

# The Full Hour

By Albert Tucher

“Nice ass, Wolverton.”

Diana froze. So did Wolverton, all but one part of him. If that part continued to droop, he would lose his condom inside her. Since he had just filled it, she didn't need that particular bit of aggravation. She wiggled her hips and ejected him.

Wolverton raised himself to a praying position. He tried to pull his pants up, but he had trapped them under his knees. After a couple of yanks he realized his mistake and tried to stand, but his waistband hobbled him. He toppled to his right and landed on the wall-to-wall carpet.

“Why don't you try that again?” said the same female voice. “Nice and slow this time. Focus. Oh, and I don't need to mention that you're fired, do I?”

Diana could see the woman now - forty-something, blonde, attractive. Her power suit spelled “realtor.” The desperation lines in her forehead said, “realtor in the middle of a recession.”

The woman hadn't come alone. A sixty-ish couple stood behind her in the doorway. They wore mismatched expressions - horror on her face, and glee on his.

The man aimed his gaze at Diana's crotch. She pressed her knees together and turned them to the side. It was time to get up, but she felt too stiff to move. The client had spent a good twenty minutes on top of her, hammering her tailbone into the floor.

Wolverton finally managed to stand and buckle his belt. His mouth worked, as if he hoped to find words that would fix the damage he had done, but he soon gave up the effort. He started toward the doorway, picking up speed as he went. The older couple barely made it out of the way as he bulled his way between them.

“Could I ask you to give me a moment?” said the realtor. “Until I straighten this out?”

The older woman nodded and grabbed her husband by the elbow. She pulled him from the room with enough momentum to suggest that they would keep going until they reached their own living room.

The realtor watched them go. Diana made it to her feet and used the distraction to go to the corner of the room, where Wolverton had thrown her panties in a frenzied moment. She stepped into them. As she pulled her T-shirt down and smoothed her short denim skirt, she turned around and found the realtor confronting her.

“You dressed down for this job. Smart.”

“Dressed down?”

“I hope you got paid up front.”

Diana wondered why this woman wanted to know. Did she think she was entitled to Wolverton's money? Or did she plan to go to the cops and try to make an issue?

“I just got carried away.”

“Maybe I'm missing something, but I can't imagine someone like you getting carried away with Wolverton.”

“We both think beds are boring.”

“And you thought it would be hot to let him wipe the floor with you? Please.”

Diana shrugged.

“Why don’t you run along now?” said the realtor.

Her expression mixed anger and amusement. Diana thought she understood, but it was none of her business. She picked up her bag, stepped around the woman, and left without wasting more words.

By the next morning she had almost forgotten her date with Wolverton, but then she opened the Newark Star-Ledger. The front page led with the preparations for war in Kuwait. It made scary reading, and she almost missed the story on the first Sussex County page.

#### Realtor Shot Dead in Lakeview Office.

She started reading. Beverly Angelone, forty-two, had died while working late in her office. Angelone had started her own real estate agency just over a year earlier. The business had not prospered, and she had decided to cut one sales agent. Other employees didn’t know what Francis Wolverton, forty-four, had done, but he had made her choice for her. Lakeview police were looking for him as “a person of interest.”

Diana decided that it was intriguing to have inside knowledge of a story like this. She picked up the phone and punched in a number that she had memorized during her four years in the business. Detective Tillotson’s extension went to voice mail. She left him a message and got up from the kitchen table to pour more coffee. Twenty minutes later the phone rang.

“Let me guess,” said Tillotson. “You want to do my job for me again.”

“Is the Beverly Angelone case yours?”

“I thought that sounded like you.”

“You talked to the older couple?”

“Apparently you weren’t introduced, but they gave a good description. She did, anyway.”

“I know where he was looking.”

“Why do you do stuff like that?” said Tillotson.

His voice had a fatherly, scolding tone. She had heard it before, but it was still a little weird, considering.

“For the money.”

“Sounds like Wolverton was looking for trouble.”

“Some guys do. He always had me meet him at whatever property he was showing. I think the idea was to come as close as possible to getting caught. It got him off.”

“How about you?”

“His tips got me off.”

“I hope you can get by without his paydays.”

“If he killed her. Maybe he didn’t.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because she was an ex-hooker.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“No, but I’m pretty sure.”

“She had no record.”

“Neither do I.”

“Good point.”

“You know any old timers? You know, cops who were plugged into things twenty years ago? I’ll bet they would know if she was hooking. You guys always do.”

“What makes you think she was?”

“Well, for one thing, she knew right away what I was doing. And she wanted to cut me some slack without making it obvious.”

“So how does that affect who killed her?”

“Maybe it doesn’t, but don’t you always want to know as much as possible about the victim? And hookers can make enemies. I ought to know.”

“I’ll check it out. There’s a retired detective I owe a call to anyway.”

Tillotson didn’t sound enthusiastic, but so far she felt satisfied with the outcome of the call. She had tended their relationship, which helped keep her in business.

But then his tone changed.

“So what’s this about Dawn and Gail?”

“What about Gail?” she said. The words came out before she could stop them.

“Somebody clobbered her and stole her take for the day. Sounds like the same woman who attacked Dawn. The question is, who is she? And the other question is, why did I hear about this third hand? And none of it from you?”

“Well, like I said, I didn’t know about Gail. I did talk to Dawn. But I didn’t think the bitch would be stupid enough to stay around and do it again. She must think hookers don’t talk to each other.”

“Well, she’s not completely wrong, is she?”

This was not going well.

“And I was also afraid that you might decide we’re too much trouble.”

“That could happen,” he said, “but not the way you think. It could happen if you’re not straight with us.”

“Message received.”

“Now, tell me about Dawn,” he said.

“Some woman got in touch, said she was a client.”

“Does that happen... women?”

“I guess. Everybody who refers to me knows I don’t do women or couples. They wouldn’t even mention it if somebody asked. So what happened to Gail?”

“A woman said she was thinking of going into the business, wanted to hire Gail to talk about it.”

“Was this at the Regal also?”

“Yeah. If you see or hear anything there, I want to know about it.”

He hung up, leaving her to think. She didn’t want to have another discussion like this with Tillotson. That meant getting rid of the cause of their conflict - the woman who thought mugging hookers was a growth career.

Tillotson wanted her to leave it to him, but if she handled it right, he would never know.

Diana didn't know how to find the woman, so she decided to let the woman find her. It was a matter of looking available. She started calling the people who referred men to her. Early the next afternoon a hotel bartender named Ron called back.

"I had this woman come in asking for you."

"Good."

"You know, this is weird," he said. "All this time you've been telling me, no women. What's different all of a sudden?"

"I can change my mind."

"Whatever. Anyway, this woman said she wants to watch her husband with another woman, and she asked for you. At least, that's what it sounded like. She didn't know you by name, but she's seen you someplace. I knew who she meant - blond, tan, cheekbones."

"Major nose?"

"I tell people it has character."

"Liar. Wait a minute. She's seen me? How could that be?"

"They're swingers."

It was possible. Diana sometimes went to couples parties with men who paid her to pose as a girlfriend. And some couples tried swinging but couldn't handle the emotional complications. If they still wanted variety, they called in the professionals.

The woman Diana was looking for was smart. She had come up with another plausible scenario. But this time Diana would see that she didn't get away with it.

Ron read off a phone number. Diana took a handful of change and walked the half mile to her favorite pay phone at the Shell station. The phone had an overhang to keep the sun and the rain away, and it was far enough from the traffic. She dropped coins and punched in the numbers. A woman answered. Diana gave her name and mentioned Ron.

"Did he tell you what we want?"

"He did. I understand you only want to watch?"

"That's right."

"My hourly rate is two hundred, but I double it for a third person in the room. It doesn't matter if you only watch. It's still double."

"Also fine."

"Can I talk to your husband? Make sure we're all on the same page?"

"I'm afraid he's at work."

*Sure he is,* Diana thought.

"Plus, this is a surprise for his birthday." The woman seemed to sense Diana's hesitation. "Maybe I should mention that we're good tippers. Especially if you can do it today."

They made a date for eight o'clock that evening at the Regal Motel.

The woman put on a good act. She didn't sound young enough or tough enough to make a wary hooker nervous.

At seven fifty-six Diana opened the door to the motel's office. The clerk looked up from his motorcycle magazine and told her that her date was in room 163. She went back outside and walked through the shadows to the main building. Guests preferred darkness at places like the Regal.

At one minute past eight she stood in front of the door. She had dressed down again, this time in jeans instead of the little denim skirt. In her right hand she cupped her can of pepper spray. She raised her other hand to knock.

Something cold and metallic touched the skin behind her left ear. Diana stifled an urge to flinch. Sudden moves were a bad idea when a gun was involved.

“Drop what’s in your hand,” said the voice that Diana had heard earlier on the phone.

The spray can made a soft clang on the blacktop - not enough noise to attract attention.

At the Regal people tended to mind their own business, anyway.

“Go inside,” said the woman. “It’s open.”

Diana turned the handle and pushed the door inward. She thought about slamming the door behind her, but then she would be trapped inside. Neither the door nor the wall of the building would stop a bullet.

“Have a seat.”

Diana went to the bed on the right. As she turned to sit on the corner of the mattress, she got her first look at the other woman.

*I know her*, Diana thought.

She thought back to her date with Wolverton and the embarrassed look on the woman’s face, as her husband stared into Diana’s crotch.

Diana looked at the door.

“You’ll never make it. Just sit.”

Diana sat. “I’m guessing you don’t really go to swing parties.”

“My husband always wanted to. He thought there would be lots of women like you. You’re very pretty. He really should have looked at the rest of you. Not just...you know.”

“I guess that’s a compliment.”

The woman sat on the other bed.

“I’m Grace.”

Diana started to say, “Nice to meet you, Grace.”

Get in the game, she told herself.

She had been ready for a fight, but this situation was something else. She just didn’t know what.

“Do we really need that?”

She nodded at the gun.

“That’s to make sure you listen,” said Grace, “while I tell you a story.”

“Okay.”

The woman said nothing for a while. She seemed to fear what would happen when she finished.

“About twenty years ago my husband and I went through a bad patch. I’m guessing you don’t know much about marriage, but it happens. Probably more than it doesn’t.”

“That’s what clients tell me.”

Something about “building a rapport” flitted through Diana’s mind. But was that good or bad? The phrase “Stockholm syndrome” also came and went before she could

grasp it.

“Maybe you know more than I thought. What do you think my husband did?”

“He probably went looking for someone like me.”

Grace nodded her approval. The gun didn’t waver.

“I knew exactly what he was doing. I’m the one who handles the money. It kept going missing, a few hundred at a time. I couldn’t do much besides wait, so that’s what I did. And after a while we worked things out, and the money stopped disappearing. We had put the whole situation behind us, or so I thought.

“That was then. Just recently we started talking about downsizing to a condo. I thought it would be a good idea, eventually. But then my husband said he had found the perfect place. He insisted that we had to move immediately before someone else beat us to it. I was willing to go along if I liked the new place. But we went to see it, and even without the entertainment...” She gave Diana a smile that seemed very pleasant, considering. “...I don’t think I would have seen anything special about it. No one else was going to snap it up. I didn’t have to do anything, though.

“A police detective came and told us that the deal was off. It seems that the realtor was dead. Murdered. I still didn’t make the connection. I can’t believe I was so blind. But the detective came back, and this time he wanted to talk to my husband alone. He thought he was being subtle, but he wasn’t. He must not be very good at his job.”

“Believe it or not, he is.”

Grace ignored the comment. Diana wondered why she cared about defending Tillotson. She had other things to worry about.

“I said something about making coffee, and I listened behind the door. He asked my husband if he knew the woman who was killed. My husband asked why, and the detective said she was an ex-prostitute. And just like that, it all came together.”

“The paper said she was having business problems,” said Diana. “She was probably desperate enough to look up old clients. Maybe some of them were still feeling sentimental about her.”

“And take a wild guess who was,” said Grace.

“Sooner or later, Tillotson will figure it out.”

“Figure what out?”

“That you killed her.”

“Killed her?” The woman stared. “I didn’t kill her. What on earth made you think I did?”

“Well, there’s that.” Diana nodded at the gun. “Somebody shot her.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t. It must have been that man they’re looking for. The one whose bottom she thought was cute, for reasons that escape me.”

“That was irony.”

“So was my comment. No, I didn’t shoot her.”

Grace looked at Diana. Diana looked at the gun.

“I shot my husband.”

“Oh.” *Come on*, Diana told herself. *You can do better than that.*

“They don’t seem to have found him yet, but they will. I must be just about out of time.”

“Maybe you have something better to spend it on than shooting me.”

“Why would I want to shoot you?”

“Well, in that case,” Diana said.

She stood to go. Grace gestured with the gun.

“I don’t want to shoot you. But I will if you try to leave.”

Diana sat.

“I’m serious,” said Grace. “What could I have against you?”

“I’m the one who sent the detective back to you the second time.”

“That hardly deserves killing. My goodness, this is your day for missing the point, isn’t it?”

“I guess so. I’m not getting this. You don’t want to shoot me. I like that part. But you don’t want to let me go, either.” Even as Diana said the words, she began to understand. There weren’t many possibilities left.

“No, you can’t go,” said Grace, “Not yet. I think you deserve to see...” She looked around, as if this threadbare room held something that she had only seconds to find. “...this.”

Grace put the gun barrel into her mouth. Diana closed her eyes and folded her arms over her chest. For a moment she felt like the smartest, toughest person on the planet. She had faced a gun, and now she was going to live. How many people could say that?

But the sound of the gunshot made her jerk, and cowardice scalded her with self-contempt.

Diana opened her eyes and found that she was still hugging herself. Grace lay on her back on the other bed. The bedspread and the wall behind her looked as if someone had spent hours painting them red and gray, but the intricate pattern had happened in an instant. Diana sat, unable to look away. She decided that fresh blood smelled like death, and that death made her want to vomit.

It only made sense.

*Get up, she thought. Get out.*

But she stayed. How could she give herself permission to go? The light switch was two steps away. She could at least darken the room and blot out the sight of the other bed.

But she didn’t move.

Her hooker habits won in the end. She glanced at her watch, and saw that the time was eight fifty-nine. She had given Grace the full hour.

*Hookers go, she thought. That’s what we do.*

“I’m sorry, Grace. For everything.”

She had to call Tillotson, but it could wait a moment.

*Albert Tucher is now up to eighteen published stories about Diana Andrews and five unpublished novels. He welcomes comments at AlbertTucher at aol. Diana doesn't give a shit.*