

Chapter Six

RUNWAY PAST

“You with the Network?”

“Excuse me?”

A perfectly proportioned mannequin with a sunny expression posed the question. Barely five feet tall, he held a microphone in his hand. A Vietnamese man stood behind him, TV camera braced on a shoulder.

“ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC?”

“I don’t understand.”

Every hair on the man’s head was flawlessly in place as if it had been painted on. He wore a navy blazer over a white shirt, and around his neck, a speckled yellow power tie. A pair of Bermuda shorts and sandals completed the outfit. Typical of TV reporters. Since they were only viewed from the midriff up, they went casual below the belly button.

“Don’t tell me now. I never forget a face. Didn’t you anchor. . .no, that’s not it. . .Sundays with Charles Osgood . . . you were the news reader!”

I shook my head. “I think you’ve got me mixed up with someone else.” I got a lot of that, though not so much since I’d moved out to the relative obscurity of Corkscrew County. People remembered my face but didn’t immediately place where they’d seen it before. It’s difficult being invisible once you’ve been in the public eye. But I was working on it.

I turned to watch the forensics crew. The perimeter had been cordoned off. They shuttled in and out of Kelly’s carrying large evidence envelopes and paper shopping bags. A few deputies stood watch, their thumbs hooked over their gun belts.

“Wait, wait, you were a *guest* on Sundays with Charles Osgood!”

He was getting close. Down the highway another news van drove into view. That brought the total to three. The first reporter on the scene had been from the Santa Quinta paper, The Daily Republican. He and his

photographer pulled in right after the first deputy arrived. It had taken the deputy 15 minutes from the time I dialed 911.

“He was doing a segment on over-the-hill. . .I mean, former models!”

He had me. I had appeared on that show along with a clutch of models, mostly trophy wives set up in small businesses by their CEO husbands or those marketing organic jams from upstate farms with their domestic partners. I’d been the only one still at loose ends, knocking about Europe, aimlessly staying with friends or house sitting, trying to escape the aftermath of more bad publicity, waiting for my case to be heard. That seemed so long ago.

“Lee. . .Leeann. . .that’s it!”

He had me. Leeann had been my mononym on the billboards, fashion pages, and runways.

“The glasses threw me. Marty, Marty Steele, KSQU TV News.” He held out his hand for me to shake. “So, what are you doing here? Are you covering this for CBS?”

“No, I’m not with the Network.” I turned to address him. When ignoring attention doesn’t work, surrender and charm.

“Wow, I can’t believe it, Leeann. Who are you working for?”

I was about to deny any affiliation but perversity is a small pleasure I sometimes allow myself. “The Corkscrew County Grapevine.”

At first there was a look of incomprehension on his little wooden face, and then an embarrassed flush colored the grain under the layer of makeup. He choked out, “You’re joking. . .right?”

I’d had my fun. “No, I’m not joking, but I’m not here as a reporter. I found the body and called it in.”

“That’s a relief. For a minute, I thought The Grapevine had beaten us to a story. I mean, no offense, but JJ’s paper isn’t much more than a throw-away advertiser.”

“None taken.” I gave him a one-sun smile. He basked in its glow. “Technically, though, since I am a reporter for The Grapevine, I did beat you to the story, as you put it.”

A shadow crossed his face. “What I don’t get is why a . . .a famous model like yourself is working for a nothing little rag. I mean, what kind of money can you be making?”

“I’m on commission. I sell ads as well as write for the paper.” I was exaggerating a little. My first attempt had been a dismal failure, evidenced by the annoying beep of the coroner’s van backing up to the front of the resort.

He looked surprised. “That can’t be much.”

“I get by.” My finances and my sex life are two things I don’t discuss with total strangers. He didn’t need to know that my parents had wisely insisted, at the height of my career, that I start a retirement fund and now, in my later years, it allowed me to pay utilities, buy food, keep the Volvo running, and occasionally splurge on a really expensive pair of shoes. My career had ended in my late 20’s. Designers were looking for less developed body types. Then there was my ill-advised return as a runway model on the Euro-trash circuit in my mid 30’s. My step-dad had left me his summer cabin just outside of Timberton. That was how I ended up in Corkscrew County where I was trying to live a low stress, low calorie, low tech, low profile existence.

“Well, this *is* news! International fashion model discovers gruesome murder while reporting for obscure country journal!” His face lit up like a cheap paper lantern.

“Please don’t.” I gave him two suns. It didn’t seem to faze him. The story he’d report on the evening news had more dazzle, human interest plus crime and punishment. It had Network news potential. His cheeks grew rigid imagining himself on camera nationwide. “Seriously. I hope you’ll be discreet.” Three suns followed by a plaintive yet seductive look.

“But . . .”

“Look, let me be honest with you. I don’t need the past dredged up. I mean, it’s not exactly pretty. . . .”

“Something about a fire. At a villa. . . outside of Paris? I seem to remember. . . that was pretty. . . .”

“. . .bad, yes, I know. That was an accident, as I’m sure you know.” I sighed, not solely for effect. “Unfortunately, the focus tends to be on these unpleasant things and they get blown way out of proportion.” I got an understanding nod.

“Wasn’t there that thing with the sheik. . . ?”

He was obviously familiar with my dossier and my spate of bad luck, but then they were the things that made the biggest splash on the entertainment news. *Party girl fashion*

model outrages again! I was hoping he wasn't going to start listing all my public indiscretions.

“And how about that mysterious abduction?!”

“Ms. Malone?” The gruff voice belonged to a handsome slender man in his fifties. He handed me his card.

“Detective Richard Santos, County Sheriff.”

I blinked a smile. *He* wasn't going to be easy to impress.