By Dennis Louis Dyer

Hollywood, 1950: Five years after the second world war film-makers have revived Hollywood's golden age and an upscale stockbroker is murdered in the lobby of an exclusive hotel.

Mrs. **Meredith Morgan** has been abandoned by her husband and she contacts private eye **Mark Taylor** to search for her missing spouse. Later, her wealthy boss **Louis Schribner** has a problem needing investigation and she recommends Taylor. Taylor arrives at Schribner's Hollywood Hills home early for a late afternoon meeting. While waiting in the living room, Mark is surprised to find Meredith also there. This scene presents the first interlude of a developing romance.

The affair occurs as a side-line of the murder investigation plot. **Freddie** is an investigative reporter who provides Mark with information.

The scene begins with Mark Taylor standing at a panoramic window overlooking the palatial estate's gardens and city-scape of Hollywood.

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"You like the view, Mr. Taylor?" Asked a soft feminine voice that startled me. The voice was vaguely familiar and I spun around. She leaned against the baby grand near by, resting an elbow on top. She was dressed leisurely in a white translucent lace blouse that had puffed sleeves choking off at the wrists. Her green ballerina skirt flowed down almost to her ankles.

"Very nice," I said. "Very nice indeed, Mrs. Morgan."

"You remember me?" she said, surprised.

"I never forget a face," I said as I concentrated my gaze on her trim figure.

She moved toward me in that smooth graceful motion women use when they don't wear high heels. She stood beside me and seemed unaware of my presence. The magnificence of the view fascinated her. She sighed deeply and said in a husky whisper, "Isn't it beautiful?"

I looked at her striking profile and said, "Yes, very." There was a faint scent about her, not too strong, not too weak. It was just enough to remind me of pine and orange blossoms.

Suddenly she shrugged her shoulders slightly and walked to the center of the room. She picked out a cigarette from a small box on the mirror-top coffee table and began tapping one end of it on her thumbnail. I reached into my pocket for my lighter, walked over and offered a light. I gazed at the flame and as she lit the cigarette, our eyes met. We didn't say a word. Dollars to donuts she was thinking what I was thinking.

She sat down in the corner of a long sectional couch and motioned for me to sit beside her. Then she inhaled deeply and allowed the smoke to flow through her delicate nostrils.

"It's so depressing," she said moodily.

"What?"

"Beautiful things, this beautiful home," she paused for a moment. "I wish they were mine." Her words were lazy like the smoke that curled upward gently in wavering ribbons before us.

"I figured this was your home."

"No," she smiled but there wasn't any humor in her face. "It's just -- uh -- room and board and a salary for me -- for being Mr. Schribner's secretary." There was a great deal of bitterness in her voice and it made me wonder if she had hocked her lavish fur coat. Or whether it was hers at all.

I finished my drink and put the glass on the table. The Scotch warmed me up. I felt good. Then I said, "Has anybody told you you're a damn good-looking woman?" -- And, if it's any consolation, you certainly don't look like a secretary.

"Thanks," she said softly, "you're very nice -- very sweet." Her eyes wandered down to her open-toed gold sandals. For a moment she seemed to admire them -- and so did I. She used the same carmine-color nail polish on her toes as on her fingers. Then she glanced at me and saw I was looking at her feet. It seemed to annoy her, to embarrass her slightly. She lifted her legs and deftly tucked them under her on the couch. Then she asked, "Do you still think I had something to do with the problem at your office?"

I reached up and felt the sore on my head. I gave her a silly grin and said, "That's rather a common occurrence in my trade. -- And even if you had, I -- uh, I wouldn't hold it against you. After all, my mother taught me a long time ago to never hold a grudge."

Her face looked even better when she smiled. This time she did it out loud with a high melodic tinkle. "I can understand why Mark Taylor, private investigator, doesn't advertise.

"I can't afford it," I said.

"You don't have to," she assured me. "The best way is mouth-to-mouth."

I almost cracked wise, but I didn't. I've always said that women say things they don't feel and feel things they don't say. "So you told Schribner about me?"

She nodded and said, "You impressed me, even if you were flat on the floor when I first saw you."

"What does Schribner want?"

"You'll have to ask him. He should be along pretty soon."

If Schribner never showed up, I wouldn't have minded. "So you don't know, so why the big build-up about me?"

"I knew you were in the business," she said. "He needed a private investigator, so I told him about you." She leaned down toward the coffee table and placed her cigarette on an ash tray. The low-cut neck of her loose billowy blouse sagged slightly. Everything she had was all hers and there was a lot of it. Then she leaned back and threw her arms loosely along the rim of the couch.

"Is he a nice guy? -- To work for, I mean?"

She thought about that for a moment. Then she peaked an eyebrow and said, "To work for -- uh -- yes."

"All I can say is he's lucky -- having a girl like you working for him."

She edged closer to me and I turned toward her. "I wish Mr. Schribner thought so," she said.

"Has anyone ever told you -- that you're a damn good looking woman?"

"Yes," she said softly. "You. -- And stop repeating yourself."

"All right," I pouted. "So I'll keep my big mouth shut and just think about little sweet things like that."

"Men are such little boys," she sympathized and reached up and stroked the back of my head. "Does it still hurt?" she cooed and moved forward slightly brushing her knees against mine. I looked at her and there was no need for words. Our eyes were doing all the necessary talking. Her lips had just enough sheen to make them inviting. Her eyelids lowered a little. I pulled her to me and brushed her soft neck with my lips, moving them gently along her neck to her cheek until I found her mouth. She closed her eyes.

I kissed her hard, almost bruising her lips. She trembled and slipped her arms around me. Then she stretched out her legs and pressed herself tightly against my body. We clung to each other for a few moments, passionately, hungrily, and let our lips and tongues do crazy things.

After a while she pushed away from me. Her face was flushed and her eyes seemed to smile at me. She reached up and brushed aside a stray lock of hair. Then she smoothed out imaginary wrinkles on her blouse. Her hand grasped mine and gave it a wee squeeze.

"Please help me find my husband," she said in a husky whisper, and it hit me like a heavy corkscrew right there, right on the button.

It was a real cute trick and I should've known better. She thought she had me up a tree but there were a helluva lot of branches I could crawl away on. For instance, I thought of Burton, alias Morton. If he was her husband she was going to be very surprised. And if he wasn't, she was going to be very surprised that I couldn't be purchased for a kiss, a tumble and a promise of something more in the future.

I took her hand, returned the squeeze, and set it down beside her. Then I reached up and cupped her chin in my fingers. "What's he look like, angel face?" I asked as I kissed her again.

Her eyes took on a wistful far-away look. She described him and I got about the same mental picture I had gotten from Freddie.

I tried to figure out what her angle was. Her anxiety over his disappearance was as phony as a junior G-man's badge. So I took my time about responding, then I said, "Mrs. Morgan, there are several things involved."

"Such as?" she asked.

"Dough on the line -- for finding him ---" And before she had a chance to answer, I added quickly, "Alive or dead?"

She started to say something, but restricted herself. She seemed surprised, hesitant. The muscles in her jaw tightened and twitched. Her lips straightened out into a thin line. Then she moved away from me and spat out: "You money-hungry bastard!"

"Aren't we all?" I smiled.

"Not that much," she snapped. "How low can a person go?" she asked and added vehemently, "God, I bet you'd sell your mother for a song!"

"And what were you trying to buy with your kisses?"

Her right hand darted out at me faster than a snake's tongue. It caught me flush on the cheek. The crack of the stinging slap sounded like a .22 pistol shot. The side of my face was hot and I blinked my watery left eye a couple of times.

She smiled at me and it reminded me of Judas. Then she said sweetly, "Can I get you another drink?"

I just sat there, amazed by her nonchalant change of mood. "Remember," she added, "your mother told you never to hold a grudge."

She threw my line right back at me and I grinned. I liked that. She was smart, had a lot gumption and her control was good -- strictly big league. She made me feel like a little chastised boy. I shook my head. Scotch just didn't appeal to me now.

"Look, Mrs. Morgan, let's stop horsing around. If you want to play adolescent games, we can have some fun. But finding your husband is a business proposition entirely. I leave it up to you. What'd you want?"

"You -- you hinted that my husband might be dead," she said quietly.

"No, didn't hint one way or other. I said alive or dead."

"Something has happened, hasn't it? Please tell me about it," she pleaded and seemed sincere. I wondered about that.

"I'll give it to you straight," I said. "A guy was murdered a few days ago in a swank Hollywood hotel."

"My husband?" she asked, and her voice sounded far off.

"Could be, he fits the description you gave me. And has other similarities you've talked about."

Just then we heard a car's engine purring softly and slowing down. It came closer and stopped. A car door slammed shut.

For a moment she didn't say a thing. Her hands began to move and she didn't know where to put them. Her face was like a blank piece of paper, there was nothing written on it.

"And knowing that -- you -- you kissed and fondled and made love with me?"

"I'm still not positive he is your husband. -- Maybe the guy isn't," I explained. But I was almost certain that he was.

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