

Chapter Twenty Two

NAKED BLADE

JJ was crying her eyes out. A copy of the Daily Republican was spread open on her desk. I'm normally a sympathetic person, but this was JJ, with whom I was becoming increasingly annoyed. Maybe Barbara's Bakery had finally closed. Or her love life, nebulous as it was, had taken another turn for the worse. She pointed to the black and white photo of a slightly balding man. "He had a crush on me in high school."

I looked a little closer. It didn't appear to be an obituary. "He passed away?"

She shook her head. "No, no, no. . . ." They were almost sobs. "He was this geeky guy who was fixated on me in my senior year. I was head cheerleader." And as if it was all coming back to her, "And Homecoming Queen. I think he even stalked me."

I fanned myself with the manila folder in my hand. "So. He's dead?" It was going to be another July full moon scorcher.

"No!" Now it was an angry sob. "Read!" She thrust the paper at me.

I glanced at the caption under the picture. The name meant nothing to me. Something about a science prize, nominated for the Nobel. The lighting was bad and the office was stuffy and I had to hold the paper at arm's length.

"Oh, I know what you need!" It was a kind of chirp. JJ reached into a desk drawer and came up with a handful of eyeglasses. She held out a blue pair. "Here, try these, they match your eyes."

"I don't need glasses." I adjust the distance of the text to where I could just about read it without squinting. Fortunately JJ told me what I was reading. "He was this science geek in high school. Kinda goofy looking. So I just ignored him. He asked me to the prom and I laughed in his face." She sighed. "The article says he'll make billions just from the royalties on his patent for doing something with NDA."

"DNA?"

"Whatever. Billions. He was in love with me. I could have married a billionaire. If I had only known."

“You can’t be serious.”

She wrinkled her forehead and stared at me with her red-rimmed eyes. “You have no idea what it feels like to lose an opportunity like this. You were an international party girl. You went through men like a chain smoker goes through a pack of cigarettes. You can have any man in the world!”

I’d heard this rant before. I could have answered her, told her that the power of beauty is a double-edged sword as she herself should have realized. Beauty entitles you to nothing but itself. And along with beauty come expectations. Cruelty is one of them. JJ had been acting in a manner consistent with the status her teenage beauty had bestowed upon her.

“JJ, let’s get something straight. If you had married this guy, he’d be trading you in for a trophy wife by now. That’s what rich men do. They upgrade to a woman whose youth and beauty is equal to the power of their money.”

Like a bullfighter waving a red cape, I had distracted her from her self-pity and she focused her frustration on me. “What’s that in the file folder, the latest episode on the dog murders by Lee Malone, *Girl Detective*?”

I looked down my nose at her. “JJ, it’s been nearly nine months since I started writing that piece. Its moment has passed, wouldn’t you say?” I could have added “thanks to you.” Her averted eyes and the set of her chin told me she was secretly gloating. “As for that other matter, you know as well as I do that the Kelly’s Resort murder and The Franklin Family Resort killing are linked somehow, but I’m going to let the Sheriff’s Office puzzle that out. If you ask me, they’re taking their sweet time about it. I guess the wheels of justice turn slowly. Fashwalla’s out on bail, and the way the defense and the prosecution are lobbing motions back and forth, they might as well be playing ping pong.”

I handed her the folder, “This is the publicity article for the Montague Winery Charity Fashion Show you asked me to write. And you wanted me to help you with something else?”

JJ sat up erect in her swivel chair. “Oh yes! The Fashion Show!”

“I told you, JJ, the puff piece is the extent of my involvement. I don’t do fashion shows any more. I hardly do fashions.” That was a lie.

“No, that’s not it. Tommy asked me to model a few outfits for the show and I was wondering if you would give me some pointers. I modeled a little when I was in college.”

I had seen those pictures. She had appeared in a men’s magazine co-ed dorm feature of mostly well-developed young women in skimpy underwear. “Ever model on a runway?” I was hoping I wouldn’t have to start from scratch.

“No,” she shook her head mournfully and held up a shopping bag, “but I have my shoes.” She pulled out a pair of black Italian stilettos whose high heels were well over the legal limit.

“Wow.” I was impressed. “Where did you get those?”

She fit her feet into them, tying the ankle straps with some effort. “In New York City, about five years ago, on a total whim. I saw them in the display window of some chichi shoe store on Fifth Avenue and I just had to have them. This is the first time I’ve had a chance to wear them.”

I certainly understood the impulse. I had a closet of footwear that testified to that urge. I watched JJ stand and almost tip over. She steadied herself with her hand on the edge of the desk. “Well, this might take some practice.” And took a few wobbly steps. Gaining her balance, she strode to the other side of the room before her right ankle crumpled and she caught herself on the bookshelf. She turned and smiled bravely.

I leaned against the desk and wondered how long this was going to take. The office was already hot enough to incubate eggs and I was intent on finding some place cool real soon. A drive to the coast was beginning to sound like the solution. “You need to relax. Shoulders back, chin up. Now put your right foot in front of your left foot.” She moved her left foot and then corrected herself. “And left in front of right. And repeat, right, left. That’s good. Now step with determination. You walk the earth like the great and awesome beauty that you are.”

JJ giggled. “This is fun.” She was standing in front of me.

“Pivot on left heel slowly, keeping your head turned toward me, looking over your shoulder as you do.” I steadied her with the flat of my hand. “Now show me your sassy I’m-leaving-now strut.”

She looked at me, questioning. “What kind of strut?”

“The catwalk sway, the runway sashay. You’re showing off your butt, a woman’s most seductive asset after her breasts. Why do you think women wear high heels? Not because we like to torture our feet! Because it elevates and accentuates! So do the fanny flaunt!”

She regarded me again, puzzled.

“Think of it this way,” I said. “You have a cat, right?”

“Yes, my blonde Persian, Waltzing Matilda, I call her her Matty because. . . .”

I cut her off before she launched into another one of her cat stories. “Visualize how your cat struts away from you, tail up, poised like a question mark, putting one paw in front of the other. Walk like that.”

A light went on behind her eyes. “Oh,” she cocked her head to the right, “I know exactly what you mean.” She advanced across the room, confident.

“Hand on hip, break the other wrist, turn,” I instructed.

“I think I’m beginning to get the hang of this.” She smiled broadly. “Shouldn’t I have a book on my head or something?”

I laughed. “No one uses a book anymore.”

“Really? What do they use?”

“They use a pencil.”

“A pencil?” She stepped behind her desk to retrieve a pencil from the drawer. One of the floorboards creaked.

I glanced at the phone and thought back to a rainy day months ago. I had been in Blackie’s repair shop below and heard everything that was said in the Grapevine office. “Remind me to call the DA,” I said in a louder than normal voice.

The pencil rolled off the top of JJ’s head and under the chair. “Why?” She was distracted, considering whether to stoop and pick it up.

“Something just occurred to me that might be an important detail in the Kelly’s Resort murder.” I spoke as if I were trying to be heard over a loud background noise.

Now I had her attention. “What, what is it? Tell me!” She was puzzled by my raised voice.

“I don’t have time to get into it right now. I’m going to head for the coast before I melt,” I announced clearly.

She shrugged. “You might consider bringing a jacket or something to cover up. It’s bound to be at least ten degrees cooler out there and the way you’re dressed would probably get you arrested in any number of countries.”

The light in the stairwell still hadn’t been replaced and I felt for the handrail. In the dark descending to the street below, JJ’s comment about covering up brought back the memory of an equally sweltering summer day in Paris many years before when for some reason I had decided not to spend the summer on the Riviera with friends. The odor rising from the famous sewers of the City Of Light was that of a litter box long overdue for a cleaning. I was in bed, a satin sheet covering only part of my naked body. Mohamed had just stepped out of the bathroom babbling about the superiority of his culture again. I’d about had it. The heat was making me cranky. “Listen, Mo,” I said. He hated it when I called him Mo. “That’s just a lot of goat crap. In your culture you make women wear bags to hide their bodies,” I said, and he stood over the bed looking down at me fitting a cufflink in to the starched sleeve of his tuxedo shirt, and said, “Burqa,” and I said “Burqa, bag, what’s the difference, you oppress women by making them cover every inch of their bodies when they’re in public. That’s pretty medieval, don’t you think?” and he gave me one of those condescending looks like I was some half naked bimbo laid out on satin sheets who didn’t know anything and said, “I’m surprised, Lee, that you, of all people, underestimate the power of the unadorned female form. Uncovered, the female body is like a brandished sword, a naked symbol of the raw power over life and death. Imagine a society where these razor sharp instruments were always on display, the anxiety and tyranny they would foster. The streets would run with blood. We have learned to respect our women as we respect our scimitars. We keep them sheathed.” And I had said, “Goat crap, Mo, pure, unadulterated goat crap.”

I stepped out into the swelter of Main Street. I peered into the window of Blackie’s shop. No light was visible from the workshop in back. I caught a glimpse of myself in a large antique mirror, a lacy see-through bolero jacket over an orange tube top that emphasized my ample bust. A pair of tan hiking short shorts I had picked up in Santorini years ago and handmade leather sandals from the Amalfi coast

completed my ensemble. I fit my *Fabregianni* sunglasses over my eyes and fluffed my sun streaked blonde hair. I had to admit I looked sharp, lethal, like a naked blade.