

A Summer Romance

by

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Author's Note

A Summer Romance won the Silver Award in Literary Competition at the 2015 Second Spring Arts Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

The topic for the competition was remembering our military service and servicemen and women. Writers were asked to write about how their own service impacted their lives, or about how their lives were impacted by the service of others. *A Summer Romance* is a love story set in the Vietnam War era.

I first met Andy on a fateful day in 1959, as I hiked out to my favorite reading spot under a gnarled oak tree at the crest of the hill overlooking McGuire's pond. I was thirteen, and books were my passion that long slow summer, replaced at some point by Andy McGuire.

In the five years since our family moved two doors down from the McGuire's farm, I'd caught sight of Andy only twice, but never near enough to meet him until that hot July afternoon. Andy's parents divorced when he was six. The court ruled his father unfit due to a severe drinking problem that Mr. McGuire never managed to kick, an addiction that ended his parental role as well as his life.

After a judge's ruling granted exclusive custody to Andy's mother, she swept the two boys away to live with her parents in a city twenty-five miles east of our small town in upstate New York. She might as well have moved to another planet except for the few weeks every summer she allowed Andy to visit his father.

From my perch on the hill one sunny afternoon a few days prior to our fateful meeting, I spotted Andy emerging from the back door of his father's barn carrying a large unidentifiable tool, which only sparked my curiosity about him. While I watched, he disappeared around the corner of the barn leaving me to wonder about the weird gizmo in his hand and what he meant to do with it. In the short amount of time Andy occupied my visual field, I couldn't help but notice the shock of blond hair falling over his forehead, the determination on his face, and the fearlessness in his stride.

Over the next couple of days I obsessed about meeting him and learning what he was up to. I planned my strategy carefully. I'd climb the tallest tree in the pinewoods where I could see most of the McGuire's yard, including the barn and the pond. Figuring people were creatures of habit, I scheduled my surveillance for noon, the time I'd first observed Andy leaving the barn. He'd been so intent on his task whatever it was, he never glanced across the pond to the hill where I sat with my back against an old oak tree, Perry Mason book in my lap. Had he spotted me then, I would have waved, hoping to raise his curiosity level to that of my own.

Without warning the opportunity arrived. I spotted Andy down by the pond skipping stones across the water. I scrambled down the tree, grabbed my book and blanket and headed for the pond. Emerging from the woods, I walked over and introduced myself.

"Hi. What's your name?" I asked even though I already knew.

"Andy McGuire," he said, his blue eyes piercing straight to my soul.

I told him my name, which seemed new to him because he asked me to repeat it.

"I never heard that name before," he said. "How old are you, anyway?"

I looked away and muttered, "I just turned thirteen."

"I'm fourteen." He paused and straightened, "And a half." Adding six months to his age apparently provided him with a sense of superiority. Knowing what I did about his father, I couldn't blame him.

"Can you skip stones?" he asked.

I nodded. "Uh-huh."

He squatted down and searched out a few flat stones lying along the edge of the pond. Transferring the flattest one to his left hand he side-armed the stone across the water counting the skips.

"Five," he announced, handing me a stone.

I knew what he was thinking and I knew I would surprise him. My father had taught me early on how to throw like a boy, and I'd probably spent more time skipping stones on McGuire's pond than Andy had.

I bent down and using the same side-arm motion slung my stone long and low to the water.

“Five, same as me,” Andy yelled. “Hey, you’re pretty good for a girl. Want to have a contest?”

I thought we just did, but I said, “Sure.”

Andy and I spent the next half hour or more skipping stones across the pond, saying little beyond counting the skips. Andy captured the record at eight skips but I beat him on more of the throws, which I thought made me the winner, but it was Andy’s yard so we played by Andy’s rules.

“Let’s have a turtle race,” he suggested, after I’d won three throws in a row. My arm was pretty tired so I was happy to quit even though I had no idea what a turtle race involved.

“Wait here, I got to get something.” Andy ran back to his father’s barn returning with a box and a dilapidated net attached to a long wooden pole.

“See those little dark things sticking out of the water?” He pointed across the pond and I nodded. “They’re turtle heads. We have to wait until one pops up next to us, then we grab him.”

After a long wait and several tries that nearly landed us both in the water, we managed to catch two turtles. Neither were larger than my rolled up fist, but Andy assured me size didn’t matter.

“It’d be better if they were bigger, but they’ll do,” he said, watching the turtles as they tried to scramble out of the box.

“What’s next?” I asked, retrieving one turtle and placing it on the ground to see how fast it could move.

“We got to paint numbers on their backs, so you better put that turtle back in the box.”

“Why numbers? We only have two turtles.”

Andy failed to see the logic. “Didn’t you ever see a race?”

“A turtle race?”

“Any race,” he said. “People races, car races. The contestants all have numbers. You can’t have a race without numbers,” which made sense to me in some perverse way. “Besides, after we get these two numbered up, we’ll catch more. It’ll make for a better race.”

Over the next month, Andy and I spent every day on adventures together, catching eels in the stream that fed the pond, picking blackberries, exploring the countryside on our bikes. The pond was our favorite place, but our second favorite turned out to be the woods behind my parents’ house. There we climbed to the tops of the supple white pines and swung the trees back and forth until they bent halfway to the ground. My mother disapproved of our ‘riding the pines,’ which limited us to the trees in the very back of the woods, the ones my mother couldn’t see from her kitchen window.

Thanks to the workshop in his father’s barn, Andy had access to a multitude of tools that we borrowed on a regular basis. The barn had a walkout basement on the downside of the hill toward the pond, which allowed us to enter and exit unseen. With our pilfered hammers and saws we spent several days building a large hut in the pinewoods, sawing down tree branches to cover the sides and the roof. I pretended we were married and the hut was our house, but when I mentioned the idea to Andy, he rejected it in no uncertain terms.

“That’s girl stuff,” he said, “forget it.”

Before either of us knew it, the summer ended and Andy’s last day with his father arrived. The following morning his mother would arrive to take him back home for the school year. I got a little weepy, but Andy scolded me.

“Quit your crying,” he said with a disgusted look. “Guys like us don’t cry, don’t you know that?”

I wanted to remind him that I wasn’t a guy, I was a girl, but Andy’s annoyance intimidated me and I wiped away my tears and tried to act tough.

“I’m not crying,” I told him, “I’ve got an allergy. Anyway, I just wanted to know when you were coming back to stay with your father again.”

"I don't know," he said, looking down at the ground, "probably not until next summer. My mother's making me go to a different school, which is okay I guess, except I have to live there. It's a military school. I'm gonna be a soldier."

I couldn't believe he'd spent the whole last month keeping this news to himself instead of sharing it with me, but asking him for more information led nowhere.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, "and if you keep acting like a girl, I'm leaving."

The following summer, I saw Andy for only two weeks. I was surprised to find him one morning standing on our back stoop ringing the doorbell and shifting from leg to leg.

"I have to stay at school all summer," he explained on that first day.

"What? What do you mean you won't be here all summer?" I was incensed. "I hate your school," I told him, trying to fight back tears since I'd spent the whole school year looking forward to spending another summer with Andy.

"It's not bad once you get used to it, but I failed some of my classes. That's why I have to go to school for the summer."

"Well, you better study more next year," I ordered, "so you can have some time off. What do you think I'm supposed to do all summer if you're not around?"

Andy didn't answer and I realized he already felt bad and I was making him feel worse. We never built a hut that summer because there wasn't time. We hung out around the pond a few times and only once rode the trees. Mostly we walked through the woods and pastures and talked about school.

Andy had a difficult time adjusting to military school. He said he'd gotten into some trouble during the school year and his mother had a fit when she found out about all his demerits, which was part of the reason he had to go to summer school, in addition to his bad grades. I felt really awful for him and told him I wished he could live with his father and go to my school so I could help him with his homework. He just shrugged.

On the first day of the second week of his visit, Andy and I were walking alone in the woods about a half-mile from our houses, when he reached over and held my hand. We never said anything about holding hands, but we managed to find time every day that week to walk in the woods where we could talk and hold hands in private. And then on Andy's last day, when we were really far away from our parents' houses at an opening in the woods, which was one of our favorite talking places, Andy said he had something he wanted to tell me.

"Since you're a girl and all," he said, "I think we should kiss each other, not because it means anything, but just to see what it's like. The guys at school are always talking about kissing girls and I told them I had a girlfriend back at my father's house and we kiss all the time." He didn't look at me and I could tell he'd rehearsed his spiel.

"Sure, why not," I told him. I'd been reading about love and kissing in some of my library books and I wanted to know what it was like, too. "Did the boys at your school tell you how to do it?" I hoped one of us knew something about the matter.

"Sure, they talk about it a lot."

"Okay, then, let's go." I shut my eyes and puckered my mouth, tilting my head back because Andy had grown and was now at least six inches taller than me.

Andy bent down and planted a kiss on my lips. I can't say it felt much different from my parents' kisses whenever they left for a trip or to go out for an evening. Not Andy's first kiss anyway.

I opened my eyes to see him staring down at me.

"How was that?" he asked.

"It was okay. Nothing special."

"That's because I didn't French kiss you."

"What does that mean?"

“Sometimes you’re pretty dumb,” he said, which made me wonder if he knew any more about French kisses than I did.

“I think we should try it again,” I said, hoping for a little more spark.

“Sure, why not?”

This time I kept my eyes open, but Andy closed his and he didn’t just plant a kiss on me like the first time. Instead, he kissed me gently, a soft wet kiss that caressed my lips. I thought I might have a heart attack and die on the spot, which would be embarrassing for my parents if they had to haul a stretcher all the way out to Brown’s woods in order to drag my corpse home. I took a deep breath hoping to slow down my heart so it wouldn’t explode and deprive my parents of their only daughter.

“Now we’re in love,” I told Andy.

“Oh, cut that crap,” he said. “I told you it don’t mean nothin’. It was just an experiment.”

I didn’t care what he said because his words weren’t true. I knew from that moment on that I loved Andy McGuire and Andy McGuire loved me.

Andy and I wrote occasional letters that school year, though I wrote him more than he wrote me. Over Christmas break Andy’s mother dragged him to Florida, so we missed seeing each other. Fortunately, my freshman year in high school was a busy one and between keeping up with homework and all my extracurricular activities, I had little time to dwell on missing Andy McGuire. I began dating that year, but mostly in groups. I kind of liked one or two boys in my class, but with Andy in the back of my mind, I never allowed myself to get emotionally involved.

Andy entered my life again on the fourth of July. He appeared at my back door dressed in his school military uniform. He said he’d just come from marching in the Independence Day parade in his hometown, though at the time I suspected he wanted me to see him in his dress blues. He was more handsome even than I remembered. His blonde hair was now sandy brown and the uniform sharpened the color of his eyes, which were clearer and more penetrating than I remembered.

Seeing him literally took my breath away. I thought I might be having a seizure because my chest clenched up and my knees trembled. I held onto the handle of our back door in order to stabilize myself, and nearly forgot to invite Andy inside. He’d also grown another few inches, but so had I, so he was still only six inches taller. I’d turned fifteen the week before, which meant Andy was sixteen and a half.

“Hi Andy, how are you?” I blushed scarlet before I could finish my sentence.

“I’m good, how about you?”

“Come on in,” I said, looking him up and down. “You look really great in your uniform.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to come in right now. How about coming out for a walk with me?”

“Sure. Let me tell my mom.”

Talking was difficult for both of us. After a year apart we were almost strangers and yet we weren’t.

“How long are you here for?” I asked, hoping he would be staying more than one week. My heart pounded waiting for his answer.

“A month and a half,” he said and smiled at me. I breathed a long deep sigh though I doubt Andy noticed. “I made better grades this year just for you.”

“You mean you made better grades so I wouldn’t yell at you again.”

“Yeah, that, too.” I could tell he was nervous as we left the house. So was I.

We both walked with our heads down, though eventually we loosened up and talked about school and our grades and teachers and how our school teams fared. Andy said he played on the JV basketball team and the coach told him he’d probably make varsity for his junior year. I told him I made the JV cheerleading squad for the next school year, so maybe I had a chance at two years on the Varsity, too, but I wasn’t counting on it.

Once we were out of sight of the house, Andy reached for my hand. It felt so good having him back. I wished with all my heart he would tell me he was moving in with his father and we could be together for the whole year, but I knew his father's drinking problem prevented that from happening, even though Andy wanted it in the worst way.

We walked through the woods holding hands, neither of us mentioning our destination. For Andy and me words weren't always necessary. It was like we could read each other's minds. After what seemed forever we reached our clearing. We stepped out of the woods into the meadow and walked straight to the place of last year's kiss under a large tree in the middle of the pasture. My heart pounded and I worried again that it might break.

"Want to try another kiss?" Andy asked, reaching for both my hands.

"Sure, why not?" I said, my brain on hold.

For the next few weeks our summer involved some of the same activities of our first summer, our childhood summer together. We rode the trees a few times and even caught some turtles at the pond though we laughed at the idea of painting numbers on their backs. We spent a lot of time sitting under the oak tree on the hill overlooking the pond and reading books together. Andy wasn't a big reader, but I took him to the library and introduced him to books on sports and he got hooked.

My parents weren't happy about the amount of time I spent with Andy though I reminded them it was no different from the first summer he spent at his dad's.

"You're older now, that's the difference," my mother said. "I don't like the idea of the two of you wandering off in the woods together. It doesn't look good."

I defended myself with statements like, "I couldn't care less what some nosy neighbor thinks," but my arguments went nowhere.

At some point my parents and I reached a compromise with regard to the places Andy and I were permitted to go, the woods being out of bounds. However, as most kids do, we managed to find a way around the rules. Every day, we hopped on our bikes for a trip to the library, except along the way we cut through an empty field that led to the woods surrounding our clearing. Andy snuck a blanket out of his father's house and kept it stashed in the woods hanging over a low lying branch so it would dry out from the dew and the rain. We did a lot of talking and necking on that blanket but I never gave in to Andy's requests to go all the way and finally he stopped asking.

The next summer, when I was sixteen, things were different. I did go along with the idea, but not before I'd spent a lot of time gathering facts about the whole process including practicing safe sex, a term no one used in those days. Andy and I talked on the phone about every week that year. Our conversations were short because the call was long distance and expensive. I wrote to him a couple of times a week and he wrote back a couple of times a month. I still went out with other boys, but for me, no one compared to Andy. I never thought to ask him whether he dated other girls because I knew in my heart he loved me as much as I loved him.

During Christmas vacation that year, Andy dropped the bomb that nearly destroyed me emotionally. He drove over from his mother's house and took me out to dinner at one of the nicer restaurants in my town, our first real dinner date. I hadn't seen him in over a month and could barely eat I was so excited to see him again. Before our dinner arrived, Andy announced he was joining the Marines. I started to cry, begging him not to do it. We'd already made plans to attend the same college, which for me was a dream come true, but Andy said college wasn't for him. His grades were bad, he hated his high school classes, the college kids he knew were immature and only cared about partying. He wanted to make something of his life, he said, and college would only get in the way.

"I want us to get married," he told me, "as soon as you finish high school. And that means I need a job and a career. Joining the Marines is my best shot and you can still go to college after we're married. I can't wait any longer to start my life."

I couldn't stop crying, which did no good at all, especially when Andy told me it was a done deal. He'd already signed up.

"But they'll send you to Vietnam," I moaned.

"Maybe they will, but I know how to take care of myself."

Andy left for basic training in North Carolina six months later, one week after he graduated from high school. We only had three days together that summer. The next time I saw him was at Christmas when he arrived with more bad news. He was shipping to Nam. I thought my heart would break when he left. We promised over and over to love each other forever and to marry on his first leave home.

"Nothing else matters," he said, holding me close and trying to comfort me, "we'll always be together in our hearts. I'll be home again before you know it and we'll get married."

The Marines shipped Andy to Vietnam the end of January of my senior year in high school. I wrote him faithfully every day, and in the beginning he wrote me regularly too, but then his letters arrived fewer and farther between. At some point in late summer, around the time I started college, Andy stopped talking about getting married when he came home, which puzzled me.

I talked with my mother about it, but she reminded me that Andy was under a lot of stress and I shouldn't push him, just be supportive and let him take the lead. Adjusting to college life kept me busy, which helped with the pain of worrying about Andy and not hearing from him.

His next visit came without warning, shortly before Christmas. One night he telephoned to say he was home and he'd be over the next day. His leave was short, he said, only a week. I couldn't sleep that night, wondering why he hadn't written about coming home, why he'd stopped talking about marriage in his letters. Had he stopped loving me?

Andy arrived at our house just before breakfast and spent the first half hour talking with my parents. He seemed so grown up, like he'd aged twenty years. I could sense a gulf between us for the first time. Andy asked my parents if he could take me out to breakfast.

"Of course," my Dad said. "We've all missed you son."

"Yes sir, thank you," Andy replied, "I've missed you, too."

The minute we got in the car I threw my arms around him and kissed him all over his face and his lips and hugged him and told him how much I loved him and missed him. Having him there, looking at him, felt like a dream. I could hardly believe it was Andy in the flesh. I wanted to hold him forever. I loved him so much I thought my heart would break.

Andy held me for a long time, finally saying he had a lot to tell me. "Let's head out to our favorite diner and we can talk."

We stayed at the Silver Diner until almost noon, talking and eating and drinking cup after cup of coffee. Andy deflected my questions about Vietnam, never answering in specifics. He was reserved in a way I'd never experienced before.

"Of course I still love you," he said, when I questioned him, "and I always will, but a lot has happened and in some ways I've changed. Not anything I can share with you right now, maybe someday, I don't know. You have to be strong and trust me. I still want to marry you, but not until I'm back from Nam for good. Meanwhile, you need to keep working on your college stuff, stop worrying about me, and concentrate on your studies."

"But I thought we were getting married the first time you came home. I'm eighteen now, I don't need my parent's permission. We can go to a justice of the peace, we don't need a big wedding..." My voice trailed off.

"That's not what I want for us," Andy said. "I want us to get married in a little country church with you in a beautiful white wedding gown and orchids in your hair. And after the wedding, I want us to go on a long honeymoon to some place like Hawaii. And after we come back we can buy a

small farm with a pond like the one at my father's place." He paused and looked into the distance seeing things I could only imagine.

"When things get rough over in Nam," he said, taking hold of my hand, "that's what I think about. I think about you and a picture-book wedding in our perfect life where we'll love each other forever."

The day after Christmas, Andy left for another tour in Vietnam and I returned to college. I can't say which of us was more distraught. Five months later, near the end of May, Andy came home again, this time in a flag-draped casket escorted by a Marine guard.

A pall fell over my life that day, a shadow that accompanied me for years. Eventually I married, a union that produced three children and two grandchildren, but the deep rich hue of Andy's eyes haunts me still. An occasional stab of grief arrives when I least expect it, a reminder rising unbidden of memories that linger in the deep recesses of my mind.

And despite the passing years, every now and then Andy comes to me in a dream. The dreams are always the same. Andy's dressed in his Blues, his azure eyes sparkling, and I'm wearing a long white dress. We're walking down the aisle of a small country church holding hands and gazing into the future knowing we'll love each other forever.

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Read on for the first two chapters of the third book in the P.I. Polly Bergen mystery series:

Holy Kow! Who's Dead Now?

Chapter 1

Bugsy Burnstein's got a job for us, Polly. How's that for news?" My loyal secretary pushed open my office door and peered around the corner at me. He was grinning like a kid in a candy factory. "Are you decent?" he added, neglecting our recently established office rules.

"Have you forgotten about knocking before entering?"

"I can never remember which comes first," Bunny replied, in mock humility. I tried to smile, but my mood wasn't the best this early in the morning and Mondays as anybody who knows me knows, aren't my best days.

"This'll wipe the grim off your face," he continued, unfazed.

Bunny's a stand-up comic on the weekends, which means he's impervious to all forms of rejection, even by me, the source of our recent rule change.

I managed to maintain my dour demeanor even though I could feel myself lightening at the prospect of working for real money. "Does this news come with a downside?"

"Nope. Just good news. And here's even better news. Bugsy's paying us one-fifty an hour plus expenses if we put his job at the top of our priority list. That's almost lawyer rates, and a record fee for us, Boss. Only a couple of hours work and you can buy yourself another pair of Jimmy Choos."

Bunny's smile spread across his handsome visage like butter on a warm griddle. He got me on that one and I returned his happy face with what might be called a wry smile. I love shoes, the wilder the better even though I stick to basic military footwear at the office since it helps convince my male clients I can handle any situation.

"I can't afford Jimmy Choo," I said, "even at that rate. And since we're on the subject of ripoff prices, who's Bugsy ripping off now?" Our best shyster lawyer friend wasn't known for his charitable donations, so I knew if he was giving he was getting—double and more.

"Are you sitting down, Boss?"

"What does it look like I'm doing, resting my pants while my butt flies to Honolulu?"

"What *is* the matter with you this morning? You know what I mean. Are you sitting down emotionally?"

"And the last time you worried about my emotional well-being was?"

"You can try to aggravate me all you want this morning, Polly, but I'm not biting. This is the best news we've had since Cinda Mae Bradbury resigned as our number one client. Bugsy's client is Harvey Kow that's who. Bugsy's on retainer to get him out of his latest scrape and needs our help."

I perked up. Maybe Bunny was right. I suppose I should treat him better, but I was still upset over his latest little number with my twin sister. I didn't trust him not to hurt her. She'd just come off an abusive marriage that left her widowed but significantly better off, and I didn't want any more pain added to her life. I thought she could do better than Bunny, but she seemed to be stuck on him, a state of affairs that I of all people, should understand.

"Harvey Kow might change our luck," Bunny added.

"We could use some luck of the non-bad variety," I said, deciding to be agreeable, "since our bottom line has nearly bottomed out thanks to the last stiff we represented, no pun intended."

Bunny laughed out loud, clearly humoring me.

"Harvey Kow ..." I savored the name. "The right Reverend Harvey Kow of the multi-million dollar Golden Cathedral's New Alliance Church."

Bunny nodded. "That's the one. *Holy* Kow, as he's known to the Press. That guy's been making more headlines in Hollywood lately than the disappearance of Paris Hilton's underwear."

I tried to recall the content of the latest newspaper articles I'd read about Hollywood's most notorious preacher, wondering what kind of scrape he was in this time.

"Not to be confused with the famous Japanese composer by the name of Kow," Bunny went on.

"I know which Kow, Bun." I was on the verge of getting irritated again, especially since I'd never heard of a composer by the name of Kow. "What's he done this time?"

"Composed the soundtrack of *New Neighbor*." Bunny gave me that stupid *I'm waiting for you to laugh* look and when I didn't bite, he added, "you've never heard of Kow Otani, have you?"

"I have not," I admitted. Bunny was starting to tick me off. I was in no mood to deal with him bragging about his knowledge of music trivia. "But that says nothing about either my intelligence or my education."

"He's composed a lot of video game music, but you're not a gamer so I guess it isn't something you'd know."

Bunny's a talented musician in addition to being a comic, but he makes less money singing than doing standup, which is why he's stuck working as my secretary.

"I don't care about Kow Otani or what he composed or where he works or what he looks like. I *am* interested in the nefarious activities of one Harvey, a.k.a. Holy Kow, which are?"

"Flim-flam, fraud, extortion, and now maybe murder."

"Maybe murder? How does that work? Like half-dead?"

Bunny ignored my sarcasm. He was too giddy over the possibility of Berger Investigations, Inc. earning real money for the first time in the relatively short life span of its owner P.I. Pauline Isabel Berger, if you can call thirty-nine years and holding relatively short, which I do.

"Like his wife has gone missing," Bunny said. "Harvey Kow claims she was kidnapped. Buggy thinks she ran away. The D.A. is hinting at murder charges, only there's no body yet, which means the police don't know if there's even been a crime, especially one that results in a dead body, which is where we come in."

Bunny took in a deep breath and looked at me like he was expecting applause again, but I'm not his best audience.

I motioned him out of my office. "I need to think about this for a minute or two. I'll get back to you."

"Long as you don't wait 'til the Kows come home."

I cracked a smile. "Or you'll have a Kow, right?"

I should have known better than to go one-on-one with Bunny in the quip department, but fortunately he was too happy about our new fee-paying client to bother one-upping my one-up. Instead, we laughed together for the first time in maybe a week.

As I deliberated over whether or not to accept Buggy's offer, Bunny stood in the doorway shifting from foot to foot waiting for my response, which came pre-packaged.

"We'll take the case," I told him. "I know a cash Kow when I see one."

Chapter 2

A minute or two after I'd informed Bunny of my decision to take the Kow case, I remembered the invoice I forgot to give him. I headed out to his desk with a copy of a statement from the L.A. Department of Power and Water.

"One more bill to pay," I said. "The best reason of all to work with a shyster like Buggy."

No sooner had the words left my mouth when all hell broke loose.

"Holy sh ... ! Get down, Polly," Bunny screamed, tackling me and dragging me behind his desk as a flurry of gunshots rang out.

"What the ... ?" I'd barely hit the floor when our building exploded in a fusillade of flying bullets and shattering glass and metal. The cannonade rivaled the fourth of July at Dodger Stadium. I hoped our building's earthquake fortifications were up to code because there was a whole lot of shakin' going on and not of the Jerry Lee Lewis variety. I listened for screams wondering if anyone downstairs had been hit, but the only sounds reaching my ears were of the non-human variety.

Why is somebody shooting up our place? My blood began to boil. As far as I could tell, we had no grudges coming our way. Business had been slow over the last few weeks and our most recent bad guys were either dead or in jail. I felt my blood pressure rising and my adrenalin spiking. My state of mind went from angry to berserk as the bedlam ended almost as fast as it erupted.

Neither Bunny nor I moved, our hearts pounding in anticipation of another round of gunfire. Barely breathing, we calibrated our hearing to distinguish the slightest sign of a second barrage, but the only noise was a deafening silence. Bunny's body lay tight against mine shielding me from harm except for the crushing of my rib cage and the squashing of my head, which partly explained the quiet encompassing the office.

"Bun," I squeaked, "I can't breathe."

"Sorry, Boss." Bunny rolled off me, but stayed glued to my side, his right arm holding me down. "Are you okay?" he whispered, tickling my eardrum.

"Of course I'm okay if you're okay," I gasped, struggling out of his choker hold. "Did any stray bullets come in here? My bullet locator seems to be stuck in the off position." Re-filling my lungs with air I answered my own question. "The mayhem appears to be confined to the first floor."

"Whoever it was, thank god they were aiming at somebody else and not us," Bunny replied, stating the obvious, which was one of his more annoying habits. "Or, we're dealing with the gang that can't shoot straight."

"Sounds to me like somebody shot up Rosa's Tarot Card Salon downstairs," I grunted, still trying to wriggle free of Bunny's grasp, but his arm clung to me like a magnet on Iron Man.

"Why would anybody shoot up Rosa's place?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Maybe she read somebody's cards wrong and they didn't like what the spirits said about their future."

"She never does that," I said.

"Reads the wrong cards?"

"No. Tells people bad things about their future. Only good things."

"How do you know? Have you been paying her to look into your future? If so, you're wasting your money. I can tell your future for free. Just look at your past."

Now was not the time to argue with Bunny over my current involvement with my ex-husband, Hollywood Police Department Detective Johnny Birdwhistle. "I think we can get up now, Bun. Sounds like the show is over." Bunny twitched a muscle or two, freeing my rib cage for

respiration. “And thanks for protecting me,” I added, trying to change the subject and redirect Bunny’s attention. “If the bad guys had been firing up here, you would have saved my life.”

“So, what kind of thanks do I get for that, Boss?” His voice sounded husky and his lips were a little too close to mine. I made an executive decision.

“A raise.” I sat up so fast Bunny’s arm flopped onto my lap. “A dollar an hour. How’s that?”

“I know you can do better,” he said, not moving his arm, “and besides, I don’t need the money. My weekend stand-up gigs are paying my bills. I work for you for beer money.”

“Let’s not get back into old habits,” I told him, brushing carpet threads off my shirt. I decided to call him on his misguided behavior. “We made a deal. And on top of that, you’re still seeing my twin sister ... my *identical* twin sister.”

He nodded, trying to look ashamed. “That’s the problem.”

“Look, Bun, we’re confronting a serious problem here,” I scolded. “Somebody in this building, maybe Rosa, could be dead and all you can think about is a roll in the hay?”

“I’m fantasizing about threesomes these days and who needs hay?” Bunny winked at me, which in my previous life would be all it took for me to succumb to Bunny’s charms, but a threesome with my twin sister was a major turnoff and I’d already made a deal with my ex that I planned to honor, which reminded me.

“I’m calling Johnny.” I knew that would cool Bunny’s ardor faster than a cold shower on a hot day. Johnny is a Hollywood PD Detective Third Grade, and even though he’s my ex-husband, we’re exploring the possibility of a status renewal. I use the conditional tense here because I haven’t fully committed to reliving my past mistakes. Too bad there’s no such thing as marriage insurance because I could use a paid-up policy.

“I’m calling 911,” Bunny said, unclipping his cell phone from his belt. “Unlike a certain member of the HYPD, they won’t hit on you when they arrive.” He paused, “at least, not right away.”

But before either Bunny or I could finish dialing our respective Hollywood PD numbers, we heard a clamor of footsteps pounding up the stairs. The two of us ducked behind Bunny’s metal desk. I drew my gun, ready to blow away the first bad guy who invaded our space. The office door blasted open, slamming the paint off our newly refurbished wall. I heard a familiar hysterical voice screech my name.

“Polly, Polly, where are you?”

I stood up and holstered my Glock. “I’m right here Rosa, are you okay?”

“If by okay, you mean am I alive? Then, barely,” replied Rosa, the dark-eyed, hair-flying in every direction tarot card reader from downstairs, before fainting dead away on my new rose-colored carpet, adding a bit of irony to another garden variety L.A. day.

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[Holy Kow! Who’s Dead Now?](#) Is available from Amazon in paperback or on Kindle

