

VENUS BESIEGED

THIRD IN THE RICHFIELD AND RIVERS

MYSTERY SERIES

by
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PROLOGUE

Standing on the flat red rock that juts over the sheer cliff, the only firm ground between her and thousands of feet of air below, the frightened Navajo woman, her body whipped by the wind, a mere updraft away from soaring to her death, begs the shaman to save her from the man who would throw her over its edge.

“Leave her to me,” the shaman says, her dark eyes like an eagle’s piercing those of the older, diminutive man as she loosens the deerskin cape around her shoulders.

“If you don’t do it, he’ll come after you.” Threatening words from the man who would one day whisper them.

The shaman, angry, suddenly swings her doeskin cape from her shoulders like the wings of a great bird. The deer’s last vestige of life fans out and takes the Navajo woman with it, her body sails over the canyon’s edge, her cries echo in the night air—silence—the silence of death. Even her adversary is paralyzed by the suddenness of a life ended.

“It is done,” the shaman says, clearly demonstrating strength beyond mere threats.

A pause. Turning his back to her, the older man walks on shaking legs to his long, black limo. A tall man with slick black hair steps out and grasps the door handle, holding the passenger door open for him when, from behind, a flash of fur and bared teeth soars through the air, ripping into the tall man’s arm.

He curses the animal, slams the door shut, and blood drips from the door seal as the vehicle fishtails on the loose rocks. Tires squealing, it disappears into the night.

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The attacking wolf, adrenaline pumping, charges the shaman as if to shred the skin from her body, but at the last possible moment it drops at her feet, resting against her side as she gently strokes its head and whispers to the heavens, “Shimasani, protect us.”

CHAPTER ONE

I drove down Hollywood Boulevard alongside the dragonesque Grauman's Chinese theater, past a man on roller skates naked except for a red butt thong and full-body tattoos, and spotted the ever-present soul with the tinfoil-covered cardboard box over his head, coat-hanger antennae sticking out of the top, his face peering out of a hole cut in the front, as he shouted, "I would like to thank the Academy."

Worn smooth from trying to sell screenplays to arrogant producers and dense studio development executives, I appreciated the simplicity of putting a box over your head and announcing success.

I punched the button on my cell phone, dialed my house, let it ring, and waited to hear my own voice on the answering machine so I could talk to Elmo. The irony of phoning my basset hound struck me, but only for a second. After all, this was Hollywood, where talking to a dog would get me straighter answers than talking to people.

At the beep, I spoke. "Elmo, it's me. Remember what I told you? Right after my dinner meeting tonight, we're headed for Sedona, so hang in there and don't lick your paws—you hear me? No paw licking. We don't want to end up at the vet again. Besides, if you meet a nice girl basset, she's not going to find a bloody paw attractive. Girls like manicured hands and a nice ass. You've got the latter, preserve the former. I'll be home in a couple of hours." I could almost hear him sigh as I told him I loved him and hung up.

Lately Hollywood had taken its toll on Elmo. Pitching shows all day, I was talked out by the time I got home, so he didn't get much attention. Frankly, I didn't know how to listen to a dog the

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way Callie Rivers did, so Elmo had been in a basset-hound funk and lay around trying to lick the fur off his paws.

Living with Callie would make us both happy, complete our lives, make us a family, fix everything, I thought, then chided myself for putting the burden of fixing my entire life on my lover. *No fair using love and chocolate as substitutes for therapy.* Nonetheless, when Callie wasn't around, Elmo and I were lost balls in a high wind, blowing around town lightheaded and directionless.

She'll be in Sedona, I thought happily and felt a twinge of excitement below my waist in a spot that seemed wired to the mere mention of her name. I'd seen her only a few weeks earlier in Las Vegas, but that trip was hardly relaxing since murders seemed to follow her like morbid sheep, a fact I attributed to her otherworldly connections and her astrological leanings.

All I cared about now was that Callie and I were going to meet in Sedona and spend a month writing my screenplay, planning our future together, and arranging to live in the same state, city, house so I could wake up to her ethereal blue eyes, wrap my arms around her soft, voluptuous breasts, and start my mornings and end my evenings with the touch and taste of her.

Erotic thoughts of Callie nude, sliding along my own naked form, were clouding my sense of direction, and I missed my turn as I dropped south onto Sunset heading for a large but chic Japanese restaurant to meet Barrett Silvers, the androgynous studio executive who, despite her many faults, was still touted in lesbian-land as one of Hollywood's most fuckable finds, women seeming to line up for the opportunity.

I was reminded of my own short tryst, having gone to Marathon Studios to pitch her my screenplay and ending up in a bungalow at the Bev—where the perks included a massage, wine, and sex with Barrett. Not good sex, just sex, because Barrett liked to make all her writers, right along with their movies. Despite that lapse in judgment, I had remained friends with her because she insisted on it and often sold my scripts, and I hoped it was for more than the talent in my fingers.

Directly in front of me a six-story photograph rose at the head

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of a curve, making it appear that a young woman with long, tangled hair blowing in the wind, wearing G-string underwear and rose petals for nipple covers, was blocking the road. Beneath her bare feet giant letters instructed, KNOCK ONE BACK, and I realized it was a Vodka billboard. Distilleries seemed unable to sell liquor without involving a sexy woman—obviously they believed getting laid was somehow made better by not remembering most of it.

Minutes later I pulled up in front of the Kotei restaurant and surrendered my Jeep to the valet parker, who took it in exchange for a numbered ticket. How ironic to turn over my vehicle to a total stranger just because he was in close proximity to my destination and wore a logo on his shirt that said Parking. I'd followed men into the woods because their shirt said Guide, let them into my house because their shirt said Delivery, and taken off my clothes because their shirt said Doctor. I was suddenly fretful that a foreign power might buy Van Heusen.

Pushing open the huge teak restaurant door, I was greeted with a riotous whoop from four total strangers wearing dish towels knotted around their heads like Asian Aunt Jemimas, flashing cinematic smiles apparently designed to make me feel welcome, and brandishing knives that could have been onboard a schooner with Johnny Depp.

“Kangeiiiiiiii!” they chorused, and diners’ heads turned. A group greeting was bad enough at a surprise party, but ridiculous at a restaurant. A woman, petite even by Japanese standards, bowed slightly and without a trace of an accent said, “Konnichi waaa, Miss Teague Richfield. Please follow me.” Barrett had obviously described me to the woman who waited to lead me through this dark labyrinth of soy sauce and sushi.

I followed her past polished teak tables filled with dining duos, then a virtually empty room with banquet-style dining, finally down a hallway with small signs jutting above each door, and stepped back as she gestured toward a room marked JUICHI, smiled, and backed away, exiting down the hallway.

The door opened with only the touch of my palm, and Barrett Silvers came into view through a dim haze of candlelight. She lay

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back on big, colorful silk pillows, one leg outstretched, the other bent, the knee used as a resting place for her long, languid, French-cuffed arm. She held a saki glass and her gaze revealed that she'd already been partaking heavily. She was a stunning study in raw sex appeal: her dark Adonis hair framing her chiseled features and her long body completely relaxed and at rest, like a large cheetah lounging between meals but poised for the chase.

"You look good," she said, editing out any perfunctory "Hello, how have you been?"

She knows she looks good. In fact, I think she's talking about herself more than me.

"Did they run out of adult tables?" I asked slyly, checking out the Japanese-style dining table only eighteen inches off the floor. "Elmo would love this place. He likes his doggie bowl at about this height."

Barrett made me nervous, her intent always unknown and her actions unpredictable. It wasn't a good sign that we were dining in a small private room consisting mostly of pillows.

"I brought a copy of the treatment and the notes from our conversations with Jacowitz," I said, referencing the famed director who, thanks to Barrett, had bought the story I'd pitched him and agreed that I would write the screenplay. I also hoped invoking his name would slot Barrett's mind back into a business groove.

Barrett smiled, reading me. "Why don't you sit down, relax, and have a drink. We'll talk about the project in general and then cover the notes." Her tone was light, as if to say my nerves were unwarranted, nothing untoward was going to happen. Dropping to my knees, a position not uncommon for a writer facing a studio executive, I leaned onto the large red pillow to my left—not an easy move for my five foot seven frame. But Barrett had managed it, and she was a few inches taller than I.

A knock at the door had me nearly executing a backflip to see who was behind me. A Japanese girl entered and set another opaque earthenware bottle adorned with painted flowers on the table, along with two fresh glasses and a tray delivered by the Japanese boy padding behind her. What a difference an ocean makes—in their

country she would be walking behind him; however, once they crossed the Pacific he was not only trailing her, but carrying the dishes.

Scanning the tray of uncooked seafood, I spotted amaebi, hamachi, masago, ebi, and, thankfully, a couple of California rolls—because despite having tasted nearly everything in life, I drew the line at raw fish.

“You will knock if you want?” The Japanese woman spoke uncertain English while she indicated a place on the wall about two feet off the floor behind Barrett, bearing a symbol I presumed to be the international sign for knocking knuckles. Barrett thanked her, and the two servers bowed and backed out of the room, heads bent as they uttered “Tanoshimu,” which I’d been told meant something like “Enjoy yourself”—a phrase that always confused me, as it seemed to invite masturbation.

“So you’re headed for Sedona,” Barrett said. “I offered you my cabin—”

“Yes, thank you, but Callie made arrangements.”

The mention of Callie’s name sharpened Barrett’s voice and sent it slicing through the air like a knife through cream cheese, cutting the small talk. “I’ve had another conversation with Jacowitz since he’ll be out of pocket soon in Paris. His only concern in the first draft...” she paused to sip from her glass “...is making it sensual enough for foreign audiences.”

“I think it’s a very sensual story—”

“A young novice counseling a psychologically abused wife—interesting character studies but no heat—doesn’t automatically generate steam. Mull over a way to make them more sexually exciting.”

“I don’t want to whore out the story.”

“Never said that.” She sipped her drink again and I gulped mine, which burned my throat and stomach immediately upon arrival.

“What is this?”

“Shochu. It shouldn’t burn. Take another drink or two and see if it goes away. Shochu is usually mixed with something, but this is straight.”

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Another sip and I realized the burning was starting to recede, along with the room, and my heart rate had doubled. I blinked and reached for the bottle again, this time to examine the alcohol content on the label—50 proof. “I think I saw this when I was a cop. The guys drinking it were under an overpass.”

“Are you avoiding my notes on the story?” Barrett asked, all business.

“Absolutely not. More sex. Sexier. Unexpected sex. Sex within two minutes of the open, sexier a half hour in, huge sex an hour later, sex—”

“The problem with you, Teague—you argue.” Barrett’s tone was soothing as she handed me a bite of something. “Mirugai.”

For all I knew, mirugai meant calm down.

“From my vantage point, it’s called not rolling over. Studios and directors buy a screenplay based on the treatment, then before you can turn those ten pages into a hundred and twenty, they begin giving notes. How can you give notes on something that doesn’t exist yet?”

I took a bite of the slippery thing Barrett had handed me, spontaneously slapped the remainder of it onto the black lacquer plate in front of me, and slugged the slimy sea creature down with shochu, nearly gagging on the combination. “What the hell was that?”

“Mirugai, giant clam.”

Slamming down more shochu, I was emboldened. “Maybe my attorney should contact Jacowitz and remind him that our deal says I write the screenplay, not rewrite the treatment.”

This is how it always starts. Love your work, bought your work, so that I can destroy your work and start over. Having played this game for years in a city where people were more scared than horses in a hail storm and followed what everyone else did, herdlike and horrified, taking more chances in bed than they ever did on the screen, I’d apparently chosen tonight to have a breakdown brought on by seafood and saki.

Seeing I was agitated, Barrett took the drink out of my hand and finished it, sipping from the same side of the glass where I had

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drunk, reminding me without telling me that we had a shared and intimate past that connected us whether I liked it or not.

“The drink is supposed to relax you, but you might be allergic to it.” Barrett reached back and thumped her fist against the knuckle block.

Seconds later, the Japanese girl returned and politely awaited Barrett’s command.

“My charming friend needs something more soothing.”

The girl nodded and left as I got to my knees and staggered to my feet. Telling Barrett I’d return in a moment, I headed down the hall to the bathroom.

This has gotten off to a great start, I chastised myself, looking at my slightly blurred face in the ladies’ room mirror. My green eyes weren’t quite as sparkly after I’d drunk the shochu, but my punked hair was in place. After using the facilities, I washed up and pulled my green T down under my green cord blazer and pants. When in doubt I gravitated to military colors; perhaps Hollywood reminded me of a battle that never ended in a war that couldn’t be won.

Try to be nice, for God’s sake. This script will become a movie... will become a movie... will become a movie, I chanted in my head as I strode back down the hall, more off balance than the *Andrea Doria* as I re-entered the private dining room where Barrett was standing, asking if I was alright.

I made a mild attempt at apology, blaming the alcohol. She agreed it wasn’t the right drink and offered me the one on the table.

“Nihonshu, a refined version of saki and only 16 percent alcohol. Let’s see what this does for you.” I knelt and she knelt beside me, on my side of the table, and poured me a glass. We sank down on the pillows facing each other.

“To better days and happy endings.” I raised my glass, quoting Melissa Manchester.

“Or you could ‘make my day,’ as Clint always says.” She smiled, toasting me with her own connectedness.

“Listen, I’ll be in Sedona for several weeks. We’ll stay in touch, and I’ll let you see how it’s progressing and get you and Jacowitz comfortable with the sex scenes,” I offered, trying to be conciliatory.

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“Fifty pages at a time?” she asked, and I knew I’d given too much. Now she would be dogging me, wanting to see every scene. “I want to see how it...builds,” she said and reached for my shirt, heretofore safely tucked, and flipped it out of my pants, running her hand across my skin and over the top of my bra.

“Barrett,” I protested, but my breath was faint and so was I. She unzipped my pants and jammed her hand inside between my legs, using that leverage to pull me into her lips. I pushed back but felt weak, almost drugged.

“Think of it as research.” Her fingers fought to slide inside me and her mouth enveloped mine.

Barrett’s inability to kiss and the flashing images of Callie and her warm, soft lips and blue eyes saved me. I shoved Barrett away, pulling my pants together and struggling to get to my feet.

But she had me off balance and pulled me down to her unzipped fly murmuring, “Start by eating this.”

While I was zipping up my own pants Barrett had apparently been unzipping hers and placing a California roll in the...*what... groin area?* It was resting there like a beached crab. I’d heard the slurs of women and fish but had never contemplated a woman wearing a crustacean in her pants.

“Barrett, for God’s sake, let go of me!”

But she was out of her head, either from the drink or the fantasy or her close proximity to a woman. She had a death clutch on my lapels and was using my weight to pin her to the ground so she could writhe up against me. My muscles had failed me and I was struggling to extricate myself, which only seemed to make the sensation more pleasurable for her. As sexual as the next woman, I was nonetheless turned off by trying to turn her off.

“Fuck me, baby,” she breathed, then repeated it like a mantra with each hip thrust, trapping my knee between her hot thighs and grinding into me. “Are you the young novice I spoke to on the phone?” Barrett’s reputation was not only tied to her promiscuity but to reciting an author’s work during the most intimate sexual moment. “Take me places with your mouth my husband would never dream of going.”

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The word “husband” threw me, despite the fact that somewhere in my head I knew Barrett didn’t have a husband. I’d always made it a point never to get involved with a woman whose betrayed lover had chest hair.

When she began to moan and climax, I was unable to escape, and her verbalization of extreme pleasure was reaching Beverly Sills proportions. I clamped my hand over her mouth, thinking our position reminded me of a takedown on the police force rather than an act of consensual sex. *How can sex be so one-sided and so unsexy?*

Suddenly she ratcheted up her hip movements to Tilt-A-Whirl force, groaning loudly, then exploded and went limp, unconscious. Silence—stillness. Scared, I spoke her name, took her pulse, shook her—nothing. My heart raced. *Omigod, has she had a heart attack having sex virtually with herself and died on me like some old guy in a sleazebag hotel?*

I took her pulse again, and it was weak and fluttering. I banged on the wall block and started CPR. The Japanese woman stepped inside the door, startled when I looked up frantic.

“Get an ambulance!” And I resumed trying to breathe life back into her. Images of that day at Orso’s flashed through my mind when Barrett was having lunch with me and I had to call an ambulance. *Note to self. No more dining with Barrett, assuming she’ll ever be able to dine with anyone again.*

Moments later the paramedics arrived, and after much talking into their radios and taking vital signs and quizzing me, they finally gave her a shot of Benadryl and loaded her onto a stretcher.

When the sushi fell out of Barrett’s pant leg, the female tech glanced my way and began quizzing me anew. “What was she doing right before it happened?”

“She was drinking and very animated.” Only a partial lie or partial truth, whichever way you chose to look at it. I wasn’t about to say that Barrett Silvers had humped me like a horned toad and then stopped breathing.

The shot of Benadryl seemingly having done its trick, Barrett was already coming around on the stretcher and demanding to be let

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off, refusing IVs and further assistance. The young male paramedic allowed her to get up, saying something in the food or wine could have caused the reaction.

Barrett asked me for a pen and, her grip still weak, managed to write a wobbly signature that dismissed the paramedics. Then she signed a waiver for the restaurant that assured any lawyers who cared that whatever had happened wasn't their fault. *For a studio executive, she gave up her rights pretty quickly*, I thought, but I wouldn't want my body taken to an L.A. hospital either, unless my parts were so badly damaged they were arriving under separate transport in an ice chest.

The sexy dining alcove now looked like an episode of *ER* with torn paper, tape, tubing, and other paraphernalia mingled among the lotus blossoms and orange slices.

The medics attempted a quick cleanup and loaded up to leave. I was relieved when the room was cleared and Barrett asked me to drive her home, having come by cab. She put her arm over my shoulder, the full weight of her tall frame heavy and unsexy. The weight of a woman hanging on me, drunkenly rather than affectionately, felt different—both physically and psychologically.

A nervous Japanese restaurant manager who wanted to be on record, I was certain, as having been of assistance, followed us to my car.

Helping Barrett inside, I felt sorry for her, but I also had the same reaction I surmised men had—awaking in bed with someone who looked sexy after six martinis, but now not so good over a couple of eggs. Barrett's pleated and pressed black slacks were wrinkled, her patent loafers had a gouge in one toe, which must have occurred as they hurried to load her on the stretcher, and she looked worn smooth, her loose silk shirt with the French cuffs sadly stained.

I drove slowly, not wanting to jar her, and when I asked occasionally if she was alright, she nodded. As we pulled up in front of her Las Feliz home, she reached over and took my hand in her slightly larger one, the gold pinkie ring somehow exotically sexy on her long slender fingers.

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“I enjoyed the first half of the evening,” she said, but her words sounded like a perfunctory wrap-up to a date that hadn’t ended well. “I’ll call you and see how you’re doing. Think about the notes from Jacowitz, will you?”

How in hell can she still be talking business, I wondered as she opened the car door, and then I realized business was all she had. I started to get out and help her but she waved me off, some shred of pride left.

As I watched her walk up the steps, I was sad. *Who in the world will Barrett Silvers ever meet who understands her? Where will she ever find love? There’s no one on the planet who can handle her or make her want to be faithful, yet deep down that’s probably what she wants.*

Early in my life I might have taken on that task simply to save her, despite having to sacrifice myself in the process, but I’d gotten my money’s worth with a shrink on that topic, so the most I could give Barrett tonight was a ride home.

Quickly my own love life clicked in, and I wondered if this whole bizarre evening constituted being unfaithful to Callie Rivers. I had tried not to let Barrett have sex on top of me, if that was the proper phrase. I hadn’t enjoyed it and was embarrassed by it. Nonetheless, Barrett Silvers had climaxed against my body. What should I tell Callie, and was telling even required?

Callie Rivers was psychic, so wouldn’t it be entirely up to her to figure it out, get a call from the cosmos, a visual from Venus, or whatever? Did I have to walk into the cabin and blurt, “Hey, honey, by the way, while I was having a business dinner with Barrett Silvers she put sushi in her slits and humped me like a hound, but it was one-sided”? What earthly good could come from sharing that piece of information? It was bizarre, unexpected, and over.

But the big question still remained: when is telling required? After all, even Catholics go to confession voluntarily.