

STELLIUM IN SCORPIO

SECOND IN THE RICHFIELD & RIVERS
MYSTERY SERIES

by

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PROLOGUE

It was at once the most prestigious and whispered-about evening in Las Vegas, replete with drag queens, mafia dons, and upscale hookers, all of whom, having had enough alcohol and drugs to sufficiently numb the senses, displayed no remorse as they bet on who in this gambler's paradise would most likely die in the next twelve months: a macabre game for the rich and bored.

Gypsy Rose Ross, a twenty-three-year-old Las Vegas showgirl with the requisite long legs and cover girl complexion, followed the flickering black candles held aloft by the beautiful bronze chorus boys in feathered masks and leather breastplates as they wafted through the marble arches and down a long tunnel where the walls parted, revealing a small but dramatic theater-in-the-round.

The processional formed a circle around the stage, a forty-foot metal disk, a polished steel mechanical masterpiece, a series of precisely engineered circles within circles, each able to spin at varying speeds to create theatrical illusion—for this was a town of illusion. Tonight, its highly polished metal surface reflected the ring of costumed guests, as if they'd fallen face up into a large silver pond.

Marlena, a particularly striking drag queen, yelped as she hit her foot on the edge of the metal circle. "Ouch, this thing is hard!"

"You never complained before," Joanie Burr, another drag queen, said slyly as fog began to seep out below the disk, enveloping the guests' legs in a mysterious mist.

A deep, disembodied voice welcomed the guests to this All Hallows' Eve Ghoul Pool.

"I'm into the ghost," Marlena purred.

“I heard he’s into you about twice a week,” a chorus boy sniped, and Elliot Traugh, an erudite gay man, looked away, obviously pained.

A Latin chant arose, and the mirror-like disk turned slowly at their feet; its inner circle spun faster, hypnotically, and then separated and rose into the air as the chanting reached a crescendo. The swarthy ghost arose from the Underworld beneath the disk—bare-chested, black-booted, leather-strapped, spike-balled—an apparent denizen of West Hollywood.

Elliot Traugh held the silver bowl aloft as the ghost drew thirteen names, reading each one slowly before tossing it into the cauldron of flames that skirted the stage.

The redheaded young Gypsy Rose Ross leaned into Sophia, a tall, brashly handsome Italian woman. “Do people on the list ever really die?”

“Don’t worry about the list. It’s just a stupid game,” Sophia said, keeping her eye on Elliot Traugh. Rose gasped as two male dancers coupled in a shadowed corner, one having mounted the other from behind. “It’s a hologram, an illusion. Faux-fucking,” Sophia whispered very close to Rose’s ear. “Personally, I like real fucking.”

“Rose Ross!” the ghost intoned. Sophia’s wineglass slipped from her hands and shattered on the floor. Rose’s eyes darted away from the ghostly lovers, and she stared at her host in disbelief.

All heads swung to observe the statuesque showgirl, and the room raised its collective glass, their voices like thunder. “The ghost has got us, the ghost has hung us, and now we toast the ghosts among us!”

CHAPTER ONE

The large, ninety-pound, tricolored basset hound was approaching at warp speed across the backyard, past the lemon tree, over the flagstone patio, ears spread wide like the wings of a 747, going airborne three feet from me and belly flopping into my lap, snatching half of the ice cream bar out of my hand and gulping it down in one joyous swallow.

“Damn it, Elmo! You’ve wrecked my suit! What in the hell am I going to wear?”

Elmo licked the side of my face to remove the chocolate he’d splashed there and then gave me two more licks out of sheer gratitude. I had thought he was safely in his wicker basket in the living room taking a nap, otherwise I would never have sat down on the back steps to indulge in Elmo’s one uncontrollable addiction. He gave me one more lick, this one decidedly a kiss for my not having berated him further, and he buried his head under my arm, smearing more ice cream onto my suit. I sighed in resignation of the disaster he had wrought and patted his head in sympathy. “I completely understand a craving you can’t control,” I said, thinking of Callie and how I hadn’t heard from her in more than a week and how every time the phone rang I dove on it like Elmo on ice cream.

I pulled myself to my feet, shrugged out of my Ralph Lauren suit, tossed it into the dry-cleaning bag, and rummaged through the closet for something else that matched. I settled on a double-breasted blazer with a matching vest and a starched pair of jeans.

“This is the last clean outfit I have, so stay away from me with those chocolate-covered jowls,” I warned the large hound, who merely

belched in reply and closed his eyes, having reached some basset nirvana brought on by dairy products.

I grabbed the folder labeled *Midnight Rodeo*, picked up my car keys, and headed for the door. I couldn't concentrate on anything these days, not even the network movie I was about to pitch in an hour.

Elmo watched me with furrowed basset brow as I breezed past him, gave him a quick pat on the head, and said, "Back by noon. Guard the joint and stay out of the freezer."

Having set the burglar alarm, I dashed out the door, jumped into the Jeep, and backed up at high speed, narrowly missing the lilac bush with the left side mirror and the side of the house with the right side mirror as I maneuvered down a driveway the width of a bike path. No scrapes. Pretty good depth perception for a person who never slept. My nights, and a good part of my days, were spent obsessing over Callie Rivers. Our final lovemaking had been nothing short of spectacular. If we had been tires, we would have been treadbare from the friction. We fell asleep only to awaken a few hours later, wet and wired to make love again, as if our bodies, without any help from our minds, were magnetically drawn to repeating the orgasmic sensation again and again. How, after that, could she have postponed our meeting in Las Vegas? First a week, then two, now ten weeks had passed, all due, so she claimed, to her work. *Maybe for her it was just great sex. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am. Maybe she's seeing someone else. Maybe psychics are basically crazy. Maybe I'm going insane from thinking about it. I've got to stay focused on this pitch to the network...and not wreck the car!* I thought as a man swerved, narrowly missing me, and shouted, "Fuck you, lady!" I almost smiled at the oddity of "fuck you" and "lady" in the same sentence. *Fuck you, bitch, maybe. But fuck you, lady must mean that, basically, he likes women, unless they're trying to crush him with their cars.*

The Hollywood Bowl marquee flashed news of last night's Halloween Concert as I drove by, heading over the hill.

I recited my pitch notes that lay on the seat of the car. "Bobby Jo was a raw-boned girl from Alabama whose horses often exhibited more sense than she did." I said the line again into the air, more casually this time, as if I were just formulating the thought. The light turned red at the corner of Sunset and Highland, trapping me alongside a transient wearing a propeller beanie on his head. He leaned into the passenger side of my car and waved a ragged piece of cardboard at me:

Will work for food. I waved him off, having seen the recent exposé on L.A.'s transient population who apparently collected ten bucks from people like me, headed for a pay phone and dialed their "junk dealer," and within twenty minutes, a beat-up car would cruise by with a dirty needle full of forget.

Minutes later I rolled through the Fairfax District where two elderly Jewish men, wearing yarmulkes on their heads, were entering Cantor's Deli for a morning bagel. It dawned on me that society drew a very fine line between a beanie that was acceptable and one that wasn't. It apparently had to do with the propeller.

Turning left on Beverly Boulevard, I pulled onto the CBS lot, found a parking space along the narrow alleyway that faced the executive offices, and entered the main lobby. Unlike the vaulted ceilings of the ABC lobby or the more horizontal quarters of NBC, the CBS lobby felt genteel even if, on this particular day, the huge windows could have used a good bath. I reported to the receptionist that I was waiting for Nan Connors, vice president of Mitafilms, and director Granger Goodman, who would be joining me at ten o'clock, and then we would all be seeing Marshall Tevachney.

"Your name, please?" the receptionist asked.

"Teague Richfield," I replied.

"I'll ring Mr. Tevachney when you're ready."

I stared out the window and continued rehearsing my pitch. "Bobby Jo had no idea that the cowboys she'd befriended that night would turn on her. She'd known one of them for years. He was like a brother. But the heat and the alcohol changed all that."

I tapped my foot nervously.

My cell phone rang. It was Barrett Silvers, the tall, handsome, androgynous motion picture executive who held the distinction of being the only Hollywood executive to have both physically and psychologically fucked me. We hadn't spoken since midsummer, when she'd admitted to planting a little artifact on me that had endangered my life, and Callie's. Hearing her voice brought that up again.

"Hi, Teague, Barrett. Where are you?"

"I'm at CBS getting ready to go into a pitch."

"I thought you only pitched to me." Her voice sounded seductive.

"Not lately," I said with an edge to my voice.

"I'm back at work now, and I'm feeling better. I was pretty out

of my head on drugs when we last spoke. Anyway, I'm figuring I owe you one." She paused, and I said nothing to let her off the hook. She sure as hell did owe me one. In fact, what she owed me would overflow Yankee Stadium. The silence between us was palpable. She finally continued, "There's a big director friend of mine who's bankable, and he's looking for material. I told him about you. I want to get the three of us together."

"And do what?" I tried to sound disinterested, but I was already mentally whoring out. Bankable directors could get movies made.

"Make one of your theatricals, if all goes well." She kept her voice silky smooth.

"And what do you get out of this?" I asked with unveiled sarcasm.

"I'd like to say a weekend with you, but from the look in your eye when I saw you at Il Faccio's with the pretty blonde, I'd say you look...taken."

I didn't know if I was taken or not. Barrett Silvers's voice had more urgency in it than Callie's these days. At least Barrett wanted to see me soon. I had no idea if or when Callie would finally decide the same.

"*Are you taken?*" Barrett probed seductively.

My mind slid back to Barrett on top of me in bed, inside me with the same kind of urgency she had in her voice right now. I had to remind myself that while she was technically brilliant in bed, she was also emotionally heartless and had slept with every female writer in L.A.

"I'm not up for games, Barrett. If you've got someone who wants to make a movie, great, but that has nothing to do with my personal life."

Through the tall CBS plate glass windows, I spotted Nan clacking along the concrete walkway in her spike heels. Granger, in ragged blue jeans, trailed her with the studied nonchalance of one who has a studio deal and is loved by the networks. His presence at this pitch was purely sales insurance.

"I gotta go," I said to Barrett. "My guys are here for the pitch."

"We'll talk soon," she said and hung up.

I straightened the collar on my starched white shirt, buttoned my blue blazer, and dusted off my starched jeans before shaking my head vigorously, much like Elmo when he wants to get rid of a bad conversation.

Nan came through the big double doors, looking tense, crisp, and businesslike. Granger was tall, wiry, bushy-haired, and looked distracted. We said our hellos and gave each other Hollywood air-kisses.

“So are we ready?” Nan addressed me using the collective pronoun. I assured her *we* were. Nan asked Granger if he remembered the story well enough to “do the character arc,” describing the dramatic change a character has undergone by the end of the movie.

“I’ve been thinking about the story,” Granger said, crossing his arms, shifting his weight, and staring up at the ceiling. “I think this girl...Bobby Sue—”

“Bobby Jo,” I corrected with a smile.

“I think this girl needs a greater handicap in life than the psychological abuse she carries with her from her childhood.”

“What do you mean?” I asked pleasantly.

“I think she should have something like—” He broke off, musing.

“Like?”

“I don’t know...like...one leg.” He pursed his lips pensively.

I burst out laughing. “Why not put her in an iron lung for the entire movie?”

“I think it makes her need for love that much greater,” Granger said, ignoring me the way one would an unruly child.

“Interesting,” Nan said in a manner that would have me believe she really thought he’d come up with a provocative idea.

“I hope you’re kidding!” I blurted out. “At one point, the woman becomes a bareback rider!”

“That ties in. People expect circus people to be odd.” Nan nodded her head pensively.

“She’s not in the circus. She’s on the *circuit*—the rodeo circuit! Look, a girl with a wooden leg...” I tried to sound calm.

“No leg,” he corrected me. “She’s too poor to afford a wooden leg, so we have a sort of...Tiny Tim empathy working for us.”

I bent over at the waist and did a ninety-degree pirouette on one heel, trying to release tension and avoid thrashing Granger, who as far as I was concerned had just gone nuclear.

“A girl with *no* leg? How does that work in the scene where she *runs* a mile after being raped to escape being killed by her torturers?” I felt my voice rising.

“You can talk around that,” Nan said confidently, letting me know that she too was experiencing a meltdown.

This was why everything on television looked the same. Projects were autopsied before they were even declared dead. *Why do I feel compelled to develop and write stories for morons? Why do I ever believe anything I write will ever reach the viewing audience in any form I would want to claim as my own? Why the hell am I even here with these people?* I began to sweat from the sheer heat of holding in my emotions.

“Look, I have nothing against doing a movie about a girl with one leg but it’s not *this* movie, and we can’t rewrite this movie here in the lobby in ten minutes!” I checked my watch. “Make that five minutes. We’ve had four months to make this decision...”

“The best creative decisions don’t always come on schedule.” Granger smiled indulgently.

“This isn’t the best creative decision,” I said firmly. “The girl is raped—”

“That’s something that’s always bothered me,” Nan said in a Prozac drawl. “I think we should avoid the use of the word *rape* in this pitch. I would say she was aggressively attacked.”

I was losing control of the situation. In minutes I would be standing before Marshall Tevachney, Vice President of Movies and Mini Series for one of the major television networks in the United States, trying to tell a story I was making up as I went along.

“Aggressively attacked is with hammers. Raped is with penises!” I shouted into the lobby, which was filling up with other writers and producers who had appointments. It’s odd how one can be forgiven the public utterance of almost any word, save the anatomical name for the male member.

Granger and Nan stared at me in utter shock as the receptionist, her eyebrow arched all the way into her hairline, said, “Mr. Tevachney will see you now.”

The receptionist punched the button to a set of doors that let us into the CBS inner sanctum as Nan and Granger eyed me warily. It was apparent they perceived me to be dangerous.

“Nuts,” I said to no one as our feet sank into the plush hallway carpet and the lobby doors closed behind us.



An hour later I was back home, where I nuked a cup of old coffee in the microwave, shrugged off my jacket, kicked off my shoes, and sagged into a chair. Elmo strolled over and rested his heavy basset jowls on my leg by way of condolence.

“The whole town’s nuts,” I told him as the doorbell rang.

I opened the door to find Mary Beth Engle standing there with a Tupperware container and a big smile on her pert, thirtysomething face. Mary Beth and I had been paired on a blind date only two nights before by a well-meaning friend wanting to end my extended mourning over Callie Rivers.

“Thought you might enjoy lunch,” Mary Beth said in a way that made me think she envisioned herself as lunch, and whatever was in the Tupperware as merely bait. I was horrible at situations like this, and I avoided them like the proverbial plague. I had considered our blind date a disaster. First, I didn’t know I was on a blind date—you might say I was blind to that fact. I just thought I was meeting friends for a drink. They surprised me with Mary Beth, who they said they’d brought along to cheer me up and to make me forget Callie, a woman seemingly uninterested in seeing me anytime soon. Mary Beth’s round, cherubic face was cute, but not sexy. She tried very hard to please, laughing at all my jokes, staring into my eyes, and never offering up a thought of her own, and now, here she was serving herself up with lunch. In short, Mary Beth should have been straight, because there were a hundred guys who wanted nothing more than exactly what Mary Beth had to offer: vapid attentiveness and a potluck meal. Unfortunately, Mary Beth just wasn’t doing it for me. She set the container on my kitchen countertop in a proprietary way and gave the kitchen a once-over as if sizing up something she thought she might soon own.

“I have a special floor wax that will get those scuff marks right off this floor,” she said and spun on her toes to face me, taking two steps forward and sliding her arms around my waist.

“I had such a super time with you the other night. You are so funny.” She giggled to accent the word *funny*. “I would love to spend more time with you.”

Elmo moaned and flopped to the ground, one ear landing squarely over both of his eyes, as if he couldn’t bear the idea of my infidelity to Callie. His moaning gave me an excuse to pull away.

“Sorry, when he makes that sound, it means his collar’s too tight,”

I lied and leaned over to fake-adjust Elmo's collar. When I stood up, she was standing in front of me with her shirt unbuttoned, revealing bare breasts. I had to give her points for speed. She took my hands in hers, yanked them forward, and placed them on her breasts.

"What I'm saying"—she drawled the words—"is that I'd like to see more of you. A lot more of you," and she reached for the zipper on my jeans, deftly unzipping them and sliding her hand inside. I knew if I didn't move quickly I was a dead woman. I could easily do this because it was easy, not because I had any feelings for Mary Beth. It might even have been an exciting diversion because it was unexpected and uncharted, but I was old enough to know that if I took a moment of my life to fuck Mary Beth, Mary Beth would fuck every moment of my life thereafter: calling, visiting, crying, and showing up with Tupper-suppers! I pulled back suddenly, aching a bit from the effort it took, just as the phone rang.

"Sorry," I said and grabbed the phone.

"Teague?" It was Callie calling from Tulsa, and she sounded upbeat.

"Hello," I breathed, feeling my heart leap to higher ground somewhere in my upper chest, where the beating just stopped, as if it had been put on pause. While I struggled to breathe, I was aware that love could actually kill me.

"What are you up to, darling?" she asked as I zipped my pants back up.

"I just got back from a network pitch, and if you'll permit me a negative word," I said, mocking Callie's dislike of my swearing, "it was a fucking disaster!"

"Why don't you meet me in Las Vegas and tell me all about it?" Her voice had a silvery ring to it that had an instant sensual effect on me.

"When, two weeks from Thursday?" I asked sarcastically.

"You need a break. My client is one of the original owners of the Desert Star Casino. He's given me a two-week stay, and there's no one I'd rather stay with. How about tonight?"

"Tonight?" I breathed, my whole body coming alive. Mary Beth took this unguarded moment to wrap her arms around me from behind and nibble my ear. I yanked my shoulder up to my neck so quickly I nearly dislocated it, and I groaned in pain.

"Are you with someone?" Callie asked suddenly.

“No! A friend stopped by to have lunch, that’s all,” I said, and Mary Beth retreated sullenly.

“There’s a seven o’clock flight...” Callie’s voice trailed off.

It was true that a plane flight would put me in Vegas in about forty-five minutes, but today had been harrowing enough without adding to it an opportunity for high-altitude free fall.

“Okay, so drive,” she said, reading my thoughts, “but be very careful. See you in the hotel lounge at nine.” She hung up on me in her standard form of good-bye.

I pretended she was still on the line for Mary Beth’s sake. “All right then, I’ll leave now. No, sure, I can be there.” I checked my watch. “No problem.” I hung up and shrugged happily at Mary Beth. “Sorry, I’ve got to leave town suddenly.”

“Oh.” Mary Beth looked hurt as I put my hand on her shoulder and walked her to the door. “Can I call you when you get back?” she asked.

“Actually,” I said, “I’m...getting married.” I had no idea where that remark came from, but it just popped out and, having heard it out loud, I figured it was as good as any lie I could have conjured.

“Were you getting married forty-eight hours ago when you and I went out?” Mary Beth asked tersely, exhibiting the first signs of real life I’d seen in her.

“No, I wasn’t. It just came up.”

Mary Beth paused, tapped her little foot three times on the hardwood floor, huffed loudly, and left. Elmo rose up on his back legs, leaving his front legs plastered to the floor, stretched, and passed gas, blowing Mary Beth down the road.

“You really like Callie, don’t you? Me too.”



Every nerve ending in my body was tingling with excitement. I would see Callie tonight. “You care if I go to Vegas, Elmo? I’ll call Wanda and she’ll come and play with you...and give you rice with your dinner...and some chips...and a huge Milk-Bone before bedtime.”

Elmo’s expression never changed as he lifted his muscular behind off the floor and ambled out of the room. He was a Hollywood dog. He knew a snow job when he saw one.

I jumped up, pulled a small suitcase and suit bag out of my closet,

and began flinging clothes into them without regard for what matched. I was so happily nervous that I couldn't think straight, and I couldn't locate the simplest of items like the number for Wanda, Elmo's dog-sitter. I rummaged through drawers trying desperately to find it. That was one thing I hated about Vegas: there were no dogs allowed in any of the hotels. No one could tell me that a dog would pee on their fancy hotel carpet any more frequently than the drunks who inhabited the rooms.

I looked over at Elmo, his large brown eyes rolled up in his head as if he were preparing to be beamed up by aliens. Dropping to my knees, I lifted his head up and looked into his big, soft face.

"You know what?" I said, "Screw those Vegas hotels. I'm taking you with me." His ears elevated off his head a full inch, and he became alert.

"You'd like to see Callie too, wouldn't you?" He stood up and shook his huge fur suit in that way he had of getting physically ready for something important.

"But here's the deal: we have to smuggle you in, and you have to be quiet in the room, and sometimes, I might have to leave you for a couple of hours in the car with the windows cracked, but it's pretty cool now, so I think you'll be fine. Still want to go?" He wagged his entire body. "Great!" I said. "Let's get you packed. And remember, once we're with Callie, NFL—No Farting or Licking."

Elmo let out a long, loud belch and I laughed. "You always have to have the last word," I said.