

**1** Frank Logan thumbed through a week-old issue of *Time* and tried hard not to feel like a piece of leftover meatloaf. Smooth jazz oozed from the tiny Bose stereo on the windowsill, some slow saxophone riff that sounded like all the other slow saxophone riffs he'd heard since opening up shop at 8 that morning.

He sighed, and replaced the well-thumbed news magazine back on the reception table, taking the time to make sure to carefully fan the magazines out just so. He stood up from the overstuffed leather chair poised next to the well-fed ficus plant in the reception area and stretched his back, digging both sets of knuckles into the softening flesh at the small of his spine.

God, he was getting old.

For perhaps the twelfth time that day, Frank wandered from his outer office back to the inner. It wasn't a long walk, maybe twenty feet all told, but at least it was a diversion from the grim routine of watching the entire day pass by without any human contact. The walls of his new office were thin, and he could hear the painful jazz solo in his inner office as loudly as he had in his outer sanctum.

That's what he got for sending his receptionist, computer programmer, Girl Friday, and DJ home early. Dana was a doll, and had a hell of a figure to boot, but hearing her yap on the phone with the rest of the gals from the office complex secretarial pool was worse than 5,000,000 sax solos at once.

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By lunch he'd had enough and, God love her, she hadn't demurred when he offered her a half-day instead of a full. As she gathered up her oversized leather purse and filled it with her clattering keychain collection to head off for the long weekend, he'd been tempted to follow her, maybe catching a matinee at the multiplex down the street or even getting a jump on happy hour down at Bernie's Bar on 4th and K Streets. But he was a Bureau man through and through, and that meant staying till business hours were over, whether you were painfully slow or dreadfully busy.

Frank cringed upon entering his inner sanctum, suddenly reminded of why he spent so much time in Dana's domain in the first place. For there, on the walls, was his gallery of book covers, from his very first to his very latest, expertly framed and blown up to at least ten times their original size. Interspersed were smaller frames picturing his face on a dozen or more magazine covers, as well as a select grouping or two of his more notable newspaper headlines.

He tried to avoid them as he paced from door to desk and back again, but it was impossible to do so. They were everywhere: over the water cooler in the corner and the file cabinet against the wall, above his desk and across from his desk and beside his desk and on the other side of his desk. It was like being in a museum, only he wasn't dead yet. Although he had to admit that, on days like these, he felt pretty close.

It had seemed like the logical interior design move at the time. His longtime publisher, Doubletree Press, provided them gratis, and they'd been lying around in his garage for years now. Why not put them to some good use and, if seeing a wall of his latest bestsellers convinced a hesitant client to sign on the dotted line, so be it.

Of course, that had been six months ago when he'd left

the Bureau and gone into business as a private investigator. License #X-3784QR7, thank you very much. If you looked hard enough between the book and magazine covers, you could see it there, framed on the wall, just above the thermostat.

At first, getting his PI license and setting up shop in the newest office building on the Beltway (well, a tad off the Beltway, to be precise, but at least the way was clearly visible, from the top floor, on a sunny day) seemed like a no-brainer. The reviews for his latest book were great, and he'd left the Bureau with over 30 years in and at the top of his game. He'd left his old partner, Vinny Smalldeano, behind to be his eyes and ears, a loyal source inside the department should the need for quality inside information ever arise.

Leaving his old life behind had been easier than he thought. After all, Frank had grown tired of the inter-office politics and the not-so-subtle hints that he was "using the Bureau" to feed his own "publicity machine," at least in the words of a none-too-subtle performance review just before Frank pulled the plug. To quell the controversy and prove the naysayers wrong, he'd done the unexpected and walked away from a nearly 35-year career to start all over as a PI.

It might have been the oldest story in law enforcement, but Frank was hardly your typical PI. For one thing, he didn't need the money. Even if he never wrote another word—or sold another book—he had more than enough money to retire and live more than comfortably, several times over if the truth be told.

No, the PI gig was just to keep from going insane while pacing from one end of his exclusive Georgetown brownstone to the other. He figured he'd invest in a fancy espresso machine, get one of those mini Bose sound systems, tune into a classical station, catch up on his reading, and spend his time

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in between consulting for Court TV and CNN, looking for the occasional true crime case for his next book.

Once he'd invested the time and effort in getting the license and renting the office suite, though, he'd slowly warmed to the idea. Obviously, Frank's undercover days were over. From his salt and pepper gray hair to his trademark scowl, he was about as incognito as Paris Hilton at a nightclub opening.

Surveillance, he supposed, was out of the question, too. Years of daylong stakeouts in cramped quarters had left him with a bladder the size of a walnut and bad knees to boot. But that hadn't stopped a steady stream of wannabe clients knocking on his door those first few, heady months. In the beginning, everybody had wanted a piece of the Frank Logan mystique. (That half-page ad in the *Washington Post* hadn't hurt things, either.)

Although his first dozen or so clients paid him exorbitant fees to track down cheating wives or deadbeat dads, Frank got the feeling they were more interested in telling their friends who their PI was than actually getting the results he worked so long and hard for. It bothered him a bit at first, but he knew these were just the rubber neckers and gadflies. Once the shine wore off and the dust settled, the *real* clients would come around. The tough cases.

Missing persons.

Cold cases.

Unsolved murders.

The good stuff.

Well, the shine was off and the dust had settled, and his doorway was still empty. The reporters who'd announced his grand opening with such pomp and circumstance weren't returning any of his phone calls, his new agent was hinting around that the numbers for his latest paperback release were

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“more than disappointing,” and most days he and Dana passed the full 8 hours with nary a phone call or door knock. He’d caught up on all his reading, switched from classical to jazz, and traded in that Crate and Barrel espresso-maker for a good old Mr. Coffee.

And here it was, another Friday, three in the afternoon, with another two hours to go before he could swing by the local deli and pick up a six pack and a roast beef grinder for the long, lonely night ahead. He sighed, listened to another sax solo from the outer reception area, and buried his head in his hands.

He was still sitting like that sixteen minutes later when the door to the outer office creaked open, startling him out of his midday nap. Instinctively he reached for his gun, then he realized it was safely locked in the top drawer of his desk and, besides, this wasn’t a stakeout. This was his office. He stood up too abruptly, banging his knees on the underside of his fancy, newfangled desk, and then bruising his thigh as he cut the corner too fast and dinged himself a good one on the flat edge.

“Shit!” he grumbled, only to do a double-take as he rushed to the outer office and stared at a vaguely recognizable face. The oldish man with the trim physique and John Lennon glasses stared back at Frank and offered a greeting.

Kind of.

“Frank Logan?” he asked more than believed, an inquisitive twinkle in his sharp, hazel eyes. “*The* Frank Logan?”

“The indeed,” Frank chuckled self-consciously, stifling the urge to give his intruder a bear hug. He still had a ways to go in the customer service department, but it had been so long since he’d handled a new client he was now swinging in the opposite direction, from grizzled, hardnosed veteran to smarmy salesman. Frank extended a hand, suddenly sweaty, and was surprised by the thin man’s firm grip.

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“Arthur J. Ritchey III,” said the bespectacled gentleman, and suddenly Frank knew why his face looked so familiar. Glancing down to the coffee table reaching just to their knees, Frank spied Richie’s face staring back at him from the cover of *Time*.

“THE Arthur J. Ritchey III?” Frank asked.

The man followed Frank’s glance down to the magazine cover and grimaced. “God, I always hated that picture,” he said with a sneer, quickly looking back up at Frank with eyes both wise and wary.

Frank realized they were still shaking hands and felt the man pull away abruptly, his aversion to close physical contact apparently as distasteful as his image on the cover of a magazine. Not too subtly, he wiped his palm on the leg of his fitted gray slacks. Frank blushed, feeling out of place and over solicitous. In his own office, no less. “It’s an honor, sir,” he said blandly, offering Ritchey a seat in the overstuffed chair beside the front door.

Ritchey sat daintily, as if afraid he might catch something, and looked around the claustrophobic outer office with a critical eye. Frank took a seat on the corner of Dana’s desk, affecting a casual approach, as he’d seen cops do so often in the movies. All that was missing from his Bogart pose was a battered fedora hanging from the coat rack and an unfiltered cigarette smoldering at his side. “What can I do for you today, Mr. Ritchey?”

The man stared back blankly, then tapped the magazine cover for emphasis. “You mean you don’t know why I’m here?” he asked.

Frank stared back with a blank look, a man unaccustomed to being surprised. “Should I?” he asked.

Ritchey barely concealed a snort as he shook his head. “I

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see,” he sighed. “So the magazines are just for show, is that it?”

Frank could have kicked himself. He was getting soft and moldy in the private sector. He’d picked up that same magazine a dozen times or more since it had arrived but had never bothered to read the cover story. What more did he need to know about Arthur J. Ritchey III? Everyone knew he was a successful international businessman, importing and exporting things Frank could hardly pronounce. Forbes list every year, down toward the bottom but, hey, still on the list. Friend of all the right people. Trophy wife. Donated just the right amount to all the right charities. What could *Time* tell him that the *National Enquirer* hadn’t already?

“Perhaps it’s better that you *don’t* know the story beforehand, Mr. Logan,” Ritchey reconsidered, eyeing Frank with a reserved indifference. “Maybe it’s good you don’t already know the sordid details. That way, you can look at the case with a fresh pair of eyes.”

“Case?” Frank asked.

Ritchey nodded grimly, glancing around the room as if the walls of a former FBI agent’s office might have ears. “It’s my son,” the powerful shipping magnate admitted. “He’s gone missing, Mr. Logan. He was studying in his dorm room late last week, according to his girlfriend, and...just...vanished. Never showed up for his mid-term, stood her up for a date. His roommate found blood on the back of his door and his Sociology book lying in the middle of the floor. There was an empty pizza box on his bed and concrete dust on the windowsill. The campus police did a thorough search, the locals too, but nobody’s seen him since.”

A heavy silence filled the room. Frank waited, guessing there was more to the story. Bitter custody battle, hostile takeover, rival business partners, drug addiction, some extenu-

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ating circumstances that had brought Ritchey to a PI instead of the Feds. There wasn't.

Arthur J. Ritchey III looked up from his starched lap and said, "I saw you on the news a few months back. Heard you'd left the Bureau, hung up your shingle in the private sector. I've read all your books, Frank. May I call you Frank? Read them all, every last one. I know you're the best. I know you're expensive. I need the best, Frank, and I'm willing to pay for it. Can you help me?"

Frank nodded, resisting the urge to squeeze Arthur J. Ritchey III on his thin, slumped shoulder and thank him profusely for dragging him out of the doldrums. He didn't seem like a warm and fuzzy kind of guy. It also didn't seem like that kind of case.

Already Frank's head was reeling. Empty dorm room, hot girlfriend, pizza box, bloody handprint, daddy's boy, magazine covers, lots of pressure to succeed. Based on this initial rough sketch, Frank was fairly certain he'd find the boy holed up in some nearby crack den, owing a 400-pound drug dealer several grand and all too eager to apologize to Daddy when Frank rescued him from a grim fate.

"I can help you, sir," Frank pledged.

*After all, he thought, how hard could it be to find a pampered frat boy?*