

Courting Rites

By: *Kristine Kathryn Rusch*

* * * *

Humphrey Bogart used to star in the sort of hard-edge, black-and-white film that “Courting Rites” could easily be made into. But let’s cast Lauren Bacall or Mary Astor as the detective this time (if we don’t opt for Kathleen Turner as V.I. Warshawski)—a gumshoe who isn’t as tough as her trade, but who’s as smart as any of the movie detectives who wait behind those glass doors for clients to walk in with problems that are always, always more than they seem. Maybe even smarter. Those detectives usually turn up in Los Angeles and New York. Ms. Winters works out of Nevada, where the rents are cheap.

From this winner of the John Campbell, the Hugo, and the World Fantasy Awards, we have the tale of the hard-boiled detective with a heart that’s soft—but not *that* soft.

* * * *

I should have known the case would be difficult from the start. He walked into my office, sure as you please, confident he could charm any woman within range. Maybe he could have once; he had a face that even at his age registered beauty. Problem was, the face should never have grown old. His silver hair and startling blue eyes only accented the idea that this man should have died young.

“Miss Winters?”

I nodded. I allowed men of his age certain liberties when it came to addressing me. Any man under forty-five would have been reminded curtly that the proper title is “Ms.”

“How may I help you, Mr.”—I glanced at the appointment book—”Silas?”

He smiled. “Silas is my first name.”

“And your last?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He took the chair in front of my desk. His clothes, dated and slightly formal, carried the faint scent of pipe smoke. It added an exotic feel to my rather staid office.

There are, perhaps, a thousand P.I.s in LA, which is why I left. I took all my ready cash and set up shop in Nevada, where the land and the rents are cheaper by hundreds—sometimes thousands—of dollars. I set up a fancy office—plush blue upholstered chairs, matching carpet, framed prints on the wall, all-important air-conditioning, and room for my part-time secretary in the months I needed her. I had hoped it would give clients the idea that I was well-off—a woman who knew

what she was doing. It helped with tourists. But I got the sense that this man was not a tourist.

“So,” I said again. “How may I help you?”

“You may find my banjo.”

Whatever I had expected, it wasn't this. “Your banjo?”

“It may sound trivial to you, Miss,” he said. “But to me, it is of the utmost importance.”

I folded my hands on my clean desk. I hadn't had a client in weeks, and the last had been a skip-trace out of Vegas. Certainly not the most interesting kind of case, nor the most lucrative. “What is it, a collector's item?”

He smiled, and I saw a flash of that once-powerful charm. “It's one of a kind.”

“Pictures, records, serial number?”

“No, none.” He waved a hand, dismissing my comment. “It was made by my grandfather. The banjo looks like a normal banjo, but when you touch it, it feels warm—elastic, as if a live thing were stretched across the drum instead of dried skin. It will not play for you. In fact, it will not play for anyone except the person who owns it.”

I scrawled notes, pleased that I also had the tape running inside my desk. I couldn't decide if this man was a nutcase or not. He seemed rational, but then, so did Ted Bundy. “So what happened to it?”

I expected him to shake his head. Instead, his entire expression softened. “It's a bit of a story,” he said. “I fell in love.” He took a picture out of his wallet and slid it across the desk. A professionally done job: black windblown hair, wide painted eyes, and a glossy mouth. A beauty.

“Her name is Mariah Golden. She lived at Fifth and Fremont. I had occasion to visit next door. We struck up an acquaintance, and eventually, she convinced me to stay with her. A week later, I awoke one morning to discover that she and the banjo had disappeared.”

“Not kidnapped? No ransom?”

“Oh, no,” he said. “And the police say they can't do anything.”

“I suppose not.” I tapped my pencil on the desk, then quit when I remembered the tape recorder. “I take a \$500 retainer, and charge \$25 per hour, plus expenses.”

He took the money—cash—from his wallet, and set it between us. “I'm

staying in her house, waiting for her. You can reach me there.”

I nodded, knowing I should have asked a dozen more questions, but deciding that I would rather wait until later. Until I had investigated a bit on my own.

He got up, straightened his pants legs, and nodded once.

“Tell me,” I said. “What is the importance of this banjo?”

He walked to the door, as if he hadn’t heard me, then paused. When he turned, he watched me for a moment, as if he were assessing me. Finally, he said, “I’ll die without it,” and then let himself out of the room.

No chemicals bleached the Nevada sky. The sun was pure here, hot and radiant. The highway looked like a sharp heat vision against the desert brown. Even my new car, with its fancy air-conditioning system and loud-playing stereo, faded a little in the heat.

I came out here once a day to view the vast emptiness. The desert reminded me of life—little patches of growth fighting against an overwhelming army of death. Death and I were constant companions. In LA, it was part of my job—always a gunshot away. And here, here my finger rested on the trigger.

I pulled to the side of the road, and shut off the car. Whirling dirt surrounded me—not a dust storm—just dust devils, playing with my mind. The way that man had, Silas, the one who wanted the banjo.

He probably wanted the woman, too.

I got out, stretched, and sucked in the dry air. The desert consoled me. It was the only place where I could admit my unhappiness. I had run away to this small Nevada town. I had left LA not because of those thousand other detectives, but because I got to the point where I imagined Death beside me.

It happened late one afternoon, in an alleyway near Graumann’s Chinese. I had cornered a young pimp who wouldn’t let me take a fourteen-year-old girl—the one it had taken me nearly a month to find—because, he said, she was his best “lady.” He was mouthing off to me when I pulled out my pistol. The gun didn’t make him quit—maybe he thought a lady wouldn’t use one—so I let a shot ricochet off the wall. The second wasn’t as well-timed—the pimp let out a grunt and slid to the garbage-strewn pavement.

Then everything froze. Street noise I hadn’t thought I heard disappeared. Cars stopped in their tracks, and the pimp paused in mid-groan. A man stood over the pimp, a slender man, longish dark hair and startling blue eyes. A man who hadn’t been there before.

“I’m going to stop this,” he said. He had the most beautiful voice I had ever heard. “You’re way past your limit.”

He ran his hand over the pimp's wound. A gout of blood and pus leaked out, followed by the bullet. The wound closed itself, leaving only a scratch. The man smiled, tipped his hat at me, and then the sounds came back—the honking horns, blaring music, nattering tourists. The pimp completed his moan, touched his shoulder, and looked surprised when no blood coated his fingers.

The man had disappeared.

I cuffed the pimp, left him, and took the girl home. She ran away again, not a week later. Maybe the vision had been right. Maybe I killed too many and had sympathy for too few.

I came to Nevada to find solace. Instead, I found a loneliness so deep that not even the desert would soften it. I would dream of the man in black, his beautiful voice and his striking eyes, and in the morning, I would wake, my gun clutched in my hand, wondering how the barrel would taste against my tongue.

The dream hadn't come in nearly a month.

I missed it.

The heat made my skin prickle. I watched the dust devils swirl around me, wondering if they were lonely, too. Finally I decided they weren't—they always worked together, in company of two. I went home to an empty house. No one had kept me company for a long, long time.

Mariah Golden spent her days at the hospital, holding the hand of an old man dying of cancer. His room had that putrid stink of flesh gone bad, but she didn't seem to mind. She read to him, watched television with him, or sat quietly beside him, a presence, nothing more.

I had no trouble finding her. She lived in the family home just outside of town—alone, from what I could tell. She used her credit cards regularly to send flowers to the old man, and she made no effort to hide her appearance around town. Odd thing for a thief, but then, a banjo was an odd thing for a wealthy woman to steal.

I waited until she went on one of her hospital runs, then used the lock set to let me into her house. The security alarm was a familiar one—I had been the consultant for the LA firm that developed it—and so I knew I had thirty seconds to disable it before the cops arrived, guns in hand.

It took me fifteen.

Two steps down let me into the sunken living room, done in cream with Navajo blankets for color. Designer books stood on the wall, a framed Chagall hid from the light. I assumed the small objets d'art decorating the tables were also worth a small fortune.

I took two steps back up and stopped in the dining room to admire the stained-glass chandelier and the mahogany table. The dishes in the hutch were Wedgwood—predictable, I thought—and a Dali original dominated that room.

No banjo.

Not that I expected it to hide in plain sight.

The walls were thin. Neither the bookcase nor the painting could hide more than a shallow money safe—and money didn't concern me. I glanced in the kitchen, approving of the stove island, the expensive hanging pots, and the more reasonably priced (and obviously used) stoneware. The stereo lived in this room, which was probably where Mariah spent most of her time.

I went out the side kitchen door and into a narrow hallway, lined with track lighting focused on more framed, expensive art. The master bedroom looked as if no one lived there. The bed had a regulation military feel to it, and nothing cluttered the end tables. I opened closets and drawers, finding nothing except men's clothing—much of it silk, and much of it dated.

The master bath smelled dry and even lonelier than the bedroom.

Across the hall stood the only other bedroom. It was small, and lived in. Clothes scattered all over the chair and desk, empty hangers in the closet, an unmade water bed in the corner, and well-thumbed paperbacks stacked on the headboard. I searched this room slowly, careful not to disrupt the mess.

Nothing.

The trapdoor to the attic delivered dust and mice droppings. The attic itself was empty, as was the crawl space under the house. I walked back to the sunken living room, turned and surveyed the place, worried that I missed something.

My search was fine. If Silas had been right, and she had stolen his banjo, she certainly wasn't hiding it here.

I sighed. I had more questions for him.

* * *

He looked even older when he answered the door at the house on Fifth and Fremont. His hands were palsied, and age spots had appeared on his skin. His beautiful silver hair was thinning.

“Come in,” he said, as if my presence annoyed him.

I stepped into the house and saw that the same person had decorated both houses. They shared a creamy, expensive Southwestern look, a taste in modern art, and a penchant for exact detail.

“She’s not difficult to find,” I said, refusing to move away from the door so that he could shut out the sunshine. “She spends every day at the hospital. She has no need of money, and she has no banjo hiding in her house. In fact, when she bought this house five months ago, the realtor said she bought it with a man in mind. You, maybe?”

“Most likely,” he said.

“It’s time to tell me what you know.”

“You won’t believe me,” he said.

“I’ve been known to believe some pretty strange things.”

“Yes,” he said. “You have.”

He took me inside, and closed the door. The room grew dark, but not as dark as I had feared. Sunlight filtered through the mini-blinds. He pushed aside some cushions on the couch, as if he expected me to sit. I didn’t. He walked over to the fireplace and turned his back to me.

His silver hair curled against his collar. He had a young man’s body, slender, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped. From the back, I would have guessed him to be in his thirties.

“We’ve met before,” he said.

I frowned. Surely, I would remember a man as old and as beautiful. “I don’t remember.”

“I know,” he said. He picked up a poker, jabbed it at the carefully stacked wood. The logs crumbled into ash. “I looked different then, but I’ve been beside you from the moment you shot that man trying to rob your friend’s convenience store.”

I had been alone in that convenience store. Me and the thief. Not even Suzy saw it. She had been in back dialing 911.

He set the poker down and turned, his hands shaking more than ever. “The last time, I stopped you from killing a man in an alley in Hollywood. You got trigger-happy, toward the end.”

The overlay fell across him like a two-part transparency. Same slim body, same beautiful hair—now silver, same startling blue eyes.

“No,” I whispered.

He shrugged. Either I accepted him or I didn’t.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

“There are maybe a hundred of us working this world,” he said. “Each with our own tools, our own abilities. I’m one of six who handle the Southwest.” He saw the look on my face. “They can’t help, either. We must each work our own people in our own way. If we fail, we can blame no one but ourselves.” He smiled. “And the only admonition I got when I started—the only one—was to let no one else touch my tools.”

“Your banjo.”

He nodded.

“Without it you age?” I asked.

“Without it I die,” he said.

“Why would Mariah want to kill you?” I did believe him, against my will. His voice was the same.

“She doesn’t. She wants to save someone.”

The picture came clear, then. “The old man.”

He nodded. “Her father.”

And suddenly I was back five years, fifteen pounds lighter, and six hundred strands of gray darker. Not the lone gumshoe of the mystery novelists, but a detective with the LAPD, like my father and grandfather before me. Only a girl born to the Winters family, but still she had to follow tradition.

That afternoon, I hurried through the halls of the hospital, late as usual. We had a last-minute call, third convenience store robbery in a week, and arrived too late to do anything but mop-up. I figured by the time I got there, he would already be out of post-op, and comfortable in his room again.

I wasn’t worried. The operation was routine.

I stopped at the nurse’s station and let the ambiance wash over me. Intercom voices, a bit too measured, a bit too calm. Televisions, playing clashing programs. Beeping equipment, and hushed whispers. The squeak of rubber soles against tile. Lights blinking in the background, and underneath it all the too-strong smell of disinfectant.

A nurse set her clipboard aside, looked up at me with a fake smile, prepared for trouble. I told her my name, told her who I had come to see. Her face blanched a bit.

“Next of kin?” she asked.

“Daughter,” I said.

She nodded. The routine had not gone according to plan. She hustled me through back corridors and side doors, ending up in a room I had never seen before, would probably never see again.

My father looked smaller, diminished somehow, tubes up his nose and in his mouth. An oxygen tent over his face. His hair was wispy and gray, his hands skeletal. The monitors beside him beeped at intervals even I knew weren't natural.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It was worse than we thought."

Later they told me. Later they said they opened him up and found that the single small tumor was a growth that extended through his entire body. The growth hadn't shown up on any tests. They closed him immediately, but the procedure sapped what strength he had. They were hoping that he would live until morning. I think he managed to live until he saw me.

His eyes flickered once. I caught a glimpse of them, brown and cloudy. I knew the look, had seen it too many times on the street. He smiled, just a little, and for a moment, I thought I heard music. Then it stopped—and so did he.

I sat there for what seemed like hours, but it must have been only minutes. Then I realized that I was completely alone. No one left. No family, no lover. No one to hold me when I cried.

"Miss Winters?" A man beside me, dressed in black. An old-fashioned suit, a banjo on his back, and the prettiest blue eyes I had ever seen. He extended his arms to me, and I went into them, let him hold me while sobs shivered through my body. Then when I was done, when the wave had passed, I was sitting on the chair again, my father's body before me, businesslike nurses invading the room like ants.

I quit the force. Too much death, I said. Then I went out and courted him my own way.

Hospitals were never quiet. This one was no exception. The halls were wide and expansive, more like those in a Hyatt Regency than a small Nevada hospital. Someone had painted them kelly green, and placed a plush carpet on the floor. I missed the squeak of rubber soles against the tile.

I left Silas in the lobby, staring at the terrarium. I didn't trust him. He had fallen in love with this woman, had trusted her with the very thing that would, if improperly handled, destroy him. I didn't want him to do it again.

I stopped at the door to the room and stared inside.

The television blared. The old man huddled on the bed, eyes closed. As I watched, I realized that he was probably no older than my own father had been. Sickness had diminished him. In Mariah's eyes, he was probably a giant of a man, immortal and all-powerful. What kind of life would she have without him? If death came to her father, it would come to her, too. If death could defeat a man as

powerful as that, it could defeat anyone.

But Mariah had outsmarted death. She had traded her father's life for Silas's, and for it, all she had to show was this hospital room that stank of decaying skin.

I closed my eyes. If I had had Silas's banjo, would I have given it up? Even knowing that our existence would be a kind of never-ending purgatory of bad television, lime green walls and disease?

I took a deep breath, forced myself out of the memory, and scanned the room. The banjo sat beside the bed, looking as fragile as Silas himself. I stepped inside, no plan in mind, my only goal to pick up the banjo and hold it tight against myself.

Mariah sat up. The old man started, breath rasping rapidly through his half-open mouth. I grabbed the banjo, shocked at its warmth. It was a live thing, as Silas had said. I could feel the power trapped within it, running up and down the strings like an arpeggio.

"You can't do that," Mariah said, and reached for the banjo. I swung around, keeping it out of her grasp.

"She can do whatever she wants." Silas stood at the door. I wondered how long he had been there, if he had followed me from the moment I left the lobby.

Mariah gasped. She froze, looking at him, then looking at her father. Of course, she had never seen Silas old. She had only seen the young man, the one who had held me. It was easy to make love to death when he was the most beautiful man you had ever seen. Difficult when he was caving inside himself, only eyes, hair, and voice remaining.

"Give me the banjo," Silas said, that voice carrying more power than I had ever heard—even more than the day he had admonished me for taking too many lives.

"No," Mariah whispered. She extended her hand to me. It shook.

But I didn't look at her. I looked at her father. Tubes shoved into his arms, the cords of his neck exposed, eyes sunken into a skeletal face. If I gave it back, he would live, but he would never be the powerful man he had been, the man who made his bed with military precision, who probably dominated any room he stood in. She was clinging to a shell and he, he was too far gone to know it.

I had been lucky. My father had died quickly, by comparison.

"Give me the banjo," Silas repeated.

But life was life. And there it was, staring up at me from the depths of a hospital bed, as wispy and tenacious as greenery in the desert.

Silas made these decisions every day. Every hour of every day. I could not.

I extended one hand to him, letting the banjo pass in front of Mariah. This was their fight, not mine.

Mariah lunged for it, but Silas was quicker. He snatched the banjo from me, hugging it like a long-lost friend. On the bed, the father made a strange keening sound—and I couldn't tell if it was from fear or pain.

The years shed off of Silas like fur off a cat. As he crossed the room, Mariah wrapped herself around him. The sounds of the hospital had faded into nothing.

“Let him live,” she said.

Silas, young, black-haired, slim, the beautiful man I had first seen, ran his hand along her face. He kissed her forehead and cupped her chin, as if he had never held anything so precious. “You should have asked that in the first place,” he said.

“I didn't mean to hurt you.” Her voice sounded desperate. I wanted to look away, but couldn't.

“I'm as familiar with hurt as I am with anything else,” he said. “The banjo takes the hurt away.”

“But only for him.”

“Yes,” Silas said. “Only for him.”

He walked beside the bed, took the old man's hand. The old man stared up at him, keening stopped. I could see fear in the old man's rheumy eyes, but his gaze never wavered. “You can live like this for years,” Silas said, “or you can come with me.”

Mariah was shaking. She hadn't moved another step. All through this, she had thought of no one but herself.

“I'm sorry,” the old man said to her.

She nodded, unable to speak. A lump rose in my throat, too. I wanted out, but didn't dare move. Silas let go of the old man's hand, swung the banjo to the front of his chest, and played.

I didn't quite hear the music, although I felt it, rollicking through me. For a moment, the old man's face lit up, and I saw him, strong and young, a baby girl on his shoulder, a beautiful woman beside him. Then the image faded, and with it, the sparkle in his eye. Silas finished playing, swung the banjo back into position, and reached for the old man's face.

Mariah pushed him aside, knelt beside her father. Silas stumbled backward, then stared at her for a moment, and I saw longing so intense that it burned me.

What was it like to be outside time, human but not human, loving, but unlovable? I hoped I would never know.

He saw me watching him. Color touched his cheeks. “Come on,” he said.

We walked into the corridor. People flowed around us like water around a rock.

“You lied to me, you know,” I said. “You were there when my father died.”

He stopped near the elevator. “The first time you summoned me was in that convenience store.”

“I was courting you.”

He smiled a little, but the smile was sad. I liked his beauty. I liked his compassion. I liked him. “I’m not the kind of lover you want,” he said. “I’ll never leave you, but I’ll never make you happy.”

He reached into his pocket, pulled out an envelope and handed it to me. Then he leaned forward and kissed my forehead. “Silas,” I said—but he disappeared. One moment there, one moment gone. A man who was lonelier than I could ever be.

I stood there for a while, then I remembered to pocket the envelope. When I got downstairs, I would donate the money to the hospice center. They had to have one, every hospital did, for cancer care for families and patients. Then I would go to the desert and stare at the greenery.

The dream would never come again. Nor would he ever have to admonish me anymore.

The courtship had ended. We were, and we would remain, just good friends.