

Mel
Keegan

Crimes of Passion



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CRIMES OF
PASSION

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DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

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DreamCraft Multimedia
Box 270, Brighton 5048, South Australia

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Mel Keegan

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HE WAS TALKING to a cactus plant when I brought in the mail, which had been standing in the mailbox overnight. I think it was the prickly pear that had gone squishy and all kind of yellow. Me, I would have tossed the little bugger in the garbage, but not Frank. Frank was going to save its life ... and knowing him, he'd do it. He sure as hell saved mine.

I was whistling as I came up the driveway from the mailbox at the gate. Still trying to get really get used to the fact we had a house now — a real house, with a yard and trees, a double garage and an upstairs, and three bedrooms ... and the biggest bed we could find to buy. All this was still something new to both of us. We'd lived in dorms and efficiencies and apartments ever since we spread our wings as youths. But I guess I'm an old-fashioned kid at heart, and the fantasy had always been there in the back of my mind. 'Home' always meant 'house' to me. Someplace you could spread out, with room to move and grow.

When I was younger, moving and growing always meant finding a bigger house. There were seven kids in our family, and a grandparent ... four dogs, eight assorted motorbikes, two ponies. The whole circus revolved around my parents, normal folks with more or less normal lives. Me? I don't think I was ever what you'd classify as 'normal' even as a kid, and as I grew up I slithered further out, way out, 'into left field,' as my Dad called it. He used to look at my Mom and said, 'Lind, we should've shut the gate.'

Like the old saying goes, too late now.

I wasn't going to complain about how things worked out. One day at a time, Frank became my family, until I couldn't live without him, would've been lost without him.

Then, when I wrote off the bike and couldn't ever expect to get back on the track in any professional sense, everything changed so fast. I believe I'd have

lost my marbles if Frank had not been there to pick up the pieces, glue me back together.

Call me dumb, but I never realized he was looking at me the same way as I'd been looking at him since Day One. But what do you do, when a time arrives when your best friend reaches out to you, touches you, and you light up like the Fourth of July?

And an hour later you're still lying in his arms, feeling like you been hit by a truck, and yet feeling so wonderful, it's like you were only ever half-alive before. What you do, like Mom used to say, is don't look no gift horses in any part of their anatomy.

Getting used to the fact I'd never swing my leg over the saddle of a race bike again was the hardest part. I had to get it through my skull that I was lucky to even *have* a right leg. It had been broken in nine places, and I would have a steel pin in it for the rest of my life — but I had a leg, and I knew I should be grateful.

Settling down was the second hardest part of putting the crash behind me. I left a lot behind. The bike race circuit, with the thrill of speed, the adrenaline rush, the noise, the crowd, being surrounded by hunks and chicks who were never hard to persuade ... then, there was Frank.

What the hell was he doing at a bike meet? He wasn't the kind, I could see that at a glance. He didn't have the characteristic oil under the fingernails, he didn't drive the customary beat-up truck with the two Rottweilers in the back. In fact, he didn't even *own* a Rottweiler.

It dawned on me later, he'd been hanging around the track to look at the guys in the leathers. Mom always used to say I was a tad bit slow. But I get there in the end.

I digress: I was bringing in the mail.

The house was just about all we'd ever wanted, and in four months we'd gotten the garden pretty right. The furniture, the carpets, were how we wanted them.

As it turned out, it was all fixed up in the nick of time.

So, Frank was talking to a cactus as I whistled my way back from the mailbox — walking without my cane these days — counting the bills ... postcard from Steve, one of my two brothers, who was working up in Alaska on the oil fields; a letter from Libby, one of my three sisters, with an invitation to a private party at The Marlin Club; assorted mailorder catalogs of the gay variety; and a letter postmarked Jersey City.

I'd limped my way around back, where the shrubs were starting to grow

in, and the honeysuckle from Mizz Barber's side of the fence made my eyes water every springtime.

The garage put half the yard into shadow, but the back of the house collected the full sun at this time of the morning. Frank was working at the sink, at the open kitchen window.

"Hey, Butch," I called through the window as I headed for the door. He doesn't cringe anymore when I call him that ... God knows, his name's Cassidy. I expect he grew up with it. They used to call me Beaver; for ten years I thought it was because my front teeth were too big, and three minutes before I had them yanked out to save my sanity, Steve tells me, 'It's because your initials are BV, you dope.' O...kay. Cancel the dentist's appointment. "Hey, Frank," I was calling through the window, "you got a letter from back east."

On my way to the refrigerator, I dropped the letter on the side of the sink, among the tools and soil and plant fertilizer.

There was Swiss chocolate in the icebox. I can never walk past a fridge containing Swiss chocolate. Lindt, specifically. Frank says I gotta put some meat back on my bones, so what the hell? Lindt is my guilty secret.

The doctors told me, when they let me escape from that goddamned mausoleum of a hospital, I could never expect to be as fit as before. Well, the hell with them. I was making good progress, and proud of it. I had muscles in my legs, even my right leg, where the scars were still pretty ugly, and I had flesh back on my ribs.

Frank would still cluck like a broody hen over me in bed. I made a major discovery in the early days of my convalescence. Frank Cassidy does not turn on to skeletons. Which probably accounted for the way he force-fed me.

He was leaning against the sink, intent on the cactus, standing in the sun while Boots rubbed against his legs and purred the way I sometimes do myself, when I rub against his legs ... the cat had good taste. Boots kind of walked in one day, and stayed. We figured she probably belonged to the people who owned the house before us, but they never came back to find her, and in any case, I think we needed a cat.

You know you need a cat when your cookie bags are getting tiny little chew marks, and there's microscopic manure behind the refrigerator. Uh huh: you're sharing your castle with mice. Boots was black, with four white feet, which accounts for the name ... and Frank was so golden, it was a rare day when I could keep my hands to myself.

Still eating Lindt ... sort of savoring it, the way you can keep a block on your tongue for a long time if you let it sit there and dissolve instead of sucking

it or, God forbid, chewing.

I put my palms on his back, felt his body heat, kissed the nape of his neck. He growled and squirmed deliciously. "How's little Harold?" I inquired against his ear.

"Little who?" He gave me a blank look.

"The prickly little bugger I wanted to throw in the trash." I nodded at the cactus.

"Oh, he'll make it." Frank leaned back against me. "You feel so good, Brad. You having a good day?"

"I feel great." My arms wound around him and I buried my face in his hair. He smelt of peach shampoo, and he was wearing a white cotton tee-shirt and the old, washed-out blue jeans, always the next best thing to bare skin. "Open your letter," I told him at last as I stepped back, before I ravished him where he stood, right there in the kitchen.

Thing is, Frank would have helped me do it.

"Back east?" He twisted his neck to see the postmark as he pulled off the gloves he wore when he was handling the cactus.

"Jersey City. You want a coffee?" I swiped up the kettle. And then I saw the mask-like look on his face, and put it down again. "Frank, what's wrong?"

Very deliberately, he picked up the letter, crossed the kitchen, put his foot on the pedal of the trash bin to pop the lid ... dropped the letter in, let the lid smack down, turned his back on it and marched away.

"What the hell?" I swiped the letter back out of the bin before it could turn into mulch along with the morning's coffee grounds and tea bags, and some banana peels that were starting to smell really rank. Or maybe it was the shrimp shells I'd dumped in there last night? Either way, my eyes watered and I wuffed fresh air into my face with his letter. Then I slapped it back into his palm.

He stood looking at the envelope with that stony face. "Oh God, no," he groaned. "No, no, no. Tell me this isn't happening. Please God, let it all be a bad dream. Wake me up, Brad. Kick me, pinch me."

"What the Christ are you babbling about?" I demanded as he handled the envelope as if it were about to spontaneously self-combust. "It's just a letter from some place back east I never visited and don't intend to."

He gave me a look so bleak, I've seen pictures of Antarctica that look warmer.

"You think so?" With the air of a man on his way to the gas chamber, he tore the envelope. "I had a call from home a few weeks ago, remember?"

I followed through and plugged in the kettle. "Yeah. So what? Your folks

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