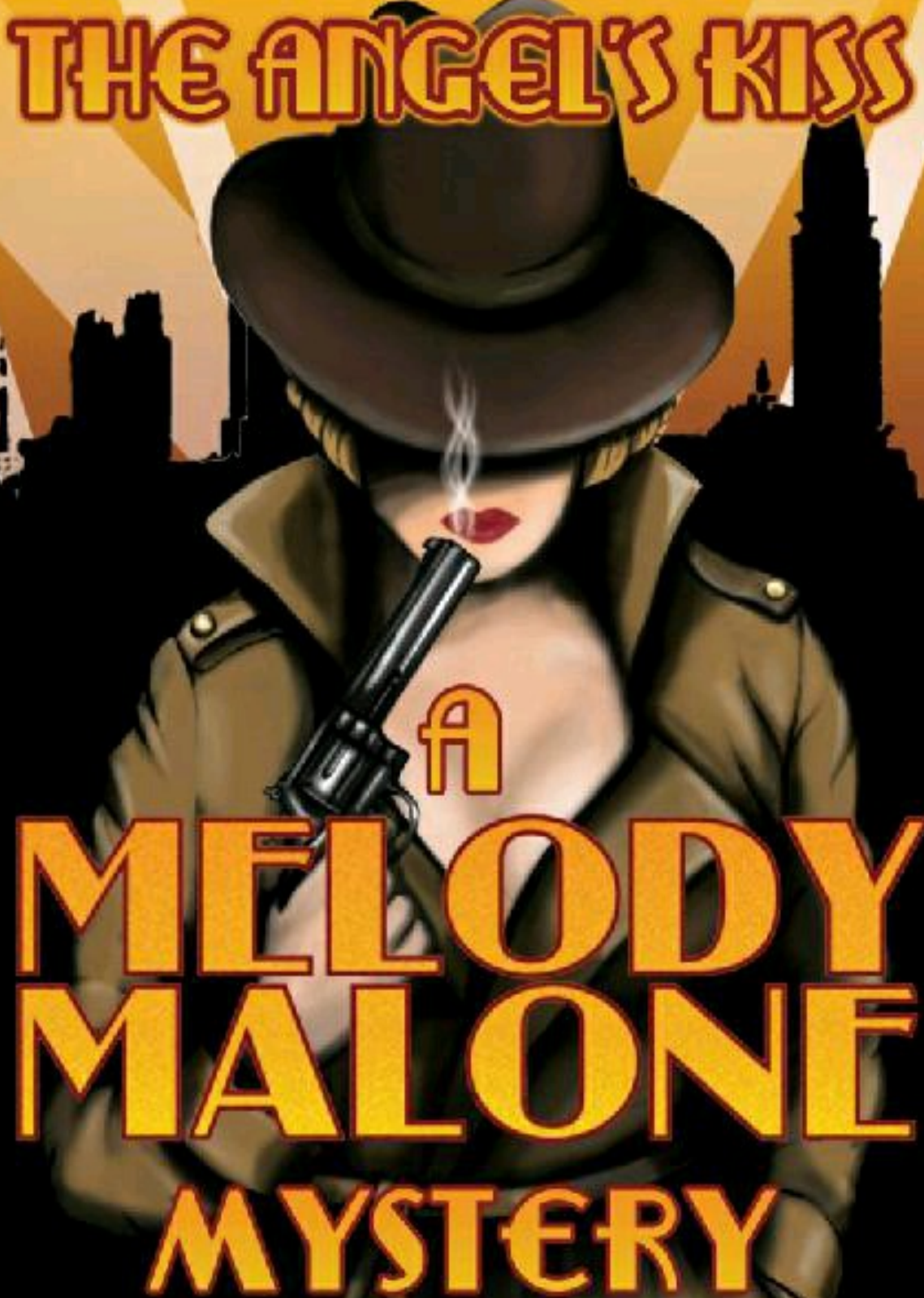


BBC

DOCTOR WHO



THE ANGEL'S KISS

The central illustration features a woman, Melody Malone, wearing a dark fedora and a trench coat. She is holding a handgun in her right hand, with a wisp of smoke rising from the barrel. The background is a dark silhouette of a city skyline against a warm, orange and yellow sky. The text 'A MELODY MALONE MYSTERY' is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.

A
MELODY
MALONE
MYSTERY

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About the Book

On some days, New York is one of the most beautiful places on Earth. This was one of the other days...

Melody Malone, owner and sole employee of the Angel Detective Agency, has an unexpected caller. It's movie star Rock Railton, and he thinks someone is out to kill him. When he mentions the 'kiss of the Angel', she takes the case. Angels are Melody's business...

At the press party for Railton's latest movie, studio owner Max Kliener invites Melody to the film set of their next blockbuster. He's obviously spotted her potential, and Melody is flattered when Kliener asks her to become a star. But the cost of fame, she'll soon discover, is greater than anyone could possibly imagine.

Will Melody be able to escape Kliener's dastardly plan – before the Angels take Manhattan?

About the Author

Melody Malone is the owner and sole employee of the Angel Detective Agency in Manhattan. She is possibly married but lives alone usually, and is older than both her parents. Sometimes.

Why not visit her website? Ah – probably because the internet hasn't been invented yet. Sorry, Sweetie.

DOCTOR WHO
BBC



Melody Malone stars in

The Angel's Kiss

by Melody Malone

with Justin Richards



Chapter 1

The Handsome Client

ON SOME DAYS, New York is one of the most beautiful places on Earth. This was one of the other days. The sky was the colour of an old church roof, and the rain was giving stair rods a bad reputation.

Some days you just know things are going to get dangerous and out of hand, and this was without a doubt one of those. About time too.

I was the only person in the office. That wasn't exactly unusual as I was the only employee of the Angel Detective Agency. As the owner too, I can tell you that I didn't think I was doing a good job of keeping the work rolling in. But then the sorts of cases I was interested in were rather specialised. Not your run-of-the-mill cheating spouse and missing cat. Or even missing spouse and cheating cat. No, I was more interested in arcane, eclectic, and other words you probably wouldn't expect a New York private detective to use all that much.

Leaning back in my chair, with my high heels resting on the unpaid bills that cluttered the desk, I listened to the rain beating against the window. Another sound was beating a regular rhythm – feet on the wooden stairs.

Might be the cleaner, I thought. I checked the calendar – 1938. I hadn't planned on cleaning the place until at least 1946. The footsteps paused on the landing outside my office. Maybe they were heading on up to the pet food supplier on the fifth floor. They'd be disappointed if they were, as the company went bust in the Crash. There were starving pets flinging themselves out of windows, or so it was said. I glanced out of the window now, and saw that in a sense it was still raining cats and dogs.

Whoever was loitering outside still hadn't moved on. 'If you're looking for the Angel Detective Agency,' I called out, 'it's through the door marked "Angel Detective Agency".'

If they couldn't work that out, then they'd come to the right place for help.

I caught a reflection of myself in the glass of the door as it opened. Just a flash, as I swung my legs off the desk. Just a quick glimpse to assure myself that everything was buttoned and unbuttoned in the best places and pointing in the right direction.

The dark figure of a man stood in the doorway, barely more than a silhouette. But his voice was promising – deep and dark as his shadow.

'Melody Malone?'

I smiled and pushed my fedora up with my index finger so he could see the full extent of my brow. 'In the flesh.' I lingered on the noun.

'Can I come in?'

I smiled invitingly. 'When we haven't even been introduced?' But I gestured to a spare chair. There was only one, so he couldn't get lost.

As he sat, his face moved from the shadows into the light cast by my rather inadequate desk lamp.

It didn't help that I'd angled the lamp to show off my own assets rather than his. But I quickly remedied that as I caught sight of the square jaw, the carefully slicked hair, the deep blue eyes, and the Clark Gable moustache. Though Gable wouldn't be properly famous for another year, and at that time his moustache was, often as not, a false one...

So it was no big surprise that it wasn't actually Clark Gable sitting in my office. But it was the next best thing. Possibly better.

He reached across the desk to shake hands. His grip was firm and assertive, but then so was mine.

'Miss Malone,' he breathed.

'Rock Railton,' I replied. 'Unless you're his stunt double?' I raised an alluring eyebrow. Alluringly.

'In the flesh,' he replied, lingering on the preposition. He needed to work on that. 'I guess it saves time that you know who I am.'

'I guess it does. But believe me, I have plenty of time. It's the business I'm in.'

Talking of time, about ninety-five per cent of you people reading this can save some right now by skipping on. But for those few who have never heard of Rock Railton, here's a bit of background that had raced through my brain when I recognised the most handsome movie icon working on the East Coast.

That's right – the *East* Coast. I know what you're thinking. This is 1938, so all the studios have upped and moved to Hollywood long ago. All, that is, except Starlight. Or to give the company its full name: The Starlight Motion Picture Company of America (New York, NY) Inc. Which is probably why it's usually just called Starlight Studios.

Starlight's success was built on its stars rather than the movies it made. Obviously people went to the movies – that was how they made their money. But they didn't go to see the film. They didn't go for the story, or the sets or the costumes. Such as they were. They went to see the *stars*.

There had been reports in the press recently about some of the studio's minor stars defecting to the West Coast studios. No doubt they'd been lured away with lucrative contracts, offers of fame, and the glamour-appeal of Hollywood. It was unlikely they'd get much of any of them, though. Most likely the major studios just wanted them *not* to be working for Starlight. After all, to become a Starlight Star you didn't actually need to be able to *act*.

So I guess it wasn't really a surprise that – if newspapers are to be believed, which of course they are not – so many of the actors (with a small 'a') and actresses (with a large double 'D') didn't seem to have got as far as Hollywood but disappeared somewhere en route. 'En route', in case you don't know, is French for 'got distracted along the way'.

But whatever their thespian talent, Starlight Stars were quite simply the most glamorous, the most cinematic, the most beautiful and handsome in the industry. And just as the most beautiful of the Starlight Starlets was Giddy Semestre, so the most handsome of the Starlight Stars was Rock Railton.

*

And here he was, sitting opposite me in the dusty offices of the Angel Detective Agency. In the flesh. My own flesh was getting goose bumps just at the thought. Which was slightly embarrassing as so much of it was on display just now.

I leaned back in my chair and adopted an even more nonchalant pose.

‘So, how can I help you, Mr Railton?’

‘Someone’s planning to kill me.’ He raised his eyebrows and opened his hands apologetically, as if to say: ‘Such a bore, but what can you do?’

‘You been to the cops?’ I asked. It seemed like a good question.

‘No.’

‘Are you going to tell me why not?’

He considered this, though I didn’t think it was a difficult question. I was saving that up for next. This question had a very limited possible set of answers. ‘Boolean’ is another word NY PIs don’t often use.

‘It’s complicated,’ he decided at last. So not as Boolean as I’d thought, apparently.

‘Mr Railton,’ I said smokily, “‘Complicated” is my middle name.’ Actually, it’s not my middle name – any more than Malone is my last name. Whether Melody is really my first name is, well, complicated.

‘Sorry.’

I smiled to show I wasn’t at all put out. ‘So why come to me?’

‘Your name,’ he said. ‘Sounds strange, but it just felt, you know – *apt.*’

‘My name? You mean Melody Malone? I only use the “Complicated” on formal occasions,’ I clarified.

‘The firm’s name.’

‘The Angel Detective Agency. Why is that *apt.*?’

‘Because of the kiss of the angel.’ He gave a short laugh at my frown. ‘Sorry, I guess that doesn’t make a lot of sense.’

‘And I guess it’s complicated.’ But he had me intrigued. Angels, after all, are my business.

‘Actually, it’s pretty simple,’ Railton went on. ‘I was at the studio, and I overheard someone planning my death.’

‘I take it they weren’t talking about a movie.’

He shook his head and the shadows did good things for his profile if not my blood pressure. ‘They said I would be dead in a couple of weeks. Then they said something about “the kiss of the angel” and how they already have my replacement lined up.’ His movie-star face cracked into despondency. ‘It’s so unfair – I feel like I only just got started.’

To my knowledge, Rock Railton had been the top Starlight name for at least two years now, but I didn’t quibble. In a career where most people’s success was measured in weeks, he’d done pretty well for himself.

I stuck to the more obvious. ‘So,’ I asked, ‘who was it you overheard planning to kill you?’

He looked at me with what might have been sympathy, or possibly disappointment. I’m not sure which as I don’t go looking for sympathy and I rarely disappoint.

‘If I knew that,’ Railton said, ‘I wouldn’t need to hire you.’

‘Really?’ Time to retrieve the situation. ‘It may surprise you to learn that lots of people hire me to tell them things they already know, Mr Railton.’ I smiled winningly. ‘Things like “Your husband is cheating on you.” Or “Your employer is a crook.” Then there’s “Your cat is almost certainly dead,” and “You really shouldn’t wear that blouse with those shoes.” You’re very handsome.’

He blinked. I made a note to warn him about that. ‘People hire you to tell them they’re handsome?’

‘Sorry, no. That was just me getting a bit carried away. Do you ever get carried away, Mr Railton?’

He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands in front of him. ‘You’ve got some front, you know.’

I made sure the best bits of it were pointing right at him. ‘I know.’

‘You flirt with all your clients?’ he wondered.

‘Usually they flirt with me. But I’m pleased to hear you’re a client.’ I leaned across the desk. ‘You *are* my client, aren’t you, Mr Railton?’

He swallowed as if the full implications of his visit had only just become apparent to him. Or so I hoped. ‘I can pay you a hundred dollars a day.’

I didn’t like to say that I’d happily have paid him double that for the case. So I didn’t. Instead I said, ‘Plus expenses.’

‘Will that be much?’

‘I’m an expensive lady. But for you, I’ll try to hold back a little.’

He smiled. ‘Not too much I hope.’

‘Not too much,’ I agreed.

We talked a little business. Boring stuff that included phrases like ‘cash only’, and ‘meet potential suspects’ and, most important of all ‘Please, call me Rock.’ Then Rock, as I now called him, said that he had to be going, which wasn’t something that had featured high on my own agenda, but he would see me at the launch party for his new film tomorrow.

‘Lady, don’t shoot,’ he said.

‘As if I could conceal a gun in this,’ I told him, standing up so he could get the full benefit of my heels, stockings, skirt, blouse, and everything. Especially the everything.

‘Probably true,’ he noted. Maybe he could be a detective after all. ‘But that’s the name of the movie.’

‘I’ll be there,’ I assured him.

‘Good title, eh?’ His moustache twitched rather fetchingly as he smiled. ‘Lady Don’t Shoot.’

I smiled back even more fetchingly. ‘I’m making no rash promises.’

Chapter 2

Age Before Beauty

TOMORROW WAS, AS a popular movie would later have it, another day. Still damp, but not so wet. Though the rain had eased, the streets were puddled and the sidewalks were sweating. It was the sort of day when deciding what to wear is like planning a military operation. Believe me – I have considerable experience of both.

Fortunately, I like dressing up almost as much as I like dressing down. So I spent a pleasant couple of hours in my apartment with a variety of blouses, skirts, suits, shoes, hats, and – let's face it – lingerie. Plus a mirror. The secret is not just to be stunning, which I find comes rather easily, to be honest. The tricky thing is getting exactly the right level of stun for the occasion.

A launch party for a new Starlight movie was, I reckoned, pretty high on the stun-counter. That said, the trip across New York to get to the party was probably not. A long, stylish raincoat in a fashionable cut, topped off with my favourite fedora therefore completed the ensemble.

I spent a few moments practising my entrance to the event – easing out of the drab grey coat and allowing the imagined guests to behold the contrast of my lovely lace and suggestive net and adorable satin. Quite a few moments, actually.

I've never been very good at looking helpless. But there are times when needs must, and one of those is when you require a cab in the rain. Several gentlemen were kind enough to allow me ahead of them into a taxi. The driver's eyes lingered longer in the rear-view mirror than was strictly necessary as he asked me how far I was going.

'All the way,' I told him, giving the address. I've never been one to resist a single entendre.

'Your accent – you British?' he asked. Perceptive as well as cheeky.

'Only my accent,' I assured him. 'The rest of me is... cosmopolitan.'

He nodded knowingly, swerving round a pedestrian. 'Never been there myself.'

'You have missed so much.'

Evening was drawing in and the cars had their lights on, cutting through the inevitable rain. I watched the drops paint clear lines down the grubby cab windows. We drove in binary fashion – either stop or go. Go was fast, and stop was sudden. The journey was punctuated by a liberal use of the horn, presumably to make up for the complete avoidance of the indicator lights.

Finally the cab drew up at the kerb with a jerk. The jerk stayed behind the steering wheel as I eased myself out.

'You need a ride later?' he asked, apparently serious.

I found the exact fare and told him: 'Oh, I hope not.' If he wanted a tip, then I was ready with: 'Stop for red lights.' But he didn't comment on the money I handed over and was soon disappearing in a cacophony of horn and brake pads.

Lower East Street was closed to traffic, so he'd dropped me on a nearby corner. The rain had eased, but even so I decided I'd tipped him too much. I turned my collar up and pulled the brim of my

hat down before heading towards the venue.

Intriguing case or not, I was looking forward to the party. It was at Nick's which as anyone who is anyone will tell you is *the* place to be seen. Nick's is where millionaires go for breakfast, where top fashion models call in for lunch, and where senators and mafia bosses have to book well ahead if they want a table for dinner.

I could see the awning further down the street. The remains of the rain was running off it at the edges forming a translucent curtain round the red carpet and uniformed doormen. A trickle of well-dressed people flowed under the awning, doing their best to avoid being dripped on while maintaining their dignity.

Across the street from Nick's was a small park, surrounded by iron railings. The statue of a woman and an angelic-looking child, holding hands, stared out across the road and into the front entrance of the restaurant. I watched it for a moment, then looked away. When I looked back, the statue had not moved.

I guess that's what you'd expect. But you can never be too careful. And especially not where statues are involved.

My high heels clicked impressively on the paved sidewalk as I approached Nick's. I paused for a moment to take out a compact and check my make-up in the mirrored lid. Lipstick can be so important when properly applied. It's one of my most formidable weapons. A quick check that my other weapons were properly deployed and I stepped forward again.

Right into the path of a tramp – a hobo – who staggered out of a dark alleyway in front of me. He was obviously headed for a very different destination. Most likely one suffixed with 'gutter'.

That said, he was wearing a nice suit. I had a good view of the herringbone weave of the right sleeve. The suit was torn and stained and about three sizes too big, but I could imagine the old man's elation at finding such a prize discarded in someone else's trash.

The reason I had such a good view of the sleeve was because the old man had grabbed the front of my raincoat. I shuddered to think what he might have been aiming for, but right now he had a handful of button and weatherproofing clutched in his gnarled, arthritic fingers.

'I knew you'd be here.' His voice was a throaty rasp that sounded like it had been through a cheese grater on its way from his larynx to the outside world.

'Excuse me?' This was both an exclamation of surprise and an escape gambit as I attempted to push past him. The smell was... interesting.

But he still had hold of my coat and, despite his frailty, he wasn't about to let go.

'You have to help me – *please*.'

'All right,' I conceded, reaching for my clutch bag. 'How much?'

He seemed confused for a moment. I know confusion when I see it, and I was looking at it right now.

'I don't...' He paused to cough violently, jolting my raincoat up and down as his chest spasmed. Mine too, under the onslaught. 'I don't want money,' he finally managed to gasp.

Well that was a first. He probably knew confusion when he saw it too.

'I want my life back,' he rasped. 'I used to *be* someone...'

'Didn't we all, honey.'

I finally managed to extract his curled fingers from my coat. Hopefully the wrinkles would drop out in time. From my coat, I mean, not his hands. There was no remedy for them, and the problem was

Anno Domini.

He was weakening. 'You said you'd help.' What hope there was faded from his eyes.

'I offered you money,' I corrected him. 'I'm sorry, really I am, but I can't help you turn back time. Not without calling in many more favours than I currently have saved up.'

'You promised.' He was going for my coat again, but I managed to step aside. 'Yesterday,' he went on. 'You promised yesterday that you'd help.'

'Sweetie – I've never seen you before in my life. Or yours.'

Then he really surprised me. He stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets and pulled out handfuls of money. He had small hands, but they were big handfuls. Ten-dollar bills, crumpled and creased as much as his weather-beaten face. He threw the money at me, right there in the street. It blizzarded round my head, caught in the breeze and swirling through the evening. People stopped and gawped and grabbed.

I just watched. Watched the money spin and fall. Watched the last hope fade from the old man's eyes as his knees buckled and he fell to the sidewalk. Watched his hand flop into the gutter where the rainwater running into a storm drain washed the dust and grime from his cuffs.

Under the layers of age and the wrinkles and pockmarks the man was almost unrecognisable. Almost. But I recognised him now. Just as I recognised the suit he was wearing, the pattern and the colour bright and restored where the water rinsed away the dust and the dirt.

It was the same suit that Rock Railton had been wearing when he called on me yesterday and I promised to help him.

Chapter 3

Lady Don't Shoot

I WAS WRONG of course. It was just some tramp who'd had the good fortune to find a suit from the same store where Rock Railton shopped (OK, one with pockets stuffed with cash, but everyone gets lucky sometimes). An old man who was so confused and so close to death that he thought he knew me, that he would ask a stranger for help. He didn't want to die – well, that's hardly a surprise.

Nothing to see here, move right along, please.

I did the helpless thing again and some of the passers-by stopped jumping for ten-dollar bills long enough to realise the old guy needed some help. Or rather, that he was past it.

'Let me through – I'm a doctor.'

My heart beat a little faster, and I lingered just long enough to be sure he'd used the indefinite article. But the man was short and bald and rather ugly – not at all like any Doctor I'd consult. I hope. If 'consult' is the right word.

By the time I reached Nick's I was completely composed again and ready to perform my renowned raincoat removal routine. I assured myself that the statue still hadn't moved, and then caught sight of Rock Railton walking into Nick's ahead of me. Any final doubts or worries I might have had disappeared as quick as the sun in an English summer.

The doorman frowned at me when I introduced myself. 'Miss Malone – you're not on the list.'

'Maybe not your list, sweetie. But I'm on nearly everyone else's.' It didn't take a lot to persuade him to let me in.

Rock had already disappeared deep into the melee of guests. I did the raincoat thing and draped it over the arm of a nearby waiter, not bothering to check how many people had watched. I recognised the sound of jaws dropping.

The waiter holding my coat, and apparently attempting to make eye contact somewhere south of my own jaw, directed me through the large foyer to the ballroom where the party was being held.

Another waiter appeared beside me before I was three steps into room.

He offered up a silver tray of fluted glasses. 'Champagne?'

'I prefer the real thing,' I assured him in a loud whisper. I took a glass anyway and surveyed the room as I sipped. It wasn't bad. But it wasn't very French either.

My plan, such as it was, centred on talking to Rock Railton and getting an idea of who the likely suspects were. Chances were that whoever wanted him dead was in this room – and I don't just mean the critics.

Everyone was here. I recognised other movie stars, like Giddy Semestre whose neckline was even more pronounced than my own. It didn't so much plunge as plummet. I spotted some big-name producers including Maximilian Schneider dePost von Algonquin – who has to be one of the biggest names in any industry.

Then there was the press. I knew some of the owners of the big papers very well indeed. They fell

into two camps – those who smiled and raised their glasses in greeting when they saw me, and those who turned away and tried to hide their faces in the hope I wouldn't recognise or remember them. I could write a few headlines there.

I couldn't for the moment see Rock Railton, so I made my way across the room towards Giddy Semestre. She was the co-star of *Lady Don't Shoot*, and there were rumours that she and Rock were romantically linked. At the hip. Whatever the truth of that, it seemed likely that Rock would gravitate towards Giddy before too long.

Plus it's always nice to talk to the most beautiful and intelligent woman in the room. So Giddy would be grateful for the opportunity.

I reached Giddy and her entourage in time to hear the end of a rather obvious joke and leaned forward in order to steal the punchline.

There was a moment's silence, into which I added: 'Sorry – were you actually telling the version with the minotaur and the ukulele?' Several people drifted away after that and soon I was alone with Miss Semestre.

'I'm sorry, but have we met before?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'I'm sure you'd remember.'

She smiled, raised a perfectly pencilled eyebrow, and looked me up and down. 'I'm sure I would.'

'I'm a friend of Rock Railton.'

'That may not narrow things down very much,' she said.

'Do I look like I need narrowing down?' I wondered. I congratulated her on her performance in the movie. Her smile widened alarmingly as I poured on the praise for her acting abilities.

But she wasn't as dizzy as her name suggested. It was genuine amusement rather than immodesty. 'You haven't actually seen the movie, have you?' she said.

I had to confess that I'd skipped the movie bit and come straight to the party. 'But I'm sure you were very good in it.'

'You can sure lie,' she said, smile still in place. 'But I can't act to save my life. Oh, I have no illusions about that,' she went on before I could pretend to disagree. 'I'm there to look good. And maybe my looks are the best act of the lot.'

I asked her what she meant. Even up this close she wasn't as heavily made-up as most of the women in the room. I'd passed one lady who had arrived well plastered in every sense.

Before she could answer me, a short man with oiled-back thinning hair who looked like he'd needed some of the same oil to ease him into his bulging suit arrived. He smudged the back of Giddy's hand with his greasy lips.

'Darling!' he announced, as if this was a complete conversation. 'Darr-ling!' he said again – you could practically hear the subject-verb-object construction within those two syllables.

He straightened up from the kiss, though that didn't buy him much height, and looked at me askance. 'Who's your friend?'

Giddy was giving the lie to her comments about her own acting talents by making a good job of hiding her disgust at the guy's slobbering. 'Oh, Max – this is...' She stumbled.

I helped her out. 'Melody Malone.'

'Melody Malone, eh?' He sounded like he reckoned I'd just made the name up. So maybe he was more perceptive than I thought. 'What studio you with?'

‘I’m not in the movie business,’ I confessed.

He pursed his lips in an especially unpleasant manner. ‘You ever decide you should be, give me a call.’ He bowed just enough for me to get the full impact of his bald patch. My guess was he didn’t know that from this angle he looked like a monk at prayer.

‘And you are?’ I asked.

That hit him right between the eyes just as he straightened up. There was a certain amount of spluttering from the Monk-Man, and barely concealed amusement from Miss Gillespie.

‘I’m kidding,’ I said in my bestest silkiest voice.

He obviously believed I must indeed be joking, and turned to share the amusement with Giddy, allowing me time to give her an exaggerated blank look.

Luckily she realised I hadn’t a clue as to his identity and rescued me. I don’t often need rescuing, but it’s nice when it goes well and doesn’t involve great heights.

‘Oh, Miss Malone, you’re such a tease,’ Giddy said. ‘Everyone knows Max Kliener, head of Starlight Studios. He produced *Lady Don’t Shoot*, of course.’

‘Of course.’ Well, yes, I’d heard of Kliener. I always thought he sounded like a commercial for an industrial vacuum appliance, and made a mental note to tell him some time. But maybe not just now.

Kliener jabbed a podgy finger at me several times, while looking me up and down and appraising me in a way that seemed particularly unnecessary. ‘Had me there,’ he said.

‘You wish,’ I murmured.

‘But, like I said – you decide to get into movies, I can find a place for you at Starlight. Just come down to the set any time and ask for Max Kliener. Everyone knows Max.’

I switched on my own oiliest smile. ‘You sure about that... Max – was it?’

He exploded with laughter. Well, not literally – that might have been more amusing. But it was a pretty extreme reaction, and completely out of proportion to my admittedly witty repost.

I didn’t linger. Max Kliener was not the sort of man a woman with any choice would linger with. From the fact that Giddy Semestre did linger, I deduced that she probably didn’t have a choice. I’m a detective – I can tell.

Meanwhile, I’d caught sight of Rock Railton on the other side of the room. He was surrounded by several women of an age where their own choices were likely to be severely limited, an insincere smile painted across his face and his moustache twitching in near panic. The poor boy needed help – Melody Malone to the rescue.

He looked relieved, I’ll give him that. I was holding out for awestruck, but one step at a time.

‘I’m sorry, ladies,’ I announced in my huskiest and most urgent tone. ‘But I’m going to have to steal Mr Railton away for a few moments. Work as well as pleasure today.’

I left it to them to guess which of the two this might be. From some of the looks I got, a few of them guessed correctly.

‘I guess I owe you a thank you,’ Railton said as we moved off into the crowd.

‘I guess you do.’

He nodded and smiled as we moved through the great and the good. Or at least, the rich and the famous which, as you can imagine, is not always the same thing. In this case a two-circled Venn Diagram would have had precious little by way of intersection.

We reached a secluded corner, and he smiled. ‘Will you at least tell me your name?’ I probably

didn't hide my surprise as well as I usually do, because he quickly went on: 'I'm sorry if we've met before. I meet so many people.'

Over his shoulder, I could see Max Kliener staring nervously in our direction. He excused himself from the group he was with and headed over.

'You really don't remember me?' I nodded, understanding. Composure level set to iceberg. 'Melody Malone. Well, I suppose it's been a while.'

'I suppose it has.' He pointed at me, the way people do when they want you to think they've realised or remembered something. 'Must be – how long?'

'Oh, don't be coy. I think you remember exactly when we last met, Mr Railton.' I adjusted his necktie for him, and stepped back to admire my handiwork.

Kliener had been accosted on the way over by a large gentleman I didn't yet know was Julius Grayle. Corpulent, ageing and corrupt – though I knew only two of those for certain back then, of course. He was gesturing emphatically, while Kliener sneaked furtive and worried glances at me and Rock.

'Yes,' Rock Railton was saying, 'Melody Malone. We met at...'

I didn't help him, just tilted my head winningly and smiled some more.

'...at that *thing*. Must be six, seven...'

Still no help. I raised an eyebrow.

'Possibly as much as...' he went on.

I put him out of his misery. 'We met at my office. Yesterday afternoon.'

He went white. Not out of embarrassment – he really did not know who I was, and my words had genuinely shocked him.

I collected a glass of 'champagne' from a passing tray attached to a waiter and took a sip. It was unpleasantly warm.

'But I can understand that it's slipped your memory,' I said in my most understanding tone. 'After all, we only flirted outrageously.'

He nodded, as if that was to be expected.

'I'm a detective, as you perhaps recall. And you told me someone was going to kill you. Ringing any bells yet?'

I didn't think it was possible for him to go any paler. But he did. He swallowed, and took a step backwards, clumsily knocking into a waiter – who immediately apologised.

'You'll have to excuse me,' he stammered. 'I've... I've just seen someone I recognise.'

He hurried away, almost taking out another waiter, two women, and the human bowling-ball that was Max Kliener in his haste.

'Must be someone you've known for less than twelve hours then,' I murmured.

Chapter 4

Death and Taxis

I'D HAD ENOUGH of taxis for the moment, and even in New York the air is fresh enough to clear the head. A brisk walk across town might not be the best prescription for every woman heading home alone. But then I'm not every woman.

New York can be a dangerous place. Even in my grey raincoat I seemed to attract attention. Maybe it was the heels. Or perhaps the fedora.

Whatever the attraction, I was soon aware of two men following me. They kept to the shadows, which from the rare glimpses I caught of their faces was probably just as well for everyone.

A shadow flitting across a puddle. A distorted reflection in a store window. The fact that neither of them seemed capable of walking without their boot nails clicking on the sidewalk. It all added up to mischief, with me as the target. I like to know where I am with people. Especially people with guns.

There's a narrow, badly lit passageway that cuts through from Kemmerton to Flale Street. No one in their right mind would ever use it after dark. I waited until I was halfway along it, then stepped into a doorway. It was the back door of a laundry. If you didn't know it was there you'd never spot it in a hundred years. And I was planning on being away long before the hundred years was up.

The two guys were clever enough to know this was an opportunity. Not clever enough to realise *whose* opportunity, but it still put them pretty high on the thug-ometer.

To give them due credit, they didn't take long to work out I'd disappeared. Well, I guess it's not that hard to discern in a sort of 'now you see me, now you – where the hell?' sort of way. They stopped, turned, looked at each other, frowned. All while standing under the only lamp in the alley, so I had a clear view of them. A clear shot too, except I didn't have a gun. They did – one each in fact. But I tend to think it's not polite to pack artillery at a swanky party. Cleavage, but not shooters.

Having stood in a clear line of sight under a lamp, waving pistols and making woefully inarticulate 'Er – what?' noises to each other, the two thugs then did something really stupid.

They split up. One headed back up the alley and the other continued down it, leaving me alone in the middle. Not very helpful. I sighed and stepped out of the doorway.

'Hello, boys. You looking for me?'

They both turned at once.

'I noticed you were following me a while back.'

They approached warily, guns raised.

'It's the heels, isn't it?' I looked from one to the other. 'Be honest. The heels. Or is it the hat? I rather like the hat.' I adjusted the brim, making one of them jab his gun forwards – like I was going to kill him with my hat. Well, I've done that before actually, so maybe he wasn't so daft.

'Not very talkative, are we?' I went on. They were standing either side of me now, each about ten feet away. 'If fashion isn't your strong suit, then let's try an easier one. Who sent you?'

‘You’re the Melody Malone dame,’ one of them growled.

It was tempting to say ‘no’ and see how they reacted. They might just apologise and walk away. Or they might shoot me anyway. So instead I smiled and asked:

‘What if I am?’

‘We gotta kill you,’ the other thug said. As I turned to look at him he shrugged and added, ‘Sorry, lady.’ Well, it was a step up from ‘dame’.

‘It’s me who should apologise.’ I unbuttoned my raincoat and they gripped their guns all the tighter.

Neither of them got any more talkative, and the contents of their pockets didn’t help much either. I dropped their guns in a trash can outside the back of the laundry, and left their wallets on the wet cobbles beside them.

I helped myself to a few dollars from one wallet for a taxi back to the office. Expenses. I imagined he’d have other things to worry about when he woke up.

‘It’s definitely the heels,’ I told them as I walked away.

The cab driver was less talkative than his predecessor, which suited me fine. He dropped me outside the office and disappeared into the night at a restrained pace and without need of his horn. But with a healthy tip thanks to the generous gentleman with the gun, the wallet, and (by now) the headache.

I sat with my feet up on my desk and started to make a mental list of the people who’d want me dead. Once I got to fifty, I decided this wasn’t helping. I narrowed the criteria to people in New York, in 1938, and finally who I’d met in the last month. It gave me a more manageable number and a few smiles. But it didn’t really help much.

So I decided to concentrate on the last couple of days. Maybe one of the women I’d deprived of the company of Rock Railton? Murder did seem a little extreme but it was a possibility. Someone I’d upstaged with my stun-level-five outfit? Well that could be any of the female guests at the party, and possibly a few of the male ones.

Most likely it was connected to the Rock Railton case. I’m a big fan of coincidence, but even so if someone tells you their life is in danger and the next day a couple of thugs come gunning for you, then there is at least the possibility of a connection.

Which got me thinking about Rock himself, and how bizarre his behaviour had been. I flatter myself that I’m at least a little distinctive in both character and – let’s face it – looks. I make an impression. People don’t forget me in a hurry.

Yet Rock Railton had dismissed me from his mind by the next day. That isn’t the way to flatter a girl. Unless it was an act, of course. And unlike a lot of the Starlight Stars, Railton *could* act.

Soon I had a working theory. Railton had pretended he didn’t know me because he was aware that whoever was trying to kill him could come after me if they were aware I was on the case.

‘You sweetie,’ I breathed. He only had my safety in mind. That had to be it.

In fact, I could not have been more wrong. But hindsight is a wonderful thing and – for most people – only comes after the event.

The result was that I was in a less thoughtful mood when the telephone rang. I don’t get a lot of calls, so I enjoyed the novelty of the noise for a while before I answered.

‘Hello, Angel,’ I said, which usually throws them. But not in this case.

‘Hello, doll.’

I paused to stare at the receiver like it was to blame. But it was my fault for answering. I recognised his voice, and now I had to speak to him.

‘Mr Kliener,’ I enthused. ‘How clever of you to ring my bell.’

He laughed his oily laugh. ‘Didn’t know you were a tec.’

‘I am so many things.’

‘Wasn’t easy, as I only had your name.’

‘Really?’ I inspected my nails, and was not surprised to find them perfect in every detail.

‘No one seemed to know how to get hold of you.’

‘The right person starts by buying me a drink.’

He didn’t react to that. I guess it was a bit over his head, which given his stature wouldn’t be hard.

‘How *did* you track me down?’ I asked as the silence stretched out. Really, I just preferred the sound of my own voice to the sound of his.

‘You won’t believe this, but I asked a guy called Garner. He’s done some work for Julius Grayle – you know him?’

‘I know Garner slightly,’ I told him. ‘He’s in the same business I am.’

‘Yeah, I know that now.’

So Max Kliener had hired a private detective to find another private detective. It’s a pity the Americans don’t really understand irony.

‘So how can I help you, Mr Kliener?’

‘Please – call me Max,’ he oiled.

‘Fine.’ That was easy. ‘Anything else, Max?’

Unfortunately there was. But as it was an invitation to come down to the Starlight Studios complex, it might help me move forward with the Rock Railton case.

‘Rock and Giddy should be in full flow this afternoon starting on their new picture. I’ll arrange a car for you.’

‘Personal taxi service, I’m impressed.’

‘Least I can do.’

I wasn’t sure why he felt he had to spend time and money on my account. Except, of course, that he’d met me.

‘Well,’ I told him, ‘I suppose that in this life there’s nothing that can be said to be certain except death and taxis.’

He didn’t comment. So I assumed he wasn’t a big devotee of Benjamin Franklin, and listed that alongside Max Kliener’s other failings. It was getting to be quite a list.

But I still agreed to see him at the studio that afternoon. It seemed like a good move. But like I said, for most people hindsight only works backwards.

Chapter 5

Lights, Camera, Bizarre

BACK THEN, ALL cars were black. But some were more black than others. The car Max Kliener sent to collect me that afternoon was so black that light seemed to slide off it. The driver wore a dark uniform that looked pale in comparison. He introduced himself as Hank. I could believe that – he looked like a Hank.

He was about six foot six in height, and as wide as he was tall. Not *bad* wide, just *wide* wide. I suspected his uniform had been put together from at least two other normal-sized suits. He had strikingly blond hair that contrasted with dark eyes and a nose that in the past had seen both better days and – I would bet good money – the wrong end of a large fist. I would have asked him about that, but he wasn't a great conversationalist. What he did say sounded like it had been filtered through gravel.

The result of which was that the journey to Starlight Studios was conducted in near silence. With the dark-tinted windows and an opaque partition obscuring the driver, I felt like I was being wheeled along in an isolation tank completely cut off from the real world. But New York's a bit like that anyway.

The ride was so smooth I didn't realise we'd stopped until Hank opened the door to let me out. I was glad of my dark glasses as the sun was angling in over the long, low sheds that were the film studios. Hank had parked the car outside one of them, and Max Kliener was standing nearby talking to a lean man with a clipboard. He had a cigar clamped in his mouth, though it didn't seem to be lit. He removed it to gesture and prod the air, like it was a prop.

When he saw me, Kliener opened his arms and waddled forwards. I avoided an embrace and shook his hand instead. It was cold and clammy and damp, like shaking a fish that's been dead for a couple of days. If you know what that feels like.

'Melody Melody Melody,' Kliener enthused. He stepped back to look me up and down. I'm used to being looked up and down but it was still a bit disconcerting. Like meeting your own undertaker for the first time.

'Max Max Max,' I reciprocated. 'How kind of you to invite me to your quaint little place.'

His mouth smiled to show he took it as a joke. His eyes hadn't quite got the message and glared angrily.

Hank stayed with us as Max led me through a side door into the studio. Inside was bigger than an aircraft hangar and hotter than a sauna because of all the lights.

The lion's share of the lighting was reserved for the set where they were shooting. It was a ballroom furnished in the style of Renaissance Italy. I refrained from pointing out a few obvious mistakes. I doubt if accuracy was foremost in the mind of the designer or the costume department. It was a little strange seeing the room only half built – with walls omitted to allow the cameramen access. But I can cope with 'strange'. It's only when we get to 'bizarre' that I start to get tingly.

We watched Rock and Giddy rehearse their scene in front of the cameras. The director – all shirtsleeves and megaphone – interrupting every few minutes. It was like both of the stars were novices, having to be told what to do every step of the way. That might have intrigued me, if I hadn't had Max Kliener whispering obvious explanations uncomfortably close to my ear. The main distraction was that he had to stand on tiptoe to do it.

As the cast took a break to set up the lights and cameras ready for the next shot, Kliener gestured to Rock Railton, beckoning him over. A make-up woman moved in quickly on Giddy Semestre – all powder puff and potions. She had the sort of severe features and iron-grey hair that would scare anyone into looking their best.

'He wants to apologise,' Kliener told me as Rock negotiated a path through cables and technicians. 'Dunno what got into him last night. Making like he didn't know you and all that.'

I said nothing. How did Kliener know what had happened? Railton must have told him – but why? That didn't fit with my working hypothesis. Time for a new theory, perhaps.

'He's very highly strung,' Kliener added in a low voice as Rock joined us. 'Problems with his meds.'

Rock greeted me like a long-lost friend, pulling me into a bear hug that more than made up for the previous evening. If he'd been a really good actor, I might have been convinced. But while there was no doubt he *could* act, he was competent, little more.

So when he apologised for forgetting we'd met before the party and that he'd actually been to my offices, I smiled my forgiveness.

'It's been such a hectic schedule,' he said. 'So much going on. I don't know what I was thinking – didn't know if I was coming or going.'

'That can be such a problem,' I agreed. 'Just so long as you remember me now.'

'How could I forget you, Miss Malone?'

'Well, quite.' Railton and Kliener were smiling so hard it seemed a shame to puncture the moment. But if anyone is completely without shame, then I'm not ashamed to say it's me. 'And my coffee,' I said.

'Your... coffee?'

'Best coffee you'd ever tasted, you told me. I'm sure you remember that. You asked whether I grind my own beans.'

His eyes widened slightly and his moustache twitched. 'It *was* the best coffee I've ever tasted,' he assured me. 'Unique.'

'You're too kind,' I told him. Which he was – far too kind. Because now I knew he was lying. OK, so maybe it was a failing on my part, but I didn't even offer him coffee.

Even so we were still in the territory marked as 'Strange' or possibly 'Weird'. But 'Bizarre' was just around the corner.

It arrived in the form of Giddy Semestre. She walked up to Rock and Kliener, working her hips so hard she swayed through about twice the distance she needed to travel. She put her hand on Rock's shoulder, leaning slightly towards me. Somehow she seemed rather less confident and more 'dizzy' than she had the night before. Still, at least I could be sure she would remember me.

'So, Rocky,' she breathed, nodding at me. 'Who's your glamorous lady friend?'

It was like she'd never met me before – and not just because she used the term 'lady'.

I needed some time to think about this, and maybe come up with another theory that could later prove to be completely wrong. So I accepted Kliener's offer of a tour of the rest of the studio complex.

My brain was working so hard that I barely took in the details. Kliener's voice was an ungent drone. One vast studio looked much like another, even with sets being built or dismantled. I confess I paid more attention when we got to the costume department. I passed a pleasant few minutes examining Giddy Semestre's cast-offs, which hung in a wardrobe running the length of the back wall.

'I guess you're about the same height,' Kliener said, wiping his forehead with a sweat-stained handkerchief.

'I guess we are.' It wasn't something I'd considered.

'About the same size too. So what do you weigh?' He made a guess that was slightly on the generous side. Whether that was generous to me or to the weight, I'll leave to your imagination.

But I told Kliener: 'I never discuss my weight before the third cocktail.'

'Maybe I can do something about that,' he smarmed.

Maybe not, I thought. I was beginning to get concerned at the lack of clues in this case. Possibly a lack of client too, as Rock Railton evidently had no real recollection of hiring me. Or presumably agreeing my fee.

Perhaps my impatience was showing, because Kliener assured me there was just one more stop on the tour. Just one more thing he wanted me to see. 'It'll blow you away,' he promised.

Well, we live in hope.

Hank was waiting outside the costume store. For some reason he'd ditched the dark (but not that dark) suit in favour of light tan trousers and a blazer. He cracked his knuckles alarmingly as we emerged and he became our shadow as Kliener led the way down an alley that ran alongside the building.

Our destination was a nondescript block away from the main complex. It looked insignificant in the way that only something that is supposed to remain unremarked can. The bolts and locks on the door were shiny from frequent use, but there was no sign of another living soul.

Inside was dark. Kliener fumbled for a light switch while Hank pulled the door shut behind us.

'You considered a life in the movies, Miss Malone?' Kliener said as the lights snapped on.

'I think you asked me that before.'

'Maybe I did. But your height and weight...'

'What about them?'

Lights were flickering into luminescence all around. The whole building was one vast chamber, like the studios. Except this obviously wasn't a studio.

'I reckon you'd make a good double for Giddy Semestre.'

He had to be joking. Giddy's figure, while perfect in its own way, was rather different from my own just-as-perfect figure. Sure, we both had curves in the same places. But not always in exactly the same direction or at the same angle. There were bits of Giddy Semestre that entered a room long before the rest of her, and believe me that would be a distinct disadvantage for a private detective who prides herself on being able to sneak into rooms all at roughly the same time.

But whatever witty retort I might have made was stifled by the sight of the inside of the building as the lights came on. The centre of the chamber was taken up with a large coffin-shaped tank. Pipes and tubes and cables and wires fed into and out of it, running to various pieces of advanced – for 1938 – equipment. More wires and cables emerged from the equipment and disappeared behind a

heavy curtain close to one of the walls.

Stretching out beyond the tank were several rows of what looked like glass bell jars. Except they were enormous – maybe ten feet high.

I'd never seen anything like it. And things I've never seen anything like worry me. Because I have seen so many things. What surprises life has left for me tend, for some reason, to be unpleasant ones.

Instead of wasting my wit, therefore, I decided it was time to be on my way.

Hank was standing with Kliener off to one side, so my route back to the door was clear. Never one to miss an opportunity or inspect the teeth of a horse someone's donated, I made my way rapidly back to the door and flung it open.

Only to find Hank standing on the other side. He cracked his knuckles and smiled. One of these actions made a noise like a gunshot. I had a horrible feeling it was the smile.

The obvious conclusion that any half-decent detective might come to at this stage, confronted with a Hank in the doorway and aware of another identical Hank standing behind her is that they were twins. One in a dark suit, the other in slacks and a blazer. I discarded this conclusion at once.

Partly this was because when I turned back to face Kliener and slacks-Hank, I saw that a *third* Hank was approaching across the chamber.

Mostly it was because as more lights flickered into life on the far side of the coffin-shaped tank, I could see what was inside the bell jars.

Leaning against the glass, for all the world like propped-up mannequins, were people. One in each jar. A whole line of identical Rock Railtons stood facing a whole line of identical Giddy Semestres.

'Here's the thing,' I said to the Hank who had just grabbed my arms from behind and was holding me more tightly than a nervous bridegroom. 'I may be wrong about this, but I'm willing to go out on a limb at least until you tear my limbs out. But I am guessing that you do not come from a family of identical triplets.'

Chapter 6

The Soul of Wit

I WAS ALLOWED to walk back unaided to where Max Kliener was waiting. But two Hanks followed closely behind me, each holding an identical pistol in their identical hands. Max Kliener, meanwhile, had transformed into Max Show-off.

He seemed only slightly put out when I interrupted his spiel to say: ‘It was you that sent those thugs to kill me last night after the party, wasn’t it?’

He opened his hands in a ‘what can I say’ gesture. ‘After Rock told me he should have recognised you and didn’t, I was worried how much you knew.’

‘Which Rock was that?’ I asked, pleased I’d timed my question to coincide with walking past several of them propped up inside their bell jars. We really were in the country of the bizarre now.

‘It’s best to plan ahead,’ Kliener told me. ‘You never know when you might need a new star.’

‘So the first Rock was right when he said someone was out to kill him.’

Kliener shook his head. ‘Wrong on every count, lady.’ He was starting to annoy me.

But I smiled to show otherwise. ‘Oh?’

‘He wasn’t the first Rock, not by a long way. And no one was trying to kill him. It just... happens.’

Light was beginning to dawn. I could understand the attraction of having a ready supply of the world’s best-known movie stars standing by. If they were in the habit of dying off, that made even more sense.

But where did Kliener get them from? I glanced back at the coffin-shaped tank and he clapped his hands approvingly.

‘I think the dame’s got it,’ he said. ‘Clever girl.’

‘Lady, dame, girl, make your mind up.’ All right, so my mind was on working out the plot rather than witty dialogue right now. ‘You have a way of making someone look how you want – am I right?’

‘Top of the class, doll.’

‘You asked about my height and weight, so I’m guessing it’s to do with moving bits round rather than hacking them about.’ I had a vague idea of how it might work, but he’d need the sort of power supply that wasn’t readily available in 1930s New York.

‘That’s right.’ Kliener took his cigar out of his mouth for long enough to examine it and seem surprised it wasn’t lit. ‘It’s all to do with redistribution of flesh and bone matter.’ He knocked on the nearest bell jar and it made a dull ringing sound. ‘These are all different people. But now, thanks to my work, they look the same.’

‘But they’re asleep,’ I pointed out. ‘They’re even more bored with what you’ve done than I am.’

He chomped his cigar. ‘Funny girl. They’re just waiting till I need them. As you know I got a costume store, and a prop store and a scenery store. Now I got a star store too.’

I peered through the glass at a sleeping Giddy Semestre. She looked just like the real thing.

Though, I realised, I'd probably never met the real thing. I wondered who she used to be.

'What happens to them?' I was asking myself as much as Kliener. My breath misted the glass as I spoke, blurring the woman's sleeping features.

'They die.' He said it easily, like it was no big deal. Like it wasn't the most important event in his star's short life. 'The process doesn't last. A couple of weeks, then they pay the price for being beautiful. I guess you burn too bright you don't burn for long.'

'They get old,' I realised. I remembered the old tramp outside Nick's when I was on my way to the launch party. That had been the Rock Railton I met the day before – the one I had promised to help. Too late for him now.

'They just sort of crumble away,' Kliener said. 'Sad. But, hey, that's life. Or rather...' He paused to guffaw unpleasantly. It was the sort of sound a donkey might make if it was in intense pain and beyond embarrassment. 'Or rather – that's *death*.'

I didn't share his amusement. 'So they die, and you just wheel out a new version. An identical copy.'

'You got it. Have to animate them first – wake them up. Then the clock starts ticking. Two weeks they got, if they're lucky. That's why I keep a few spares. I find a suitable candidate, and I process them ready for when I need them. A word to the press that they've set their sights on Hollywood and no one's the wiser.'

'But what,' I asked as sweetly as I could stomach, 'if they don't want to cooperate? It might be news to you, but not everyone in this world wants to be a famous movie star.'

'That's no problem. They forget. They forget everything when they wake up. They think they really *are* Rock Railton or Giddy Semestre.'

'Or Hank?'

Kliener's eyes narrowed and his cigar drooped slightly. 'Or Hank,' he agreed.

'You have a template,' I guessed. 'They only have the memories the real person had at the point that was made. Which is why a new Rock Railton doesn't know what the last one got up to or who he met. Same with Giddy Semestre. Same with Hank.'

His eyes had narrowed so far now that they were in danger of disappearing altogether. He knew it was coming, so before he could work out what to do about it, I turned to face the two Hanks with guns.

'So how long have these guys got?' I asked. 'Before they "just sort of crumble away"?''

Neither Hank showed any sign of understanding the point I was trying to make. Kliener had obviously chosen their template for physical rather than mental acuity. I glanced back at the third Hank who was making some adjustments to the coffin-tank. I doubted he knew what 'acuity' meant either.

Beyond him, a fourth Hank had appeared in the doorway. He was escorting the severe-looking middle-aged make-up woman I'd seen in the studio. From her expression I reckoned I'd rather let Lizzie Borden work on my looks than this hatchet-faced harridan.

Between them, the new Hank and hatchet-face were supporting another woman. It took me a moment to recognise Giddy Semestre. As they approached, I heard Kliener gasp beside me. It wasn't hard to tell why.

Giddy's face was drawn and her hair was turning grey. Her forehead was lined, and crow's feet framed her eyes. She looked like she had aged twenty years since I last saw her about an hour earlier.

‘Already?’ Kliener said.

‘It’s getting quicker,’ Harridan-Woman said. ‘We need another one quick – they’re still shooting.’

Giddy looked up at me, confused and afraid. Maybe she recognised me as the one person here who might have some sympathy. Well, she was right there.

‘What’s happening to me?’ she asked in a throaty rasp. Her face looked even more wrinkled than it had just moments before.

‘Nothing to worry about, doll,’ Kliener said. ‘The show must go on.’

And with that he stepped forward, drew a pistol from inside his jacket pocket, and shot her clean through the head.

I say ‘clean’. In fact, it was anything but. It would take Make-Up Lady a few minutes to sort out herself and Fourth-Hank.

The bloodstains also spattered the curtain that partitioned off a small area off to the side of the equipment attached to the coffin-tank. I’d noted the cables and wires snaking underneath the curtain earlier. Well hey – I’m a detective. I notice things. And the thing I noticed now was that the curtain shimmered, as if in a breeze. From behind it came a noise that was partway between a sigh and a sharp intake of breath.

If Kliener noticed, he didn’t show it. ‘Less than two days this time.’ He sounded worried – and it wasn’t the sort of concern one might naturally expect to feel after shooting dead one of the world’s most famous women.

He knelt beside Giddy’s body, which was lying face down. He turned her over. There was a neat hole drilled through her wrinkled forehead and she looked, well let’s face it – dead.

As we watched, the wrinkles deepened, the flesh sagged, the skin became translucent. Impossibly, she was still ageing. I tried to calculate how fast I could get to Kliener without being shot by a Hank. It didn’t take me long to decide it was impossible. And in that same short time, the late Giddy Semestre – or whoever she had really been – crumbled to dust. A few moments later, and all that was left was a faint outline on the floor. Even the blood had flaked away, disintegrating to leave only a vague stain.

No one else seemed the least bit surprised or shocked by all this. I gave up on surprise a long time ago, and I’m not easily shocked. But Kliener’s casual viciousness appalled me. With two of the Hanks still covering me with their guns, and another two busy nearby, there was nothing I could do. Not yet.

Besides, I have to confess I was curious to see what happened next. Everything about me is pretty and a lot of it is shrewd. So I had a pretty shrewd idea what was going on.

The two spare Hanks – by which I mean the ones who were not busily watching me and waiting for an excuse to shoot – moved to the nearest bell jar. Inside, a sleeping Giddy Semestre leaned against the glass. She was wearing a plain white dress, her features every bit as young and beautiful as in the film posters. Or as I had seen her at the party and then again on set.

One of the Hanks produced a large axe. The other Hank, Kliener and Mrs Make-Up stood well clear as Axe-Hank swung at the bell jar. The glass exploded, showering down on Hank. He seemed as oblivious to it as he probably was to the meaning of the word. Giddy slopped out, one slender arm thrown forward, a shapely leg visible where her dress had got hitched up. No one seemed worried she might get cut on the glass. Someone was going to have some sweeping up to do. Big time.

Hank and Hank lifted Giddy with surprising delicacy. They carried her over to Kliener, standing

her on her feet. She swayed like a sleepwalker, and Kliener supported her – head lolling on his shoulder, his arm round her. With a helping hand from the make-up harridan, he walked Giddy across to the curtain.

The make-up woman pulled the curtain open just far enough for me not to be able to see behind it, but sufficient for Kliener and Giddy to pass through.

A few moments later, they were back. Giddy was still relying on Kliener for support, but now she was awake. She looked disoriented and confused. She looked a little, well, giddy.

She saw me, she saw the Hanks, she seemed to recognise none of us. Only Kliener and the make-up woman – the only people the real Giddy Semestre had known when she was ‘templated’.

‘Giddy!’ I called out. I got a pistol jabbed in my midriff for my pains. It didn’t shut me up. ‘They’re using you, Giddy. Don’t believe a thing they tell you. Don’t even believe who you are. Try to remember who you used to be, who you really were!’

The gun jabbed harder, and I shut up. Not because of the gun, but because from her expression Giddy obviously thought I was mad.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, shaking her head sadly. ‘I’m due on set and I have lines to learn. It will take me a while.’

‘Way things are going,’ I said to her back as she left, ‘it could take you a lifetime.’

I turned to Kliener who was watching his latest protégé leave. He looked about ready to bite the end off his cigar, he was so pleased with himself.

‘You said yourself, it’s accelerating,’ I reminded him. ‘How long does *she* have, do you suppose? A whole day if she’s lucky? A couple of hours, maybe?’

Kliener’s smile might have been pasted on his face for all the change there was in his expression. He walked slowly up to me.

‘I’d better make sure I have her replacement lined up, then.’ He nodded at the line of Giddy bell jars. ‘As many replacements as I can find.’

‘You’re insane,’ I told him.

I don’t think he was even listening. His face was looking as pleased as punch – which was what I was going to do to it just as soon as I got the chance. Cigar and all.

Kliener leaned towards me, even though the top of his head was roughly level with my shoulder. ‘Bet you’re wondering how all this is possible,’ he smarmed.

It was a shame to puncture the moment. Actually, that’s a bit of a lie. I enjoyed looking him in the top of the head and sighing patiently as if I was explaining things simply to a rather dim-witted child.

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘You obviously have an Angel.’

Chapter 7

The Stone Cold Killer

I GOT AMPLE confirmation of Kliener's complete indifference to irony: when I mentioned the Angel, he looked up at me sharply – and *blinked*. Then, in case I hadn't found that amusing and ironic enough, he did it some more. There was a nervous tick at the side of his eye too. I suspected he wasn't especially delighted at the way I'd stolen his thunder. I was unrepentant – I think he'd stolen more than that in his time.

And thinking of time brought me back to the Angel, which I now knew from his reaction Kliener had hidden behind the curtain. Where no one could see it. God knows what it was doing – out of sight but not out of mind.

'Where's this going to end?' I demanded while Kliener was failing to come up with a response. 'Can't you see what's happening? The process is speeding up. It's taking more energy as it gets stronger. And the stronger the Angel gets the more energy it takes which accelerates things still further. How long before she's strong enough to escape?'

'You know nothing,' Kliener spat. And I use the word accurately.

'I know more than you,' I told him as I dabbed at my face with a hanky. However apparently tight and uncompromising one's outfit always make sure you have a special handy space for a hanky. And lipstick.

'So what if you do?'

'Well, if I know more than you and I know nothing, then I suppose you know less than nothing. Is that right?'

He didn't seem very interested in the mathematics of it. Instead he wobbled over to the curtain and yanked it aside.

I think even Kliener was surprised by what he revealed. The Angel was leaning forward, its chipped wings swept back as if it was moving at incredible speed. Its gnarled, clawed hands stretched out in front like the talons of an eagle reaching for its prey. The stone face was weathered and lined, but twisted into a hideous snarl of anger, rage, and hunger.

'I am guessing,' I said in my best told-you-so voice, 'that it's repairing itself. That's what it does with all the energy – the potential life it rips away from your victims. And I do mean victims.'

'Not another word out of you, Miss Blabbermouth,' Kliener snapped.

I ignored this skilful quip. 'It uses a fraction of that energy to shape the next Rock Railton or Giddy Semestre or Hank...' I paused, momentarily thrown. 'What's your last name?' I asked the nearest Hank.

'Sissy,' he said.

'It was a fair question.'

'Hank Sissy,' the other gun-toting Hank said.

'Seriously?'

‘No – Sissy.’

Time to move on. ‘Rock Railton, Giddy Semestre or Hank Sissy – it uses a fraction of the energy used to remould your victims to take on the memories and appearance of their templates. The rest of the life force it keeps, the rest of the unholy bargain it does with Time, goes to repairing itself. As you can see.’

Well, Kliener was looking, but he probably couldn’t see the truth. He didn’t want to. He had other things on his mind. In any case it was clear that Max Kliener and the truth had a rather arm’s length relationship.

I tried a different tack. ‘So how does the Angel wake your sleeping beauties?’

His smile was back, curled round his cigar. ‘How else? With a kiss.’

‘The kiss of an Angel?’

‘The merest touch will do it. But let’s call it a kiss. That seems appropriate.’

It would certainly work, and it did seem horribly appropriate. Horrible because it still looked like I was in line for the lips-of-death treatment myself.

This was rather confirmed as Kliener ordered the two armed Hanks to take me to the coffin-shaped device. The other two Hanks lifted the lid to reveal the dark interior. It looked worryingly like a coffin inside as well.

Sure enough, the two armed Hanks tucked their pistols away inside their jacket-stroke-blazer and each grabbed one of my arms. I was lifted from the ground and marched across to the tank, which was bad news for me.

The bad news for them was that, with my feet now off the ground, I could twist my legs enough to kick out. In a dazzlingly elegant display of athletic symmetry, I inserted one high heel into the most tender area within reach on each of my escorts. They both yelled and doubled over and each let go of me at the same moment, evidently having a similar interest in the symmetry of things.

All of which left me free to get my high heels back under the rest of me and make a rapid exit. My feet clacked on the hard floor like a frantic telegraph operator. SOS all the way to the door.

The door sprang open before I got there. Not good news. It was Mrs Make-Up returning. I caught a satisfying glimpse of her surprised face before I cannoned into it and sent her flying. Unfortunately, the impact sent me flying too.

By the time I got to my feet, I was surrounded by Hank. Just the one Hank, but he held me tight. Then another one jabbed a gun so close to my nose I could smell the cordite from its last shot. If I wasn’t careful, my final sensory experience would be the smell of the next one.

Without many options left, I allowed myself to be dragged back towards the coffin-tank. The Make-Up Woman seemed to have recovered from her ordeal, and was talking urgently to Max Kliener.

‘Julius can’t have it,’ Kliener growled. ‘Tell him to stop bothering me.’ He waved her away.

The woman scowled at me as she passed. I nodded back. But my blood froze as we approached the equipment. The Angel was still staring out from its alcove. Maybe it was a trick of the light, or maybe it was my imagination. But it seemed like the Angel’s expression had changed, just slightly.

It seemed like there was the ghost of a smile on its cracked stone lips.

Chapter 8

Angel Kisses

THE TWO HANKS dragged me to the coffin-tank and waited while Max Kliener stomped over. His grin was so wide it looked like his face had split open, probably to let his brain out before there was a major overload.

He stood in front of me and looked me up and down. Mostly up, him being so short. He gestured with his cigar in nothing like the emphatic and effective way that Winston Churchill would soon make famous.

‘So, Miss Malone, no final words of regret? No pleading for your life?’

‘I’m not intending to die,’ I pointed out.

‘Don’t mean it ain’t gonna happen.’

‘If I get a last request,’ I told him, ‘it’s that you learn to speak proper English.’

I don’t think he really took this to heart as he responded with: ‘You want a last request, you got it. Within reason.’

On the evidence so far, he wouldn’t know reason if it came up to him wearing a big badge marked ‘Reason’, shook hands, and introduced itself. But rather than risk his wrath, or worse his mirth, with a request to leave and go home I asked:

‘May I have a minute to compose myself before this ordeal?’

‘No problem. But it ain’t an ordeal. Soon you’ll be the most beautiful woman in the world.’

‘That *is* a matter of opinion,’ I said. ‘And I’ve a feeling that sort of beauty fades. Fast.’

He nodded, clamping the cigar back in his mouth. ‘So compose yourself,’ he said rather indistinctly round it. ‘You need Hilda to come back and give you the once-over?’

Hilda, I assumed was the hag with the make-up. The notion of her ‘giving me the once-over’ was almost as unsettling as the prospect of having my flesh and bone re-arranged and then getting snogged by a stone-cold killer. So I declined his thoughtful invitation.

Instead I whipped out my lipstick. One of the Hanks reached for his gun, then realised that I wasn’t actually brandishing a weapon. Well – it depends on your definition, I guess.

‘There is one other thing,’ I said sweetly, noting carefully where each of the four Hanks was positioned. One either side of me, one at the equipment, the last away by the door.

‘Shoot.’

I wish, I thought. Though what I actually said was: ‘You know, I’ve always admired you, Max.’ Sometimes I surprise myself. ‘You’ve been a hero of mine for so long now.’ Remember what I said about shameless. I was laying it on thick, just like the lipstick.

It certainly got his attention. He frowned for a brief moment, but then his vanity got the better of whatever common sense he had. It was obvious that he believed me and was soon lapping it up.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘No, really. It’s a shame about the ageing thing, but even so... The chance to be a genuine

Starlight Studios Starlet. Even for just a few days.’ My eyelids were fluttering like the wings of a trapped wasp. If he had an ounce of sense he’d realise they were about as safe and friendly.

‘My pleasure.’ He sounded like he might mean it.

‘If only things had worked out differently. But I understand, honestly I do. It’s all about protecting your investment, isn’t it? I mean, you can’t have any old Thomasina, Nicky or Harriet knowing what goes on here, how you’ve built your success. No matter how clever you’ve been.’

He made an ‘it was nothing’ gesture with his cigar which positively dripped with immodesty.

‘So I only have one request really,’ I told him. ‘Because I’m going to forget, aren’t I?’ I paused to sniff, and then dab a tear from the corner of my eye. ‘I’ll be such a star. I’ll be Giddy Semestre. But me – the real me, *this* me... I’ll never know about it.’

He was all sympathy and ‘there-there’. Even the Hanks were looking a little moved as I sniffed some more and a real tear rolled down my cheek. Well, *I* was impressed.

‘But you know,’ I said through my sobs. ‘You know, that’s all right. That’s absolutely fine.’

I turned away so they wouldn’t see me crying. Or rather, so they wouldn’t see me give in to the urge to roll my eyes and take a deep breath. When I turned back, it looked like I had managed to compose myself again.

‘Maybe there’s some other way, boss,’ one of the Hanks said. I was more disturbed than I expected to see that there was a tear in the corner of his eye too.

‘Perhaps it’s not too late,’ the other Hank agreed.

Well, excuse me – this was my show. My limelight moment. I wanted to look back on this and be able to say: ‘All my own work’, thank you very much.

I shook my head and waved away their sympathy. ‘No, it has to be. I can see that. What choice does poor Mr Kliener – poor *Max* – what choice does he have?’

Maybe I was overdoing it just a touch. Go too far and I’d lose credibility. Now was the moment, so I flung my arms out wide. ‘Max – my hero!’

He took a step backwards.

‘There is only one thing I want before...’ I choked back a sob. ‘Before it happens.’

I ran a critical eye over his jacket, then moved as fast as lightning. Before either of the closest Hanks or Max Kliener himself could react, I grabbed him and pulled him into an embrace. Then I kissed him long and hard, full on the lips.

To give him his due, he went with it. I had trouble pulling away. But as soon as I did, he was out of it for a while – my lipstick has that effect.

As Max was coming to terms with having been snogged out of his mind, I discovered to my relief and delight that it *was* a gun in his pocket. I lifted it from inside his jacket, turned and fired in one elegant and I have to admit well-practised movement.

Yes, I felt sorry for the Hanks. But there again, they were dead already thanks to Max. One of them I’m sure already had wrinkles spreading across his forehead. But it was difficult to tell with a hole through it.

My second shot was so close to the first it could have been an echo. In which case it was the shadow of a bullet that drilled through Second Hank’s blazer and stained it red as my lips.

A hand grabbed me from behind, pulling me backwards.

It was Max – after another kiss. His eyes were wide with infatuation and he was breathing heavily while sweating profusely. I shrugged out of his embrace, crouching low – very low in fact – to escape

his arms, while simultaneously sweeping the Third Hank's legs from under him with my own.

He crashed face-down to the floor. As he tried to get up again, Max Kliener stepped on his head in his hurry to get at me, lips revoltingly puckered. The noise Hank's head made when it connected with the hard floor was almost as revolting. He didn't get up after that.

'Mr Kliener...' the final Hank called from over by the door. He seemed unsure what to do.

'Out!' Max yelled at him.

Hank didn't move, just stared in disbelief.

'Get out – leave us in peace, can't you? Me and Miss Malone have...' His eyebrows crept so far up his forehead they threatened to become a replacement hairline. '...business.'

I was tempted to ask him to stay. But Hank was out of the door like a rabbit out of an electrified hat.

Unfortunately that left me alone with Max Kliener. The effect of my lipstick-kiss was that I had exchanged death for what is sometimes termed 'a fate worse than death'. Opinions differ, I'm sure. But, whatever the relative merits of death versus Max-kiss, I was pretty keen to avoid both.

'Melody!' he enthused.

'Mr Kliener,' I said warily, backing away.

'Please call me Max.'

'Please call me a taxi.'

He didn't find that as pithy and amusing as many would. I thought it was quite good under the circumstances. But I was unpleasantly aware that backing away from Kliener's clutching fingers was bringing me closer and closer to the Angel.

The bodies of all three Hanks were disintegrating as I tried not to watch. Kliener didn't notice at all and cared even less. His bulging eyes were fixed on me and my own bulges. His henchmen crumbled to dust around us as the Angel drew more and more energy. It would take more than that before she could move far or fast enough to be a real danger. But she'd get there.

Not that the Angel needed to move at all if Kliener kept coming at me. It was a straight choice between being smothered by his (let's say) enthusiasm, or the deadly touch of the creature made of pitted stone. A straight choice maybe, but not an easy one.

'Melody – you're just playing hard to get.'

'Hard as nails,' I agreed.

'All I want is a kiss. Just one more little kiss. I ain't never been kissed like that before.'

Even if I ignored the double-negative, it sounded like I'd overdone the lipstick.

Not that Max cared. 'It was the kiss of an *angel*.'

His lips protruding alarmingly, Kliener closed his eyes into tight scrunches, and leaped at me from point-blank range.

If he thought I was going to stand there meekly and give in to the puckered-lips apocalypse, he was sadly mistaken.

'I'm no angel,' I said, and stepped to one side with a neatness and poise that would have impressed a prima ballerina. Well, Max Kliener should relate to *that*.

At the moment, however, he had other things to relate to. With me out of the way, he overbalanced, tripped, staggered a few steps forwards, and found himself in the arms of and kissing a very different sort of angel.

He seemed to freeze in position. The Angel was very definitely smiling now. Her face was

undeniably less weathered, her wings less chipped and fractured.

Max Kliener looked grey, as if all the colour had been sapped from him. His face was lined and cracked like ancient stone. Then he simply crumbled away. A scattering of dust fell to the floor at the stone Angel's feet. Followed by a well-chewed cigar.

Chapter 9

Closing the Case

AT THE END of every case there are a few loose ends to tidy away. Sometimes more than others. This one was probably about average. I drew the curtain on the Angel rather than let her watch me work. She'd be quite safe out of sight against the back wall of the building, I decided. Oh, she was strong enough to move about a bit, but not beyond the curtain. Now might be a good opportunity to refer back to my comments on hindsight in the sort of way that, at the time, I didn't.

My concern was more human. The last remaining Hank was a problem that would resolve itself, sadly. The current Giddy Semestre and Rock Railton too. Also sadly. Hatchet-faced Hilda the Make-Up Lady was a different prospect, but maybe she'd see an opportunity in the studio's inevitable demise and apply her talents to her own features. It couldn't hurt.

But in the meantime I could do something for the poor unfortunates trapped in their bell jars.

I had a smashing time getting them all out. The first was the most difficult because I had no help. But I dragged a Rock Railton to the coffin-shaped tank, and then got to work on the equipment. I'm pretty good with a screwdriver. I don't mean the drink, though actually, now I come to think of it...

One thing that had puzzled me was how an oaf like Kliener could possibly have created such a device. I soon found my answer – he hadn't. It was just a collection of wires and valves arranged with the haphazard 'try it and see' mentality of a hopeful dullard. The Angel had simply given Kliener what he wanted. The Angel, not the equipment, did all the work. And, arrogant to a degree that eclipsed whatever common sense he once had, Kliener assumed he had created the machinery. Maybe the Angel planted the idea in his rather empty head in the first place.

But whatever the case, it meant I had merely to reconnect the cables the other way round. I suffered a slight crisis of conscience (all such crises are slight in my book), before switching on.

My twinge, let's call it that, was because I didn't actually know which of the Rock Railton copies had been created from which of the original men that the equipment had stored details for.

When the process was finished, and I helped a confused and rather tired-looking young man out of the tank, he might have got someone else's features and body again. Or he might be back to himself. I consoled myself with the knowledge that he would never actually know. Whoever he was now was the person he thought and remembered he had always been.

I don't know what he made of the process of helping me carry another unconscious body over to the tank. But as it was a Giddy Semestre copy, he probably quite enjoyed it.

It wasn't too long before the bell jars were empty and an assortment of confused young men and women listened to me explain about experimental movie effects, thank them for their help, and talk in brief about where they could find out more about training for the stunt industry. I doubt any of them were impressed. None of them seemed keen to follow up on my suggestion that Max Kliener would be happy to explain *everything*.

I watched them leave. They were young and mostly good looking, but there wasn't a Rock Railton

or a Giddy Semestre among them. They were all of a similar height and roughly the same build as the stars they had been intended to replace, but they just didn't have... something. Maybe it's star quality. Maybe it's charisma. Maybe it's just confidence.

But they were all alive and well. They'd not been kissed by an angel, so they'd live full and happy lives. Or as full and happy as fate decreed. They were all unique, all – in their own special way and to someone – a *star*.

As soon as I was alone, I dismantled the equipment and got to work again with my screwdriver. Soon it was just a pile of metal, cables, wires and tubes. I'd call by the prop store on my way out and have them just take it away.

That left only the Angel to deal with. How do you deal with a statue, that had to be the real problem. Only, of course, it wasn't.

The real problem, as I discovered when I pulled back the curtain, was finding it again. Where the Angel had been standing, there was an empty space. In front of the empty space was a faint dusting of Max Kliener. Behind it was a large hole in the wall where someone had taken out one of the prefabricated panels from the outside.

I knew this because the actual panel had been carefully – and obviously quietly – leaned up against the wall beside the resulting hole. Several sets of footmarks in the dust and dirt led away from the building. It must have happened while I was preoccupied with ushering out the confused and rather noisy Starlight Stars and Starlets. In the distance I could see a trail of dust kicked up by a departing truck. A truck that was undoubtedly taking the Angel away to...

Well, that was the question, wasn't it?

One case might be over, but another had just opened. New York was growling outside, but I was ready for it. My stocking seams were straight, my lipstick was combat-ready, and I was packing cleavage that could fell an ox at twenty feet.

What had happened to the Angel was a mystery.

But I am Melody Malone, with ice in my heart and a kiss on my lips. In the city that never sleeps and should never blink, mysteries are my business.

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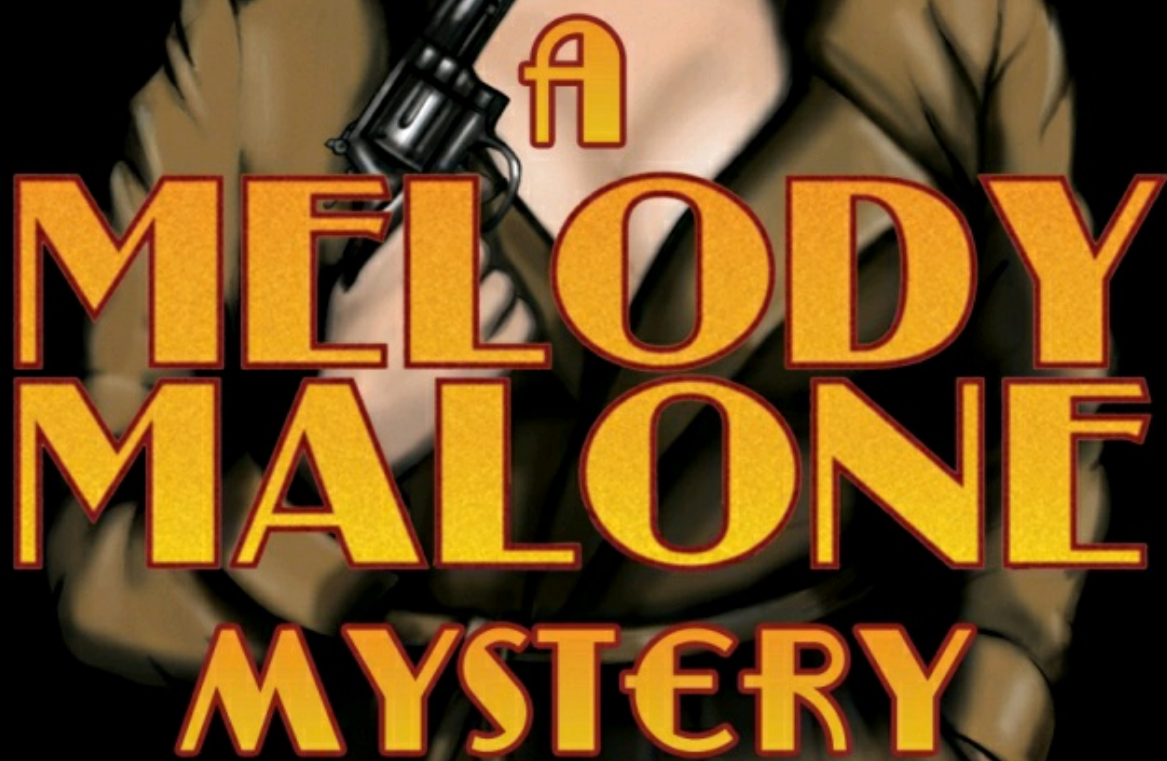
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DOCTOR WHO



THE ANGEL'S KISS

A stylized illustration of a woman in a trench coat and hat, holding a smoking revolver. The background is a silhouette of a city skyline against a yellow and orange sky.

A
MELODY
MALONE
MYSTERY