

Chapter 6

There is very little that looks out of place on Davie Street, but a six-foot-five dark Amazon with a nearly bald pate except for a stripe of blue dissecting it into two perfect halves, and wearing a Janet Jackson circa *Rhythm Nation* uniform and massive gold hoop earrings—two in each ear and one in her nose—qualifies. She looked like...Grace Jones. Could it be the same woman Anthony had spied eyeing me up on Broadway Avenue in Saskatoon last week? Naaaaaaah. But could there be more than two (other than the original of course)? What the...?

I decided to test my theory. I made an about face and headed back in the direction I'd just come: past Genesis Nutrition, the Suntanning Centre, The Dish restaurant, up towards Denny's. I crossed Thurlow before tossing a look over my shoulder and across the street to see if I'd grown a tail. Nothing...nothing...then, oh yeah, there she was, her shiny, blue-striped head bobbing inches above all others. Her gleaming eyes were drilling a hole into my back, creating an easy entrance for the chill of apprehension that began creeping its way up my spine. Who was she? Had she followed me all the way from Saskatoon? What did she want with me? There was

only one question I didn't need an answer to, I just knew it in my bones: This woman was dangerous.

I picked up my pace and whizzed by the Samurai restaurant, Gay Mart, Stepho's and Fresgo Inn and was bearing down on The Parkhill Hotel when I dared another look behind me. Was she gone? Had I been imagining things? Nope. There she was, making long-legged strides, crossing to my side of the street. So I did the same in reverse, crossing at mid-street, dodging intermittent traffic, and, once safely on the other side, I headed directly into The Pump Jack, hoping the dark, crowded pub would offer me safe refuge. The place was hopping, the music loud, and the atmosphere, although going for leather-and-studs-rough-and-toughness, was more convivial and jovial with its preponderance of teddy bear daddies and the boys-who-love-'em having a laugh over a couple pints of brew and games of pool. I was perhaps a little out of place in my off white khakis, purple T and a distressed look on my face, but I tried my best to blend in. I chose a spot about midway down the long, narrow room from where I could keep an eye on whoever came in through the front entrance.

"Can I buy you a beer?" a portly gentleman in a black leather vest that barely reached half-way around his hairy torso asked me in a surprisingly refined voice.

"Ah shit," I answered to his bewildered, mustachioed face.

"Huh?"

Behind his bulk I'd caught sight of Grace. She'd just stepped into the place and her beady, bright eyes were covering the crowd with the intensity of laser beams. She wasn't giving up easily. I pushed my face into that of my leather-clad gnome

admirer and asked, “Is there a back way out of this place?” Certainly a place like this would know the importance of a handy back door.

“Sure, sweetheart, but don’t you want a drink first?” Was I moving too fast for him?

“I gotta take a rain cheque on the drink,” I told him in some haste. “But right now, I really gotta get out of here.”

Nobody loves drama more than a guy in a gay bar. Without further prompting, my new best friend took my hand and together we scrambled away under the cover of the carousing crowd toward the rear of the bar. With a sure-footedness that belied his ungainly shape and size, the man led me through a maze of people and corridors until we came to a door with an exit sign above it. Hallelujah. We burst through it as if we’d just been released from prison...or a Billy Graham crusade. “What’s your name?” I asked my companion.

“Rufus.”

I gave Rufus a big slurpy one on the lips and took off like a jackrabbit. Eventually I came to a street called Broughton. I wasn’t familiar with it but I knew it was heading away from Davie which was just what I wanted and began hoofing it. After some minutes I reached Robson. If anything, I knew that Robson Street, with its eclectic mix of retailers to meet the varying tastes of everyone from tacky tourist to serious shopper, from chic boutique to salt-water taffy stands, from hip cafes to exquisite dining establishments, would be even more crowded than Davie and easier to get lost on if Ms. Tall Thang was still on to me. I turned right onto Robson and allowed myself to be swallowed whole by the swarms of people, like a minnow

caught in a school of spawning salmon. I kept going, regularly checking my back for Queen Kong, the crowd thinning the further I got until eventually, I reached Richards, the cross street for Black Canvass. Only then, not having seen my tracker since The Pump Jack, did I deem it safe to return to Davie.

I'd spent a lot of time eluding Grace Jones and it was nearing 9 p.m.—closing time for the gallery—and getting dark out when I popped my head into Black Canvass, setting off a door chime. The entire gallery was no bigger than my hotel room (not big). The walls were roughed up plaster painted the colour of dirt—all the better to show off the sunless, murky canvases, mostly 36" x 48" oils, hanging like giant sleeping bats from wires attached to the dark grey ceiling. Near the rear of the store was an unmanned, waist-high counter and behind it a curtained doorway that likely led to a back area used for storage, bathroom, and probably not much else. The room was heavy with silence, no radio or street sounds, and the air smelled vaguely of curry and marijuana. After a brief wait the heavy fabric at the doorway parted and out stepped Duncan Sikorsky, chewing on something that he was trying to swallow at the same time.

"Hi. How are you today?" he mouthed the words, managing not even a single expression across his long, narrow, almost-handsome face.

I would have loved to play the polite customer for a while but that wasn't going to get me anywhere. I'd already wasted too much time allowing him his work day and then playing hide-and-seek with Matilda the Hun. "Duncan, I'm Russell Quant. We talked on the phone yesterday."

I saw the thin face stiffen and his fetching dark eyes grow immediately wary under a furrowed brow. I saw now that he had a nose ring and a silver stud implanted below his bottom lip. It looked good on him. The fear did not.

“Wh...why are you here?” he stammered, taking a step back toward the curtain. “What do you want?”

He was terrified. What on earth happened to this guy to make him so scared? Did he still think I was somehow responsible for Tanya’s death? I wondered if there was a back door and if he was frightened enough to use it, leaving me alone with all these paintings-of-the-damned. What was he so terrified of? Little ol’ me? Was I *his* boogeyman?

“I just want to talk to you. About Tanya.”

“She’s dead for real, isn’t she?”

I nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

His face was crumbling and his eyes were moist when he uttered the word, “You?”

“Me?” Me what? “Duncan, I—”

“Did you kill her?”

Aw man, jeepers. “No, of course not,” I told him in a soft un-murderer type voice. “She committed suicide. Last week. I’m a private investigator hired by her family to find out why.”

This seemed to calm him some, but not much. He stopped edging backwards and his shoulders lost some of their rigidity. “Suicide? Suicide?” he repeated more to

himself than me. He looked at me, pleadingly. “Are you sure? Are you sure it was suicide?”

I hesitated. And that was all he needed.

“You’re not, are you? That’s why the family hired you. They don’t think so either, do they? It wasn’t an accident. Not Tanya. Moxie’s death was no accident either.”

“Duncan, if you can calm down a bit and tell me what’s going on, maybe I can help. What do you think happened to Tanya and Moxie? Why are you so scared?”

The young man seemed to gain some resolve, some heretofore hidden resource of strength, as he straightened up to his full height, passed by me to the front door and turned the lock. He returned to his original spot behind the counter and said, “I’ll show you why.”

The once stunning works of art had become works of horror. Duncan had led me into the back room behind the curtain where indeed the gallery stored a small inventory of unhung pieces: old pieces from a recent installation not yet retrieved by the artists, sold pieces not yet picked up by the purchasers and new pieces waiting for wall space. Amongst them, in the dim, murky confines of the rear storage room were three more. Three vandalized, disfigured, destroyed pieces. But there was nothing random about the mutilation. It was planned. It was grotesque. It was meant to send a message.

These canvases, in sharp contrast to the pieces currently on display, were once joyful representations of children picking berries on beautiful, sun-dappled, summer

days, now each bore a symbol, corroded onto its ruined surface by splashes of turpentine or low-grade acid. The first was brandished with a *B*, the next two with an *O*.

Oh hell. The same cryptic message Tanya and Moxie received. Right before they died.

I looked up at Duncan's tortured face, the area under his eyes seemingly growing darker with each passing minute.

"They were mine," he said. "I painted these, to remind me of home when I was a kid. Whenever there was room in the gallery I'd put them up, hoping to get some exposure. I don't even know when it happened. I just found them like this one day when I was closing up a few weeks ago." His voice was tremulous as he told me, "He did it. I know he did it."

"Who, Duncan? Who did this?"

A rattling noise came from the front of the gallery. The door. Someone was trying to get in.

We both turned and stared at the curtain as if we could see through it. Sudden choking fear filled the space like smog.

"Oh God," Duncan whispered hoarsely. "Oh God, he's here."