

SAM'S SONG

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Goylake Publishing

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Goylake Publishing, Iscoed, 16A Meadow Street,
North Cornelly, Bridgend, Glamorgan. CF33 4LL

Print ISBN: 978-0-9566909-5-1

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To my family, with love

Chapter One

I was sitting in my office, tapping my fingers on my desk, waiting for my computer to start. As usual, my fingernails were bitten to the quick - it was an annoying habit, one I was trying to break - and, as usual, my computer was having one of its 'moments'. Like most of the items in my office, the computer was a refurbished model, the best I could afford. Today, I was in luck and the programme opened. I selected the appropriate file and was about to type up a report for a client when a man walked in carrying a silver-tipped cane in one hand and a felt fedora in the other.

"Samantha Smith, enquiry agent?" he asked.

I looked up from my keyboard and nodded. "Do you want to hire me?" It was a question I asked *everyone* who entered my office - money was tight - I needed their patronage. In the early years, my voice had an almost desperate edge to it when I asked that question, a desperate edge that matched my pleading look. Recently, I'd modified my tone and look, but to my ears, I still sounded frantic.

"Can I come in first?" the man with the fedora asked patiently.

I waved a hand towards my client's chair and mumbled, "Oh, sorry. Yes. Take a seat."

The man with the cane and the fedora looked

around my office. He gazed at the apple-white walls, which I'd recently painted, my coat rack, my cream trench coat - I like to dress the part - and my battered oak desk, acquired on the cheap from a second-hand market. In truth, apart from a couple of iron-grey filing cabinets, there was nothing else to look at so his eyes alighted on me.

"Nice office," he smiled politely.

I nodded.

He glanced over my shoulder to a rain-streaked window, the only source of natural light in my first floor office. Maybe he didn't like the view because his top lip twitched into an Elvis Presley snarl. "Lousy district."

I shrugged. My office was located in Butetown, Cardiff, near the docks. It wasn't a salubrious district. In fact, I plied my trade from a distinctly seedy street, but it was all I could afford.

He shuffled in his seat, then brightened, his smile revealing a gold filling on his right eye-tooth. "As a matter of fact, young lady, I would like to hire you."

"You have a name?" I asked.

"Milton," his smile intensified. "Milton Vaughan-Urquhart." He leaned forward and offered his right hand. I shook it. His handshake was a trifle limp. I noted that his fingernails had been neatly manicured and that his hands were as smooth as a

baby's skin.

"Okay, Milton, so you want to hire me."

"On behalf of Derwena de Caro."

He paused for dramatic effect.

I flicked my hair over my shoulder. I picked up a pencil. I sat back in my faux-leather chair. I twirled the pencil between my fingers. I offered Milton a polite smile. I was playing it cool, as though managers of multi-million pound pop stars walked into my office every day of the week.

"You've heard of Derwena de Caro?" he frowned.

"Sure." I'd heard of Derwena. I'd heard that she could be a five-star pain in the arse, a pop diva who sent her fellow musicians and hangers-on climbing up the walls. I needed the money that was painfully true. But did I need the emotional baggage that came with Derwena de Caro? I thought not.

"Didn't she have a hit a few years back?" I searched my mind for the name of the song. "Love Bullet, wasn't it?"

"Come up to me, baby, hold me real close, you know I'm the one who loves you the most, and I wanna shoot all my love bullets into you," Milton sang. He had a terrible voice, akin to chalk scratching on a blackboard.

"They don't write them like that anymore," I sighed.

“Actually, they do,” Milton corrected me. “Woody, Derwena’s guitarist and lover, wrote that lyric and he’s put together a series of classic songs for her next album, *Midas Melange*. Okay, Derwena’s gone through a fallow period – it’s all about hip-hop and rap now, beats per minute, it’s difficult for a chanteuse like Derwena to break through – but she’ll be back big time with *Midas Melange*.”

Milton sat back in my client’s chair. He placed the silver tip of his cane on my office floor. The floor was bare floorboards – I was saving up to buy some carpet. He twiddled the bulbous crown on the cane between his flaccid fingers. He gazed at me through soft, brown, expectant eyes. Then a cat jumped in through a gap in my side window and landed on my desk.

“Shit!” Milton put a hand to his throat, caressing his cravat in an effort to compose himself. “What the hell’s that?”

I stroked the cat and he purred, rubbing his damp head against the back of my hand. “This is Marlowe. And don’t shout like that, he gets nervous.” Marlowe, a mean looking, battle-scarred alley cat, had adopted me. I’d walked into my office one morning and there he was. He’d jumped in through my open side window via the roof of a ground floor shed. I gave him a saucer of milk and next day, he was back demanding food, meowing like a badly

tuned violin. Three months later, we were still together, which was a record for me when it came to recent male relationships.

Marlowe sat on the edge of my desk. He opened his legs, leaned forward, and licked his balls. *Don't do that, Marlowe*, I groaned inwardly, *at least, not in front of potential clients*. But Marlowe licked away. I guess a cat's gotta do what a cat's gotta do.

I glanced at Milton and noticed that he'd raised his right eyebrow in inquisitive fashion. He nodded with approval. "If only I were that dexterous."

I blushed. I blush easily. It's symptomatic of having freckles and auburn hair.

Marlowe continued to lick his privates. Then he wandered around my desk, found a suitably vacant spot and curled into a ball, purring his way into a catnap.

"Derwena thinks that she's being stalked." Milton was back into his linguistic stride, leaning forward, resting his arms on his cane, which was planted between his legs.

"And is she?" I asked.

Milton shrugged a well-rounded shoulder. In his early forties, he was flabby around the middle with short legs. Clean-shaven, he had a comfortable double chin and soft jowls. His hair was wavy and brown, parted on the right, reaching to his collar, revealing a high-forehead. He flicked his hair away

from his collar in a foppish manner then offered me a thin smile. "Derwena's an artist," he explained, "she's given to flights of the imagination."

"So the stalker's all in her mind."

He shrugged again, offering me a tight, polite, yet painful smile. "Or he could be real. The music industry attracts a lot of fruitcakes."

Like Derwena de Caro, I thought, but I was being unkind. After all, if my life appeared in the Sunday newspapers, people would hardly regard me as Housewife of the Year.

"Why hire me?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Milton Vaughan-Urquhart stared at his fingernails. He blew on them then polished them on his tweed waistcoat. "There are not that many female enquiry agents around."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." If I sounded sarcastic, that's because I'd been having a difficult time lately. In fact, I'd been having a difficult time for the past thirty-two years, but you muddle through, don't you, hoping that the sun will shine, one day.

"And Derwena insisted that we hire a female enquiry agent," Milton continued. "And I checked you out amongst your male peers and they said you're the best."

That would be Mickey Anthony, a fellow private eye. He was always quick with a kind word

about me, but he was a womaniser and I suspected an ulterior motive. *Accept the compliment*, the little angel inside my head said, *you work damned hard, you're conscientious and you never quit until your client is satisfied*. But I couldn't accept the compliment; I've always found it hard to accept praise.

"Divorce is more my line of work." There I go again, being defensive; it was a coping strategy, and being a female alone in this game, I needed plenty of them.

"Do you want to stay in this dump forever?" Milton glanced around my office. He glared at me. His tone was surprisingly harsh. "From what I've heard you've got a good reputation amongst your peers. You're trustworthy, meticulous and very resourceful. But a good reputation alone doesn't put carpets on your floors or curtains on your windows. So I ask again, do you want to stay in this dump forever?"

It was a dump. But I liked my office. I liked the people in the neighbourhood. Even so, I was mildly ambitious and I knew that I had to challenge myself and move on. Besides, I had a string of bills to pay by the end of the week – I needed the money. Beggars can't be choosers, so I shrugged, "I charge £25 an hour, plus expenses." I knew that I was undervaluing myself. Indeed, if I had a twin sister I'd probably advertise as 'hire one, get one free'.

Milton stared at the gold rings and gold wristwatch, adorning his left hand, and the gold identity bracelet dangling from his right wrist. He smiled, "I think we can stretch to £25 an hour. We are ensconced in Castle Gwyn, living and recording on site. Do you know the castle?"

I nodded.

"Meet us at noon; Derwena should be up by then."

"She likes her bed."

"Recording sessions can go on into the early hours. Her voice is often at its best after dark."

Milton Vaughan-Urquhart stood. He placed his fedora on his head then straightened the seams on his trousers. His trousers were brown with a fawn pinstripe. He also wore spats, I noticed, tan and white. He checked his pocket watch, then returned the watch to his waistcoat. A pocket watch and a wristwatch – either this man had Swiss ancestry or he was obsessed with the time. "We'll see you at noon."

I glanced at Marlowe. He was still asleep, no doubt dreaming of mice. Maybe in the next life, I'd come back as a cat. I nodded. "I'll see you at noon."

Milton left my office. I stared at my desk. There were two drawers in my desk; one contained a bottle of whisky, the other a gun. I had a strict rule – the whisky was purely for medicinal purposes and, as with all medicines, you must never exceed the stated

dose. My stated dose was two fingers a day, maximum. I'd seen my mother consume gin like water. In fact, my earliest memory of my mother is of her slouched drunk in a chair, an empty bottle of gin in her limp hand. I must have been three or four at the time. I'd been to some dark places, but I had no wish to go there. Two fingers, maximum. That was my stated dose. The second desk drawer contained a Smith and Wesson .32. I'd fired the gun in anger, though I hadn't killed anyone. I thought about the gun. I thought about a potential stalker. I opened the drawer and slipped the gun into my shoulder bag. Okay, so it clashed with the make-up, the tissues, the panty-liners, but hell, better to be safe than sorry. I had an hour to kill. Enough time to complete my report and deliver it to my client. So I crouched over the keyboard and with Marlowe stretched over my desk, I earned some bread.

Chapter Two

I travelled north-east, to the outskirts of Cardiff. I was driving a modern Mini. Okay, the car had me up to my eyeballs in debt, but I needed something reliable in case I had to chase the 'bad guys'. More to the point, I needed something reliable in case the 'bad guys' decided to chase me.

It was a dull, dank, drizzly day, a day when autumn was drifting into winter. I was in the countryside now, peering through the windscreen wipers, searching for the signpost, the signpost that said 'Castle Gwyn, thataway'. I found the signpost and a turning that led to the castle. The road was narrow, one lane only, but smooth, covered with a fresh layer of tarmac. I travelled half a mile along that road, then the castle appeared before me, rising majestically out of the trees.

Castle Gwyn was a Victorian folly, a castle with a drawbridge, a dry moat and towers suggestive of white knights, princesses and fairytales. The round turrets had been whitewashed - gwyn is the Welsh for white - and they shone like beacons against the backdrop of dark woodland. Nowadays, patrons used the castle as a film set, as a location to hold wedding receptions and parties, and as a recording studio. Thoughts of wedding receptions reminded

me of my own 'special day' and my honeymoon spent in A + E, but that's another story.

I parked the Mini and got out of my car. I was still looking around when Milton walked over the drawbridge, an umbrella replacing his cane. He had something in his left hand, an 'access all areas' badge.

"You'd better wear this." Milton presented the badge to me and I slipped it over my head. "The castle has got its own security people who patrol from time to time and we don't want them jumping on you now, do we?"

As we crossed the drawbridge and entered the courtyard, I studied the badge, gazing at my picture. "Where did you get this photograph?" I asked.

"The Internet. Remember the Beatrice Black case?"

I nodded. I did. Beatrice was a prostitute from Cardiff. She'd been murdered and after six months of investigations, the police had drawn a blank. Her relatives came to me and asked if I could help. I nosed around, got lucky and, to cut a long story short, secured a conviction. For a couple of days my face was splashed over the local newspapers and the Internet. I enjoyed the satisfaction of solving the case, but I hated the publicity. Since childhood, I've loathed having my picture taken.

We crunched our way across the shingle of the courtyard and entered the building. The interior was

mind-blowing with every inch of wall space and ceiling decorated. Scenes from Arthurian literature ran around the walls - Arthur on his horse, Lancelot kissing Guinevere, Bedwyr throwing Excalibur into the lake. Above them bees, birds and butterflies swooped all over the ceiling in a display of energy and colour that had my mind spinning. In truth, it was too much, too garish, too over-blown. But bear in mind, this comes from someone who lives in a modest flat overlooking the gas works.

Milton placed his umbrella in a brass stand while I hung my trench coat in a closet as big as my apartment. Then we entered the main hall.

We found Derwena in the hall - another garish room, though offering the relief of lightly decorated tiles running from dado rail to ceiling. Derwena was reclining on a chaise longue, watching daytime television. She was in her late twenties with long, frizzy, bottle-blonde hair. Her eyes were green, I guessed, but it was hard to tell because they were so bloodshot. If I'm honest, her face contained more character than beauty. Don't get me wrong - she was attractive, but she looked nothing like her magazine pictures. Just goes to show what a bit of airbrushing can do for you. She had a curvaceous figure, maybe a few pounds overweight, and I guessed that she was around my height - and I had somewhere to go to challenge Elle Macpherson.

Derwena was dressed in an ankle-length silk dress - *I'd hate to iron that* - that had a V-shaped jewelled panel on the bodice. The dress was peach and sleeveless. She wore no rings on her fingers, although large Icenishield earrings dangled from her ears. I considered that she was over-dressed for lounging around indoors at just after noon. But then, my wardrobe runs to smart-casual with barely a nod towards glamour and sartorial elegance, so who am I to talk.

Derwena glanced up from the television. She viewed me through her red, bloodshot eyes. "She's too beautiful." The songstress waved a dismissive hand in my general direction while glaring at Milton. "Get rid of her. Get someone else."

I frowned. Me? Beautiful? Okay, I had long auburn hair reaching down to the middle of my back, which I liked. My eyes were dark brown, offering the suggestion that I had large pupils. My cleavage resembled Mount Snowdon rather than the Himalayas, but that's fine because my boobs were balanced out by a petite rear. I was below average height, nothing special, and I had a waist that would sneak into a Victorian corset. My waist was thin partly because I skipped meals on a regular basis and partly because when I did eat, I worried away any fat. Men found me attractive and maybe I'd been blessed in the looks department, but whenever I

caught sight of myself in a mirror, I wanted to look away or close my eyes.

“You wanted a woman, didn’t you?” Milton was having a hot flush – his cheeks were as crimson and as luminous as the walls that ran below the dado rail. “Well, I’ve got you a woman. She’s the best available, I’ve checked them out. And we only have the best for Derwena, don’t we, dear?”

Derwena turned away in a huff. She picked up the remote control and adjusted the volume on the television. Needless to say, the volume went up.

“Can you believe that?” Derwena gasped, while waving the remote control at the television. “He had sex with his sister and with his mother-in-law, and he reckons that his wife is sick for running off with their daughter’s rapist! Some people, eh?”

Milton went from crimson to purple. He snatched the remote control from Derwena’s hand and turned the television off. “Derwena, stop filling your head with that rubbish and come and meet Sam.”

Derwena gave me a long, sideways look, then she gazed at the vacant television. She folded her arms across her breasts. “I don’t like her. Get rid of her. Get someone else.”

I shrugged at Milton then smiled politely. “I’ll get my coat...”

“No, Sam, you’re staying.” Milton took a step

towards me, obstructing my passage to the hall door. "Let me have five minutes, I'll talk Derwena around."

Meanwhile, Derwena had turned her attention to a pile of hair, beauty and fashion magazines. She pushed the magazines to one side, picked up a piece of paper, then waved it at Milton.

"Have you seen this?" she demanded. I peered over Derwena's shoulder and viewed the piece of paper. It depicted a scantily clad model caressing a bar of gold. The words 'Derwena de Caro' and '*Midas Melange*' were emblazoned across the top and bottom of the image. I guessed that this was the draft cover for her new album. Derwena glared at Milton and complained, "This woman's got no clothes on."

"She's wearing a silk shift," Milton mumbled, defensively.

"You can see her nipples!" Derwena yelled.

"That's the pattern on the fabric," Milton replied, patiently.

But Derwena was having none of it. Like a snowball tumbling down a mountain, she was on a roll. She insisted, "It's see-through, I'm telling you." She threw the piece of paper on top of the magazines. "I'm not wearing that. I'm not posing in the nude. I'm a singer, not a Playboy model!"

Milton circled Derwena, waving his arms around in an attempt to placate her. "We'll modify the image," he promised. "That's why we took these

shots, to see what works and what doesn't. Listen, baby, we won't get you to do anything you don't want to do. But remember, sex sells. There is a direct correlation between the amount of clothes you wear and your album sales. Basically, the less clothes the higher you go up the charts."

Derwena sunk into the chaise longue. She pouted, pushing out her bottom lip. "But I want to be loved for my voice. I want the respect of my peers."

"And they do respect you," Milton enthused. "Think of the Whistle Test Music Awards. Prestigious, high-status awards. But that was four years ago. We need a cover with a bit of pizzazz, something that will catch the eye. And when the teenagers buy the record for the cover they'll get to love your music. Trust me, baby, I've got you this far, haven't I?"

Derwena's mind went clicking through the gears and her expression changed from a sulk to a look of delight, via a gamut of other emotions that a Shakespearean actress would have been proud of.

"You're a darling!" Derwena gushed, throwing her arms around Milton.

"Trust me," Milton smiled, while accepting her embrace.

"Oh, I do, Milton dearest, I do."

The unlikely couple were still locked in an embrace when a thin, effeminate man with a mousy