



Odd Jobs

A Novel

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Chapter 2

I'd met my share of Mounties in my time, but none like this one. I was driving my white limo over the Center Street bridge, late for a client pickup, coming up through that valley that was once a sandstone quarry but now a speed trap—30 mph for no apparent reason other than to fill the city coffers—when she stepped out from a shrub and waved me onto 7th Avenue. My heart leapt. Partly because I had an ounce of homegrown in the back, waiting for my clients in a champagne bucket, arranged with flowers and greens in a pleasing camouflage display.

I rolled down my window and saw immediately there'd be no sweet-talking my way out of this ticket. She had a cold clear face and blue eyes that looked right through you. She was beautiful like a mountain river.

So I said to her outright: 'Guilty as charged, beautiful.'

My heart was pounding, my temples sweating.

She looked me over and said: 'License and registration.'

I handed them over and said: 'Trade you mine for yours.'

Nothing. Not even a blink. I watched her stride to her cruiser in front of my limo. The boots were enough to kill any mortal male, but throw in the Mountie red wool tunic and leather ranger hat? My god. And the lederhosen! When she emerged again from the cruiser I averted my eyes, sweated profusely. I was guilty alright—love and desire, raw and unassailable.

She stood at my window, holding the ticket. I looked up, shielding my eyes from the sun.

'A little B&E in your past?' she said.

‘It’s a long story,’ I said.

‘Aren’t they all,’ she said, and glanced into my back seat.

I flinched.

‘I took the rap for a friend,’ I said quickly. This was true, but didn’t sound all that convincing under the circumstances.

‘I trust you’re staying out of trouble now?’

‘Of course.’

I flashed her a cheery smile. She handed me the ticket.

‘How about a drink later?’ I said.

‘Have a nice day.’

‘You too, Officer Beautiful.’

She turned and walked back to the shrub holding her radar gun. In the mirror I watched her crouch and aim that thing. I may have drooled. She pulled over another victim, and waved me out of the way.

She was the first Mountie I ever met who didn’t have a moustache. I did not forget her. I did, however, forget to pay that ticket, and the others I collected while racing up Center Street Bridge, in hope of being waved over by Officer Beautiful.

A month later, a knock came on my door. As was my habit, I peered out the front bedroom window and spotted the police cruiser at the curb. My mind shot through my recent activities. I had just dropped off my clients. It had been a long evening of one-drink stops, cruising the cheesy strips. Giggling airheads and slicked-back wanna-be’s hanging out the sunroof. I wondered whether someone had reported our homegrown activities.

Then a voice said, ‘*Hey you, answer the door.*’

‘*Hey! Officer Beautiful!*’ I opened the window and leaned out. ‘Are you here about that drink?’

‘If you mean water, and bread,’ she said. ‘Then yes.’

I dashed around and opened the door. She handed me an envelope.

‘Oh how nice,’ I said. ‘Should I open it now?’

She nodded. I opened the envelope. ‘This is exciting,’ I said. ‘Don’t you think?’

Inside the envelope was a tally of about ten tickets—a total of eight hundred dollars. I shook my head disapprovingly.

‘That’s a lot of speeding,’ I said. ‘Are you sure those things are calibrated properly? I read somewhere that you need to regularly—’

‘—First you need to give me your license,’ she said.

I fumbled around and handed it over.

‘You can either pay right now,’ she said, ‘or you can accompany me down to the station and sit in a nice room with an ensuite toilet.’

I got my chequebook. The cheques were from the Prairie First Savings and Loan, which had to close its doors a few years earlier on account of its officers all serving time. The tellers were all clean and innocent, and now unemployed.

‘Can I do both?’ I said, offering her the cheque.

‘Both?’ she said. She reached for the cheque and I pulled it back.

‘Can I pay you the money *and* accompany you?’

She smiled, just a trace. And then she did something I’ve never been able to fathom. She looked at her watch.

I got over my shock and met her at the St. Louis Hotel, that off-main cousin to the Cecil Hotel, home to drunks and druggies and prostitutes with whom Officer Beautiful, it turned out, was well acquainted. She’d just completed her rotation in vice, where she set records for solicitation arrests. The Louis was upscale from the Cecil—in that some of the furniture wasn’t nailed to the

floor. The clientele were drunks and politicians. I once had Ralph Klein sign a birthday card there.

Chick showed up at the Louis still in uniform, less the hat. She had unpinned her hair, but not bothered to stroke away the hat head. I tried not to stare at the rusty-red wisps silhouetted against the neon sign. She looked right at me.

‘Am I under arrest?’ I said, glancing at the handcuffs and revolver.

‘You’re quick with the wisecracks,’ she said.

She led us to a table and sat with her back to the wall and surveyed the room.

‘Not really wise,’ I said. ‘Just quick.’

‘Is that your way of evading questions,’ she said. She was checking out the room.

‘Is this your way of grilling suspects?’ I said. ‘Or dates?’

‘Is this a date?’ she said.

‘Unless I’m under arrest.’

‘We’ll see how it goes,’ she said. ‘Closing time’s in an hour.’

For an hour she volleyed questions at me, and at herself, since I was not the most conventional of conversationalists. Most well-raised adults, I noticed, carried on a conversation with a reciprocating series of questions and answers. As they got older, they became adept at hiding the mechanics so that it all seemed natural. Chick and I were at opposite ends of the spectrum: my social set wasn’t raised at all, and seldom bothered with such things as questions, or answers; while Chick never bothered to hide the mechanics. So our conversation consisted of me making self-incriminating wisecracks between Chick grilling me, then delivering summary statements about herself, and about what she thought my wisecracks were meant to conceal.

She told me her given name was Cindy, but no one called her Cindy, except her father. They all called her Chicken, or Chick. The nickname was supposedly on account of her being fearless.

‘But it’s just that I’m direct,’ she said. ‘I never saw the point of avoiding things.’

The St. Louis closed and she took me back to her apartment on 7th Avenue, on the C-train tracks. She changed out of her uniform into a loose shirt and jeans, and we danced a little in her living room, slow and close. She kissed me once, and then told me she'd checked me out.

'Checked me out?' I said.

'About your taking the rap for your friends.'

I doubted a police file could contain such human, even sympathetic information. Still, I knew an invitation when I heard one. She was a good six inches taller than me. I reached up and put my hands on her shoulders, turned my head up to kiss her. She pushed me to arms length and said a terse good-night. I slept on her couch.

I woke in the morning to find a Mountie crouched beside me, leaning into my face. I screamed. She got me a glass of water. I recovered myself, and we kissed.

I looked up at her and said: 'You might not want to cash that cheque right away.'

She smiled coolly from under that prairie ranger hat which I never imagined could be so sexy. Now I saw the appeal—why women swooned at uniforms. And when she saw the evidence of my appreciation, she smiled again and leaned her breast on my chest and kissed me long and soft and reached down and began to relieve me of my burden. She was still in uniform, and hat. My pretenses, and wisecracks, dropped away like an infestation of flees. She stripped me of me.

My god. I had an erection for a week. I never left her apartment. When she left on her shift, I was erect. When she returned I was erect. She never asked me what I did all day in there, whether there was a period of subsiding, what contortions of midsection were required of me to urinate, how I cooked at the stove without risking burns, etc. By the end of the week I was fired again from my janitorial job at the waterworks. I figured it was a fair trade. The limo work was casual, so I still had that.

I found myself repeating her name: *Chick*. I'd never heard a nickname ring so true. If she felt fear, her suppression was ruthless. When I was around her my stomach filled with adrenaline, like

I was about to enter a life-defining event or interview. My feet and hands were drenched. I had to change my socks three times a day.

I introduced my friends to this new phenomenon. They were impressed with her fearless manner of conversation, except when directed at them.

‘She’s a hard-ass, Marty,’ they said.

‘She’s a *cop*,’ they said.

‘You’re in over your head. She’ll either dump you or arrest you.’

‘Or both.’

I didn’t argue the fact of being in over my head, and I certainly didn’t tell them that I thought Chick and I might be *soulmates*. I was afraid of the concept. It was not the sort of abyss I was used to gazing into.

But the things that came out of her mouth! She told my landlord that my basement suite was a deathtrap. She told my friends they had no future. She was bang on. But she was not without humour. When my janitorial boss dropped by my suite and begged me to return to clean the toilets, she told him that he shouldn’t shit where he eats. Straight eye-to-eye. I was flabbergasted, although still underemployed.

‘It’s rude to lie,’ she shrugged. ‘And therefore rude to be polite.’

I couldn’t argue, doubled over as I was, trying to relieve the pressure on my groin.

It was as if, to Chick, everything on the planet was examinable. Impersonal, yet intensely personal. During orgasm she somehow managed to achieve that state of mini-death while still observing its ministrations like a scientist. I was confident she wasn’t faking, partly because she was doing most of the work herself. She was investigating her own evidence of humanness, looking for clues to the cracks in her armour so she could fill them in, stop me at the seams.

But that’s not fair, that last part. That’s the bitter me talking. The later me.

Back then, my god, I thought she was the sexiest coldest hottest woman I'd ever met. I was in a dream, spinning like a top. I asked her to marry me after a month. She said yes. And then she giggled. *Giggled*. I'd hardly ever heard her laugh. *Never* giggle. She smirked a lot. Usually while I was talking, and especially when I was being serious.

Clearly I didn't deserve her.

Her father, Frank, summarized it best the first time I met him. He was sitting in his *den* watching a CFL game. He never took his eyes off the screen, while he conversed with Ernie Afaganis, the two of them wearing brushcuts the length of astro-turf.

At a commercial break, Frank said, 'We're very proud of Cindy. The first woman Mountie in the district. She's smart, honest, good-looking, and driven. She's got a future.'

He glanced in my direction, by way of contrast.

I nodded. 'Yes. She's really something.'

There was a long, disdainful silence. I looked around at the real wood walls where real paintings hung. I was more accustomed to paneling and posters. The chair was made of some odd textured material. Certainly not vinyl. Frank was a Westmount Montrealer and rabid Allouettes fan. The Allouettes were being trounced by the Calgary Stampeders. I was never a Stamps' fan, but something converted me right there and then. I cheered a blocked Allouette punt.

He said: 'Cindy tells me you were in the cleaning business, Marty.'

I didn't think he knew my name.

'I do various things,' I said. 'That was temporary. I have other plans. I'm driving a limo right now.'

'Cindy told me you used to be in the burial business too.'

'Yes, that's true,' I said. 'I operated a hearse. Did some lowering and burying. I even stood in for the priest when needed, even though I don't believe that stuff.'

'Were you really a hotel maid?' Frank said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But I refused to wear the dress. I drew the line at the hem.’

He deigned a smile, popped a chip into his mouth, and said:

‘What do you think the chances are that my daughter will actually marry you, Marty?’

Frank turned to me. My vocal chords failed.

‘Not a snowball’s chance in hell,’ he said.

On the drive back to her apartment, Chick asked how it went with her father.

‘That depends on whether hell is hot or cold,’ I said. ‘Or what the heat capacity of a snowball is.’

‘Oh, it’s hot,’ she said, and smiled. ‘That’s his stock line. Don’t worry, he only pretends to dislike you because *I* like you.’

I had my doubts. His dislike seemed genuine. The next time I met her parents, I took a gamble. I mulled over what kind of remark would shake them up, make them see the depth I had. But all I could come up with was a feeble shot at their Westmount affluence.

‘I think property ownership should be abolished,’ I said.

I delivered this gem into a lull at the dinner table, the kind of dead space usually reserved for funeral faux-pas’s. It was a heartfelt opinion. I had no property myself, and had only seen trouble come of ownership, mostly because mine was illegally acquired.

There was a brief silence.

‘Pass the wine, would you, Alice?’ said Frank.

That was it.

Our wedding was short and sweet and private. No guests from the bride’s side, except Chick’s mother, in tears. She left with a migraine right after Chick and I kissed. My side was empty too, with no family, and my friends not invited. Chick wanted it intimate, and honest. I didn’t argue. I stood straight, spoke when directed, and beamed like a kid.

*

For our honeymoon Chick and I drove down to Las Vegas in a Flxible Flxette Buick limosine I borrowed from work—white beauty on white wheels. I'd driven us around in it for the wedding, with Chick and her mother Alice in the back discussing vows and flowers between Alice's sobs of heartbreak. The next day, Chick moved up front for the drive. She had her bare feet on the dash, skirt flapping in the vents, her voice lilting through old-time diddies. I had never seen her barefoot, or in a skirt, or heard her sing. I was so enthralled, my foot kept hitting the floor while I steered the Flxette down switchback mountain roads in the September sun, passed trucks in thrilling, death-defying maneuvers that left Chick unphased.

Our honeymoon was much the same: cool, unflappable, insatiable Chick. She was tremendous. We spent the week in the hotel bed. I still have no idea what Las Vegas looks like.

We returned to Calgary and I unveiled my surprise. I had paid two years advance rent on a studio apartment in the Neilson building on Stephen Avenue. We would begin our lives right in the heart of our city, the heart of our upbringing, the heart of history. In a work of sandstone sculpture.

Chick loved it.

'It's a bit small,' she said.

'We're a small family,' I said.

She looked at me.

'For now,' I said.

For months we hardly saw Chick's parents. I asked Chick, hesitantly, and she said she'd asked her mother to leave us alone for a while. What a woman.

We eased into semi-bliss. When Chick worked evenings and I drove evenings, I'd pick her up in the limo at RCMP HQ and drive to Nosehill Park and picnic beneath the stars, the Rockies in silhouette on the horizon. We took pistol target practice at the police range. Chick taught me how to squeeze, and how to apply the ice in the morning. We planted a tomato garden on the roof (and some quality ganja, although Chick pretended not to notice). We went motorcycle riding (me on the back of Chick's RCMP Harley) through the winding foothill roads. We watched classic matinees when Chick worked nights, and took karate classes at the Salvation Army community center (with Chick as instructor, and me coughing up a lung in the corner).

My ex-friends were quick to surmise which activities were my ideas, and which were Chick's. But there was no refuting Chick's enthusiasm. She dissected heist and hard-boiled detective flicks with verve. She was a true noir fan. Exiting the Palace one afternoon, after watching *Laura*, Chick stopped in front of the poster and put on her best Gene Tierney and read:

'Never has a woman been so beautiful, so exotic, so dangerous to know.'

She laughed. I swooned. Later, on the roof on a mattress under the stars, a rare summer evening, our bodies goosebumped in the night air, we were playing a little pelvic game, swaying against each other on the verge of orgasm, to prolong the ecstasy, as slow and elliptical as the moon across the sky.

I said to her: *'I know you.'*

'Never,' she said, her face awash in moonlight. *'Has - a - woman, been... so...'*

'You're not as tough as people think,' I said, huskily.

'You think so?' she said.

She squeezed her legs around me, hard. I nearly fainted.

'Don't get me wrong,' I squeaked, in climax. *'You're pretty tough.'*

Lying beside her beneath an old cotton quilt, I stroked her hair as her eyes tracked the heavens for shooting stars. She took my hand and squeezed it against her mouth in a kiss-bite. There was water in her eyes.

One Saturday evening, six months to the day after the wedding, Alice and Frank invited us out. Oddly, they had a taxi pick us up, and instead of driving to a restaurant, the cab swung into Sunnyside up Fifth Street to a little bungalow lit up like a Christmas tree.

We walked hesitantly up the step and rang the bell.

‘Come in!’ a voice shouted from behind the curtains.

We walked in to find Alice sashaying toward us across a tiny living room with her arms spread out—‘*well-come, well-come*’—as if we were Royalty newly arrived to her Fantasy Island. The room was only three strides long so I figured to get it right she must’ve started in the kitchen and slungshot herself around the doorjam. Frank was still in the corner by the window, probably playing signalman—*Now!*

‘Did you buy a new house?’ Chick said.

‘No, *you* did!’ exclaimed Alice. She waved her arms around the room, her eyes wide with excitement.

I looked at Chick. Chick shrugged. ‘I did?’ she said.

‘Actually I picked it out,’ said Frank, stepping from behind a sculpted hollyhock. ‘It may look small, but it’s seven hundred square feet of prime real estate.’

Alice’s Westmount roots were showing: her arms were still in the air. Frank looked at her.

‘And your mother furnished it,’ he said.

‘It was nothing,’ Alice gushed. She took Chick’s hand and led her into the next room. ‘Let me show you, dear.’

Frank took me warmly by the arm to the liquor cabinet. With his brushcut hair and blue blazer next to my shoulder-length hair and lumberjack shirt, we couldn’t have been more unlike. Still, I

felt a dormant kinship brewing. Father-in-law to son-in-law. Frank handed me a glass of scotch and a pen. It was a weighty RCMP stylo, navy blue with gold lettering.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

He handed me a ten-page document, folded open to the last page. ‘Just a little formality,’ he said. He pointed to the signature line.

‘Oh,’ I said, and signed.

He took the pen back and guided me into the next room where I followed Alice and Chick, like a freeloader in a gallery tour, leaning in, and comprehending little. Alice had filled the house with paintings and sculptures and other unrecognisable junk-yard restorations the artists called “found” objects, which seemed to mean they’d run out of ideas, and Alice could get them on the cheap.

I can describe the nest that Alice created with one word: *flowers*. Wall paper, towels, sheets, cupboards, place mats, even the work-wheel on the refridgerator was flowered, and already filled out. Tomorrow I was to dust the bronze tulips. There were flowered paintings and sculptures on the walls and floors; floral area rugs on the floral wall to wall. There were two just pieces of actual furniture—a bed and a kitchen table—flower-backed and flower-topped. Apparently Alice had some minimalist ideas about life’s necessities: sleep, eat, and flower.

I took one look at the place and fell into a sneezing fit, even though there wasn’t a live flower in the place. Alice said “the artists” insisted on no real flowers—*flowers* would have undermined their work. I could see why they didn’t want the real thing around for contrast.

Afterward, Chick said she was no happier with the situation than I was. But what could we do—refuse?

‘Yes,’ I said.

We moved in the next week. To save face, I tried to make light of the flowers. Chick humoured me at first, but I pushed it too far. She accused me of feigning allergies to trivialize her mother's generosity.

Over the coming weeks, Chick floated adjectives like jealous, threatened, heathen, crass, thick, colour-blind, tasteless, anti-blossom, anti-vulva, and finally, chauvinist—an accusation I could well understand but that was hardly relevant to the issue at hand. She had a flare for releasing these words into the room like flies, as if they simply conjured out of my natural aura, that it was me who attracted them. She even shrugged as she spoke, just identifying what was already there.

I said it wasn't the *flowers* per se. I'm as open as the next guy when it comes to pushing gender boundaries—I was a maid, after all—but it didn't take a decorating ticket or lifetime in copying others' tastes to see that a house decorated entirely in a single motif didn't work. If there were race cars or hockey pucks all over the place then I would have been equally unimpressed.

'It's a matter of aesthetic balance,' I said, still stinging from the anti-blossom remark.

It was the first hyperbolic flurry I'd ever heard from Chick. I'd struck some unsuspected nerve. Finally we faced each other across the begonia-ed bedspread. Chick's face was red with fury. My cock was hard. I glanced at the Georgia O'Keefe vulva knock-off on the headboard. We fell into a florid heap of passion.

Lying in bed afterward, Chick tried to make amends.

'The house is dry-rot anyway,' she said, dismissively.

'Don't be silly,' I said, taking the high road. 'I know a solid house when I see one.' I pounded the wall for emphasis. It made a sound like minced meat.

Within the month Alice rolled out those words I would come to relish: *gift house*. I think she meant *gift horse* but she had a pretentious elocution that included among other things a ruthless suppression of the letter *r*. I can tell you there were times when I would've liked nothing more

than to sock that particular gift horse directly in the mouth—Chick’s mother—but I could never clearly envision a fantasy where she had any of her own teeth.

Chick tried to smooth things over. She suggested I call her parents “mom” and “dad,” since I was part of the family now.

‘I don’t want to be part of *their* family,’ I said. ‘I want to be *our* family.’

Still, I tried Chick’s suggestion, to which Alice and Frank feigned deafness.

Of course all my ex-friends (they called themselves *ex*, since being *dis*-invited to the wedding) said it was my own fault. That I had it coming. I was naïve and foolish to expect to have a say in how Chick and I would spend our life together. She was a Westmount Mountie, and I was what?

‘An entrepreneur?’ I said, hopefully.

Silence.

I shrugged.

‘Exactly,’ they said.

I was just bitter, they said, at having been out-flanked by the thoroughbred Alice.

Worse, my maneuvers in the sack seemed to be losing their pizzazz for Chick. There were no more moonlight sonatas. We had sex militarily, with a kind of Musical Ride precision. I still enjoyed the truncated performance, but for her it was rote.

I asked her: ‘How come you never wear your uniform to bed anymore?’

She rolled her eyes. Apparently she had completed her orgasmic investigations, and mine had only been worth a cursory examination.

I spent my nights driving successful people around in rented limo’s, went to bed at 5 am, and woke at 10. I spent my days lying on the couch in Chick’s red bathrobe watching such gems as *Double Indemnity*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *The Blue Dahlia*, and so forth.

Chick sold the TV.

I read *A Gun For Sale*, *The Hot Rock*, and *Trouble is My Business*. It may have seemed that I was wasting away on that couch, but I could feel something gestating in me. I didn't know what it was yet, but I knew if I persevered I would find it.

One day Alice appeared in my room and ripped back the curtains at 8 am.

'Marty,' she said. 'I never took you to be the layabout type.'

'I work nights,' I said.

She had given me latex gloves as a wedding gift. She threw them on the begonia bedspread.

'The flowers look fine,' I said.

'They're not your flowers to have an opinion about.'

One morning I woke at 6 am to the Mountie standing beside the bed. I had a hopeful vision of our past.

'Why don't you get a job?' Chick said.

'I have a job.'

'Driving a limo *is* strictly a job, but I mean a real one. A *career*.'

'I'm accepting who I am,' I said.

'You're lying on the couch reading bad novels. You're sleeping all day dreaming of who knows what.'

'I'm thinking,' I said. 'I have plans.'

'What plans?' she said. 'We have debts to pay. We have a future to build.'

'Okay, I'm a lazy layabout. I accept it. You should too. That's why you married me, isn't it?'

She shook her head. We did have debts, but only to Alice and Frank. I figured if it wasn't my house, it wasn't my debt.

The next week Chick said: 'I think we should split the mortgage payments in half.'

It was if my Chicken had hatched into some entirely other being. A bird of prey, under the mother hawk's expert tutelage. Nonetheless, flowers or no flowers, I preferred this life to my old one. I shaved and got a haircut. I signed up for a night class on foreclosures.

'Do you think it's right to capitalize on others' hardships?' Chick said.

I formulated private rebuttals concerning police work and other people's hardships, but the logic didn't hold. She was on the good side, while I would be on the ambulance chasing side. Plus her parents had been foreclosed out of their Westmount house in the high-interest eighties. They had never forgiven Pierre Trudeau, and had moved west in spite. They could hold a grudge longer than I'd been alive.

I forsook foreclosures for criminology. Chick guffawed, and said:

'You're a sloppy dresser, you never shave, you have no car, you never get to the point of a story. You've never had a job that lasted more than a month or required more than a grade eight education.'

This was all true. She could still excite me deeply.

I lied on the couch and absorbed her words while thinking of Touch of Evil. I'd seen it twelve times. The first time was with my father in a Ladysmith church. The irritated heads turning back to my father's low echo of Orson Welles' every line. My father had been a dialogue-quoting film-aholic—an occupational hazard which drove my mother, and audiences, nuts.

Now I mouthed the words along with a fortune-telling Marlene Dietrich.

'Your future is all used up,' we told Sheriff Orson Welles.

'Whose future?' Chick said, from the kitchen.

'Mine,' I said. 'I'm all fused up. Ready to go.'

Welles never directed again in Hollywood. He'd gone up against forces greater than he. Sure, he paid a price for it. But in the end, the man did what he believed. He had guts.

I pondered this.

Had I too not pitted myself against greater forces: Chick, her mother, my laziness?

I sat up. I could feel a light coming on. That thing growing in my belly on the couch.