

“Blood is Pretty”

The first FIXXER Adventure

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Chapter One

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Chapter 1

Discretion is the Better Part of Value

“The Phone,” Roe said to me as I was eating breakfast.

“Yes?”

“It has rung.”

“I heard it.”

“It’s Norton.”

“It is rarely anyone else.”

“He would like to speak with you.”

“Thus his use of The Phone,” I said as I leisurely took another bite.

“I may be assessing this situation wrong, but my guess is that he would like to speak with you now.”

“Well, unfortunately, Roe, ‘now’ is when this plate of eggs benedict you have prepared for me is hot. And, compliments to you, I am enjoying it. Although I look forward to the day you lose your faith and chuck off your heritage and slip in some ham instead of turkey.”

“So you want to call Norton back?”

“Tell him I am committed to that action, and will not be swayed from it.”

Roe sighed and returned to The Phone.

A very secure instrument of telecommunication, The Phone is used by only one outside person, my business manager Norton Macbeth. Norton handles all the top players in Hollywood: Studio heads; the \$100 million plus club of directors; the actors that have become institutions. He also has an unerring instinct for those who will eventually be elevated to these ranks. So he has, as well, a tier of clients who aren’t big players — thus big payers — but whom he’s betting will get there. He helps them with sound financial advice and management. He also helps them manage other aspects of their lives, from the buying of cars and homes, to the solving of sticky career

problems, to extrication from situations of stark desperation. In the latter two he has been able to work wonders — by calling on my services. The fowl eggs benedict finished, I went over to The Phone and returned Norton's call.

"I have a little job for you, Fixxer," came his cheery voice.

"Tell me about it."

"Young actress, Anne Easley, she was in a sitcom last year."

"Cobblestone Bay."

"That's right. Great reviews."

"No ratings."

"Yes, but it was really good."

"But it didn't pay the bills."

"Right. But she got a lot of attention out of it. She's poised for the next leap, he-he-he." Norton often punctuates the end of a sentence with this little laugh.

"So what's the problem?"

"Well, she should explain that. She's really a very nice, very sweet girl from South Dakota."

"No up front fee, huh?"

"I couldn't talk her out of it. She thought the series was going to be a hit and put all her money into her dream house, he-he."

"That's the problem with dreams."

"Can you arrange to do it on contingency?"

"Will it eventually pay?"

"She's a client of mine, isn't she, he-he-he? Very talented. Given the right break, she can be a big star."

"And the problem is something to do with someone standing in the way of that break."

"I think I better let her explain. Can you meet her today?"

"Where?"

"Descanso Gardens?"

"Why there?"

“She wants to be discreet, he-he.”

“Well, as discretion is the better part of my valor — or, rather, I should say, value — I appreciate that. Time?”

“Eleven this morning. Can you make it?”

“Yes.”

“There’s a Japanese Tea house on the grounds. She’ll meet you there.”

I hung up The Phone and walked into the kitchen where Roe was doing the dishes. “Call downstairs to the garage and have them bring the car around.”

“Which one?”

“The 911 I think. Yes, I can open it up a bit on the 2. I’ll shower. Tell them washed and gassed in fifteen minutes. And tell them that ‘Sir’ will be quite upset if there are water spots on my rear view mirror the way there were last time.”

The staff of the building I live in know me, and address me, only as, “Sir.” In the business I have chosen anonymity is an asset, and they are well paid to protect that anonymity. No staff member is ever hired for the building without my approval, which I will only give after Roe has done a thorough background check and declares himself satisfied. How did I get such power? After all I don’t own the building — just the 15th floor. There is an old saying equating knowledge with power. The old sayings are the best. Personally, I have a staff of one. Roe is sharp faced, has dusty red hair receding on the sides leaving an arrow of hair pointing to his nose, which, while not a caricature, is close to prominent. He’s gay, a second generation Israeli, and a failed playwright. I hold none of this against him. I am happily heterosexual myself, but I don’t demand that other people be. His being Jewish is only a problem during holidays. It is a nuisance to suddenly find him unavailable when I need him. Especially after sunset. The nuisance is doubled by the fact that his holidays slip all over the calendar from year to year. A surprising bit of sloppy planning from a people of tradition who have added so much to the overall intelligence of our species. As for being a failed playwright, in the American culture of the 1990’s that is practically a badge of honor. Besides his expert preparation of meals, overseeing the cleaning

staff of the building, and arranging purchases from groceries to computers, I find useful the skills Roe developed while a commando in the Israeli Army and, later, an operative in Israeli intelligence.

“Any particular desires for dinner tonight?” Roe asked as I was leaving.

“Something simple.”

“Pasta it is.”

I left my building, one of the high-rises along the Wilshire corridor in Westwood, exactly fifteen and a half minutes later. I made my way to Beverly Glen Boulevard, then headed north through Westwood, making the quick jag on Sunset to catch the continuation of Beverly Glen that takes you over the hill, just east of Bel Air. The Porsche — a 1997 911 turbo, the last of the air-cooled Porsches — loves the winding path of Beverly Glen. On city streets, light to light and bumper to bumper, the 911 is just another pretty car, and Los Angeles is full of pretty cars. But when the road winds, or lays out lonely, flat and straight ahead of you, this car comes alive. With herds of horsepower, and a top speed of 190 miles per hour, some would say it's the best handling sports car in the world. I agree.

The 911 is black. Henry Ford was perfectly correct. Black is the only true color for a car. White is a waste and not one car in the world looks good in white. Red is for fire chiefs and fantasists. Gray is the mark of people in suits of the same color looking for power and reading motivational books to get it. Any bright color in the blue to green spectrum is an insult to the power of the internal combustion engine. Brown? Brown needs no commentary.

I came out of the Glen, crossed Mulholland and descended into Sherman Oaks. Like many such “Cities,” Sherman Oaks is actually just a section of greater Los Angeles in the sprawl known as “the Valley.” It's the poor man's Beverly Hills. Or the rich man's Van Nuys, if you are aware of that dedicatedly dull area of the Valley. This is especially true south of Ventura Boulevard where game show hosts, local newscasters and well-worn character actors live in million dollar plus homes. Position on the compass of certain main boulevards seems to define social strata in this town, as the sides — one being the right side and one being the wrong side — of railroad tracks did in

the nostalgic nightmare of small town America. "South of the Boulevard" is actually a selling point in real estate ads hawking homes in Sherman Oaks. If the home is north of the Boulevard, only the fact that it is in Sherman Oaks will be mentioned. Its position in regards to the Boulevard is ascertained by those in the know by noting the failure of its mention. Next down on the rung of desirability, but one trying hard to hang on to the rung above, is "Sherman Oaks adjacent," which means, of course, Van Nuys.

As I had the time, I took the curve of Valley Vista to Van Nuys Boulevard and stopped at the Sherman Oaks Newsstand for some information. Nothing to be found in the stacks of periodicals, this information would come from Mike, who has worked the stand for fifteen of its 45-year existence. Mike is a show biz fanatic. Reads every line of type about "The Biz," but, more importantly, has made it his business to know things before they get into type. And some things that never do.

"Mike, what's the info on Anne Easley?"

Without missing a move in the unwrapping and stacking of new magazines, Mike answered, "Talented. Some say with star quality. Beautiful, of course. Voted best hooters on an under 25 actress in an 'unofficial' poll among studio and network execs. Hard working. Ambitious, but with a Middle American charm that takes the edge off. On the cusp, if the cruelty of this business doesn't dissuade her." He stopped his work, turned to me and smiled. "Why?"

"Just curious."

"Yeah, I noticed that about you."

Mike is small, maybe five foot three, with a broken front tooth that, combined with his long, overgrown black and gray chin beard and never-off baseball cap, gives him character.

"Did you hear about Andy Rand?" Mike asked.

"What?"

"He's resigning from NewVue."

"Resigning?"

"Yeah, resigning. Do you think Engstrand would fire him? He made NewVue. Money is one thing, but the O' Golden Gut is everything. They're

going to announce it at a press conference tomorrow.”

“But they gave you a call about it today.”

“You questioning my abilities, Fixx?”

“Never, Mike. Never. You’ll find a bonus in your pay packet this week.”

I got back on the road, down Van Nuys Boulevard to jump on the 101 freeway to connect with the 134 heading east. I got on the phone and called Norton.

“Sell NewVue.”

“Sell NewVue? Just like that, he-he?”

“Just like that. And without delay.” I knew that if Mike had the information, the buzz was about and certain others would soon have it as well.

“Okay. You are going out to meet Anne, right?”

“I’m on my way now.”

“Oh, good.”

It didn’t take a financial genius to know that the news that Rand was leaving NewVue Pictures would practically crash the stock. NewVue had been a phenomenon. It was started by Torvald Engstrand, a Norwegian media mogul, if you can imagine such a thing, with loads of money and piles of promises. But, as Mike put it, money is only one thing. It’s hard to buy your way into Hollywood, because it’s hard to buy relationships, which are both the foundation and structure of Hollywood. And relationships are built in this town by dogs sniffing each other’s butts to see who’s farting success. It wasn’t until he pulled off the coup of hiring Andy Rand away from Paramount to be his president and CEO that the company took off. Rand’s farts have always been particularly sweet because he has the Golden Gut, that instinctual thing that allows you to pick the winners more often than not. Suddenly all the top dogs wanted to pee on Torvald’s tree.

That was 1985. Now, twelve years later, NewVue Pictures is practically a Major with a full studio facility being built out in Santa Clarita, just north of the Valley. And it has two cable stations and the beginnings of a television network, things Torvald happily gave up his Norwegian citizenship for. And Marx and Lenin thought they were going to internationalize the world.

Why would Rand willingly leave NewVue? He was certainly being paid enough, a reported 400 million last year with bonuses and stock options. Probably because he was not number one in the company, and never would be as long as Torvald held 53% of the stock. When you have a great deal of power and wealth, position is the only thing left to strive for. So Rand quits and puts himself on the market. His asking price: To be number one. Somebody will buy.

I continued east passing the Burbank Media District and the Walt Disney Studio with its much-too-visible from the freeway new animation building. Ugly enough to be in downtown Tokyo, the building sports the injury to insult addition of a tower like structure over the entrance, a giant version of the Sorcerer's hat Mickey stole to no good effect in Fantasia. It's one thing to know where your paycheck is coming from. It's another to burden the rest of us with the revelation. Of course, they probably don't give a rat's ass about my opinion.

There had been a heavy rain the night before, but now the clouds had broken, and the rain-washed air was allowing the morning light to strike and illuminate the landscape unimpeded. This gave a clear, shimmering quality to the view from the freeway, with the hills of Griffith Park and the stunted skyscrapers of Glendale standing out in relief against a brilliant blue sky. This is L.A.'s best time — the morning after a heavy rain. This is when you can actually see why people once considered this place a paradise. Of course, it is also a time to watch where you're stepping. Rain brings out the worms. Just after the center of Glendale, I took the long, graceful left curve that puts you onto the near empty 2 heading north and made the "jump to light speed," urging the 911 into joy, then quickly dashing that joy when I had to pull her back to exit at Verdugo and enter the hide-a-way town of La Canãda-Flintridge.

Separated from the rest L.A. by the Verdugo Mountains, La Canãda-Flintridge is a nice community of 23,500 good people with pretty houses and quite demeanors. Here, butt up against the San Rafael Hills, is Descanso Gardens, well over a hundred acres of rich man's landscaping now owned by the County of Los Angeles, thus owned by you and me, bub. Despite

the multitude of its shareholders, the place is rarely crowded. I would consider that a shame, except I hate crowds.

I paid my five dollars to the pleasant senior citizen at the entrance and was immediately hit with that oddly clean smell of wet soil. I took the luxury of a deep breath. Despite the sun, the air had not heated up yet, and the cool through my nostrils was bracing. I walked over to the Japanese Tea House, hidden from, but just off of, the entrance. There, sitting on a little bench built into an elevated wooden patio that jutted out over a Koi filled stream, her right elbow resting on a concrete table embedded with pebbles, and her chin resting on her right hand as she stared at the flow of the stream, was probably the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.