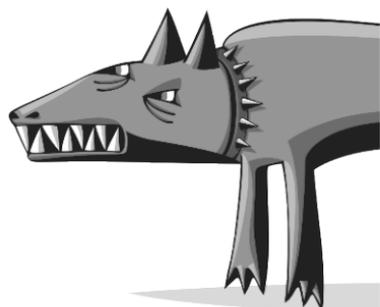


# VICIOUS DOGS



**HENRY BROOK**

**The first Lasker Investigation**

## Chapter 1

I knew the place was a dump.

There were water stains on the ceiling and the smell of mold and mildew had me sneezing and was surely messing with my lungs. Probably did more damage than the cigarettes. The water in the shower smelled and was rarely clear. The carpet had bald patches. The bed had been slept on by generations of sleazeballs before I arrived six months earlier and I didn't like to think about what manner of bodily secretions would turn up if I examined the blankets under black light. I knew for a fact that at least one prostitute was working out of this motel. Not that I had partaken of her services. I couldn't afford the \$40, even if her wasted appearance wasn't enough to turn me off. The television usually worked and that was the only decent part of the room.

As bad as the motel room was, it was better than the street. Unfortunately, as Hasid had made perfectly clear, if I didn't pay up for the past two-weeks' rent, I'd be kicked out. I couldn't be angry with Hasid; he wasn't in the charity business. He had two teenage girls a few years from college and needed every cent he could get. I understood. We are all grubbing through the world looking for a few cents to rub together. Like him, I was an independent businessman, though his fleabag motel was doing a better business than mine was.

Most of my income for the past year had come from being a guinea pig for pharmaceutical companies. Some of the tests paid pretty well—\$200 a day for some of the long term ones. I'd made a cool grand the month before, during a five-day-and-night stay at the North York research facility. After the bi-hourly bloodletting, my arms were

chewed up like a junky's. There were three major firms in the Greater Toronto area but I had worn out my welcome at all of them since they knew I had been involved in so many tests. I hated to think of all the crap that was floating around inside of me. Not so different from other times in my past, but being infested with untested drugs was a bit more frightening than the recreational variety that I had favored in my younger days. The closest thing to a high I got these days was when Hasid sprayed my room with some bug-killer from the Indian subcontinent.

Three days to come up with some money or I'd be sleeping in my car. With gas prices being what they were, the half-tank would have to last me. Maybe Hasid would let me leave it in his parking lot, and I could live out of the back seat and still use the first floor kitchen.

Christ . . . how had it gotten this bad?

I will admit that my thoughts were sometimes very dark. I often found myself looking into the suicidal abyss without fear and that frightened me. I used to love life but since my 35th birthday it seemed like everything I did turned bad. All my hours were spent trying to find enough money to get through the day. I was tired of it. I was just plain tired. I was growing tired of life itself, and that should have scared the hell out of me. But it didn't.

My cell phone rang. It was on the bedside table. I was lying on the bed staring at the splotchy ceiling while Sportscenter played in the background. The ringing surprised me since I was months behind on my bills and I assumed that the phone had been disconnected. Besides, I didn't know who would be calling me. I had become estranged from everyone who ever cared about me.

"Hello?"

"Is this Lasker Investigations?"

That threw me. I still had my license but hadn't gotten work as a P.I. since last year. I straightened up in bed.

"Yeah it is. How'd you get this number?"

"I saw your ad outside of Wong's Chinese restaurant."

"What ad?"

"It said that you did domestic surveillance."

Oh . . . that sign. It read:

*LASKER INVESTIGATIONS*

*DOMESTIC SURVEILLANCE*

*SPOUSAL & TEENAGER ACTIVITY/INVESTIGATIONS*

*THE SURVEILLANCE SPECIALISTS*

That last bit made Lasker Investigation sound like a big operation instead of just my 1992 Toyota Corolla and me. I used to do alright back when a couple of the big insurance companies hired me but that was years ago and they didn't have much need for private investigators these days, or at least that's what they told me when they let me go. I had bought the sign earlier in the year and had paid the owner of Wong's to let me hammer the wooden placard in front of his Kingston Road restaurant. Even though thousands of cars passed by it every day it had never gotten me any work. I had forgotten all about it. I had assumed that Wong had gotten tired of looking at it and had pitched it or some kids had taken it. I was so far in the dumps that I hadn't cared.

"Listen, are you available to watch my kid?"

"Of course," I said, my heart pounding with the anticipation of work. "We need to meet. Do you know the Tim Horton's near the Morningside Mall?"

"Sure. I need you on the case soon. I need your help."

The Timmy's was only a block away. "I can be there in ten minutes."

"Give me half an hour," he said.

## Chapter 2

I was lucky enough to have done a load of laundry the previous day, so I was able to put on a clean pair of slacks and a dress shirt. Looked very professional, or so I hoped. I was watching my money so I had washed some clothes in the bathtub and hung them to dry. Hasid's wife Majzara did laundry in the basement of the office but even at \$2 a load it was too expensive for me. I looked at myself in the rusty mirror that hung in my room: put up for those who used the motel as a sex stop I assumed.

I looked like hell.

I was never a particularly handsome man but when did I start looking so lousy? I was getting fat and I had bags under my dark eyes that I once thought twinkled with skeptical intelligence. My thick brow was becoming more pronounced and I looked positively Cro-Magnon. My hair used to be as thick and dark as an Adonis, but now it was as thin as Hasid's carpets and had streaks of gray at the temples. It was a little too long. I needed to scrape together \$16 and go to a Superclips. It was also a little greasy. I was only washing it once a week to save on shampoo. Well . . . I say that but honestly: who was I going to see that I needed clean hair?

I had a half hour before I was to meet my perspective client and could have jumped in the shower but to hell with it. I wanted to work for him not date him.

To save precious gas I walked to the meeting.

As I walked into the quarter-full coffee shop fifteen minutes early I realized that I hadn't asked my caller what he looked like or even what his name was. I was definitely out of practice. Was I up for a case? I had no choice. I needed the money. If I didn't get something soon I would be working

as a security guard for minimum wage and the depression that would bring might be enough to push me over the edge.

I thought I would drown my sorrows so I ordered a jumbo coffee with triple cream and sugar along with an apple fritter.

"That one at the front," I pointed out to the teenager taking my order, "With all the frosting." It had twice as much sugary coating as the other fritters so perhaps that would improve my mood. I took the tray to a table that gave me a good view of both doors. Would I be able to recognize a man who wanted to hire me to 'watch his kid' after seeing my sign in front of a roach-infested Chinese Restaurant? I knew my skills weren't what they once were but surely a man like that wouldn't be too hard to spot.

I had polished off my apple fritter (delicious) and was nearly done my coffee when a bald man in khakis and a baby blue golf shirt entered the Timmy's and began scanning the faces at the tables without a glance at the cashiers. Not here for the coffee or donuts, I thought. My detecting skills told me this was my man. The worry lines across his forehead were another indicator. He had the troubled look of a man desperate enough to hire someone like me. I stood and waved to the man and he nodded and walked to my table.

"Are you with Lasker Investigations?" he asked.

He didn't need to know that I was Lasker Investigations. "Derek Lasker." I held out my hand.

"Bob Linehan."

He sat down and sighed. He had his elbows on the table and his gaze was centered on my coffee cup. The pain in his eyes had me thinking that Bob understood the dark thoughts that had invaded my thoughts over the past several months.

"Do you want a coffee?" I asked.

He shook his head. His skin was flushed and I wondered if Bob was a drinker or in poor health. We sat there awkwardly for a minute.

"What can we do for you, Bob?"

"It's my son, Bob Junior. He's been hanging out with a new group of friends and . . . I've seen changes in him."

"How old is he?"

"Seventeen."

"What sort of changes?"

"Well . . ." He straightened up and sighed. He met my eyes briefly then looked away. "You have some sugar here." He brought his finger to the right side of his mouth.

I wiped the frosting away.

"Apple fritter," I said. I don't think Bob heard me. His eyes were wet and runny like uncooked eggs.

"He's become much more aggressive and withdrawn. We used to be close but now . . ." He shrugged.

"Not so unusual for a kid his age." I kicked myself for saying that. I didn't want to discourage Bob from hiring me for whatever he wanted me to do. "And you think this behavior is linked to his friends?"

"They're a rough bunch. My wife doesn't even like them coming over to the house. She says she's afraid for her safety." He looked around to be sure no one was listening then leaned close. "I'm not prejudiced but a couple of his new friends are black. The way they dress and act I think they could be gang members." He straightens up. "With kids these days it's hard to tell. They look and act like criminals even if they're on the honor roll."

"Is Bob Junior on the honor roll?"

"No. He's never been much of a student but neither was I and I turned out alright. Got my forklift ticket when I was his age and been working ever since."

With his soft appearance I would have placed him as some sort of desk jockey. My skills were poorer than I suspected.

"There's something else, isn't there? This isn't just about running with a rough crowd."

"No, you're right." He took a shuddering breath. "Two days ago I went into the backyard to mow the lawn and I found the neighbor's cat. It was dead and its head had been cut off, and I think Bob Junior did it."

## Chapter 3

"I see," I said in my best passionless professional voice. Bob Junior had killed and beheaded the neighbor's pet. Kook City. That explained the look of pain on Bob Senior's face. "And you're certain that he did it?"

"When I found Mittens—that was her name. A nice tabby cat. I always liked animals and that cat in particular. I used to feed it anytime the Peterson's went away. Wouldn't let them pay me or anything. My wife is allergic so I liked being able to go over and sit and pet a cat. Very relaxing after a hard day's work."

"So after you found Mittens . . ." I prompted.

"I went inside and Bob Junior was playing a video game with one of his friends—one of the ones that scares my wife the most—and I asked to talk to him. He said that he was in the middle of a level." The anger on Bob Senior's face was plain to see. "We used to be good friends, all those early mornings of hockey practice, and now?" He shakes his head. "I said I needed to talk to him about something I found in the backyard and . . ." I thought Bob Senior was about to break down in tears. ". . . and when I said that someone had killed Mittens both of them started laughing like I had made a big joke! Then—then he said . . . the little punk bastard . . . he said 'someone guillotined that pussy!' and he and his gangbanger friend continued laughing and playing their game like nothing had happened."

"So what makes you think he killed the cat?"

"He knew that its head was chopped off, didn't he?"

"He could have found it earlier and not said anything."

"I don't think so. He always hated Mittens. I couldn't stay in the room with those two . . . two bastards, so I went out back and buried poor Mittens. I could have throttled Bob

Junior right then and there." The cold anger on his face had me believing him. "Derek, I'm—can I call you Derek?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

"I'm worried about him, Derek. I need someone to keep an eye on him. Your sign said you'd watch him, right?"

"Surveillance is our specialty," I said, quoting the sign.

"I'm worried that he's going to do something really crazy. He likes knives."

"Likes them how?"

"He collects them. Has a whole closet full."

That struck me. "A closet full of knives?"

"I didn't think it was strange. I mean, I used to carry a pocketknife when I was his age. Still do." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a very fancy folding knife. "Though this is a hell of a lot nicer than what I used to have." He handed it to me. "It's a Ron Yellowhorse. Very expensive. My wife gave it to me for our last anniversary."

It had two blades and a dark wooden handle with intricate silver inlay. "A work of art," I said as I handed it back. I didn't mention that I thought it a little strange that a wife would buy her husband a knife for an anniversary, but my wife left me after less than a year so what the hell did I know. "So what exactly do you want me to do?"

"Follow Bob Junior. I need to know what he is up to. Look, I've seen enough movies to know that when a kid kills animals that it could . . . evolve into something worse, right? I want you to make sure that he is not getting into anything that is going to destroy his life. I need you to help me get him under control."

I scratched my head. I saw some dandruff float down and I thought I really should have splurged with the shampoo and showered. "I can follow him and let you know what he is doing and who he is doing it with but I'm not a counselor. I can't do anything to keep him under control."

"I—I'm not a wealthy man but I can pay you to watch him and . . . and if he looks like he is going to do something like . . . like what he did to Mittens I want you to stop him, okay?"

I didn't like the feel of this case one bit and suspected that no matter what I did Bob Senior was not going to be pleased with the results. Just the same, I was in no position to be choosy.

"The sort of surveillance you are talking about sounds like twenty-four hours a day. Who knows what kids today get up to once the sun goes down?"

"Is that going to be pricey?"

I put on my most concerned look. "I can feel your concern, Bob, so we'll give you a great rate, okay?"

Bob Senior smiled and I could see the relief on his face.

"Thanks, Derek. I can see I did the right thing in calling you."

Then we made deal that I never would have taken back when the insurance companies were hiring me.

A lousy \$175 a day. Pathetic. Less than half what I used to charge.

I shook Bob's hand after he gave me a \$100 deposit.

Oh well.

It would keep me from living in my car and would allow me to buy some cigarettes on the walk back to the motel. A quick shower and then I would begin following Mitten's murderer.