

## The First Full Moon

The spider danced. Eight hairy legs—each laced into a purple high-top Converse sneaker—moved in a slow shuffle. Its bowler hat, cocked at a jaunty angle, bobbed with every step. I would have missed the entire performance if it hadn't been for the circus music. The music—the lively tinkle of the calliope calling folks to the big top—made me open one eye in time to catch the tap-dancing arachnid in motion.

The beam from my alarm clock threw a spotlight on the spider, a smiling unicorn, three black roses, and on Jesus flashing a peace symbol. The body art moved with the involuntary flexing of the muscled arm draped over my shoulder. The music stopped, but I knew it would start again. Soon. I groaned and pushed against the warm body snuggled close to mine. He rolled over with a grunt.

I turned and watched him for a moment. Shaggy hair flopped soft around his face. Surfer boy blond. Even after a full year in the Pacific Northwest, and even in the clock's green digital light, he still managed to glow with a deep California tan.

We'd met the day before during a Groupon Coupon event. For twenty-four dollars, I received an introductory paddleboard lesson and, as it turned out, an evening of advanced lessons — private lessons—with the young instructor. I started to shake my head and stopped. The motion hurt. Did we really empty the entire fifth of Jack Daniels?

Jamie, or wait, maybe it was Jimmy. Or Jeff? No, maybe not a J name at all. Kevin? His lips formed a small "o" and puckered in little bubble-blowing motions. I smiled. Couldn't remember his name, but I certainly remembered how delicious those lips had been a few hours earlier.

The music started again. "Shit." I knew I had to answer the phone. My boss, Glen Broom, would keep calling, and that stupid circus music would continue until I picked up. I gave old

man Broom that ringtone because, like so many of my bosses, the guy was a clown. A certifiable joke. Whenever he called me, my life became a circus.

I didn't like my boss and didn't like my job. The truth is, I rarely liked any of my jobs or any of my bosses—and I've had a lot of them. I figured if I could just stay employed long enough to save the bucks to repair my blown head sail, fix the generator, and fill my cruising kitty, I'd stuff my boat full of beef jerky, saltine crackers, and Tennessee whiskey. Then, I'd sail *Ink Spot* up from Seattle and through the Straits of Juan de Fuca. We'd round the corner at Cape Flattery, hang a left, and head on down the coast. Wouldn't stop until we made it to Zihuatanejo, Mexico. I'd drop anchor and spend my days sleeping in a hammock and my nights dancing with dark-eyed men. That's all I really wanted. Was that so much to ask? I kept thinking it should be a piece of cake, but once again, it was harder to break free than I'd imagined.

I thought maybe this job would be different. After all, the clown hadn't even hinted at firing me, and it had already been six weeks. Three weeks longer than my last job at *Roger's Road Kill Cleanup*, "*You smash 'em' we scrape 'em*," and a full month longer than my stint as the only female bouncer at the *All Naked Live Girls Review* on First Avenue. Yeah, maybe this job would be the one to fund my getaway.

I glanced at Kurt, or maybe he was Randy or Ray. Finally, I gave up trying to remember his name and decided to call him 'Spiderman' after his silly tattoo. I also decided to give him a kiss. He made a burbling sound as my lips brushed his cheek. His skin smelled of sunshine and sex.

I figured the clown would wait a full four minutes before he punched redial. I slid off the bunk and slipped in a pool of something slick. Bam! Fell flat on my bare ass. It took a moment for me to catch my breath and to find and recap the bottle of coconut oil that had been so handy

earlier. With a groan, I clutched the side of the bunk, pulled myself to standing, swayed a moment, and then stumbled into *Ink Spot's* salon. I flicked the nav station's tiny red light.

My boat was a wreck. It was never what you'd call tidy. I'm a bit of a slob—okay, a big slob. Still, this was extreme. It looked like we'd been in a major storm at sea. Maybe even turned turtle or at least broached. Clothes, magazines, miscellaneous boat parts, and a shovel from my road clean-up gig were cluttered in tangled confusion. My extensive collection of adult toys was scattered across the salon table. I grimaced. We must have had more fun than I remembered.

I searched the wreckage for my phone and found the JD bottle under a pizza box. The box was empty, but there was still a swig of whiskey left. I finished it off—good as mouthwash. When the first music notes started again, I followed the sound to my jacket, which lay crumpled on the floor by the galley sink. The phone hid underneath it, nesting in the left cup of my favorite black bra. I snatched it up and glanced at the time. Crap—0530. Obviously, I wasn't late for work.

“Blue here.”

“Sheaffer, I've told you a million times to keep the phone by your bed. It's our responsibility to be available to our clients 24/7. They depend on us. It's what we're known for—*City Wide Insurance. Dependable and Reliable. Always Ready When You Need Us.* Remember? What took you so long to answer this time?”

The clown went through the same routine every time he called me. He knew that his little insurance company could never be a good neighbor, but he reasoned that at least we could be there. His spiel irritated me. Still, I'd learned that if I mumbled something—anything—he'd move on. So, I mumbled, and he went on.

“Listen, Sheaffer. I need you to go to an incident right now.” Broom called every issue in the insurance business, big or small, an incident. “There’s been a fire on one of the Lake Union docks—a houseboat fire. I want you to get there while the media are still around. Be sure to make a presence. Be sure we’re mentioned in the police report.”

He rattled on in that voice that sounded like he was reporting a falling sky or another 9/11. I tuned him out and searched for something to wear. The plastic box where I stored my underpants was empty. That meant two things—one of these days, I’d have to do laundry, and today would be a day without panties. I bent to retrieve my jeans from under the table and noticed a shimmery trail sliding down my inner thigh.

“Sheaffer, are you listening to me?” The clown sounded panicky.

“Um yeah...” I lifted a t-shirt from the settee. It was inside out. I turned it right-side out and noticed the logo, *Surf Ballard*. I grinned, flipped it inside out, and wiped my leg. It would be dry before he woke, and the scent would be a sexy little reminder. Better, I figured, than a business card.

“Sheaffer! Are you sure you have the address?”

“Um...” I looked for a pen, found a cap-less Sharpie in the sink. “Give it to me again, okay?”

The clown repeated the number and street name. I wrote it on my palm.

“So, you should be there in about fifteen minutes. Get as much information as you can, and be sure everyone sees you’re on the job. Be sure the media sees that City Wide is there. Then come straight to the office and fill me in. Sheaffer, you got that?”

“Yeah, got it.” I crunched the phone between my cheek and shoulder and tugged at my jeans. As a charter member of Club Cellulite, I’ve always struggled with jeans, but this morning, they were extra tight. I made a mental note to ease off on the late-night pizza. I stopped tugging for a

minute. Something bugged me because this sounded like a typical gig. Broom was always sending me out to investigate minor insurance incidents—small fires, fender benders, reports of laptops and cameras “stolen” from cars. Standard insurance stuff—nothing that required this frantic predawn action.

“Ah, one question, boss. So, it’s a houseboat fire. Probably one of those old ones. They’re all wood, you know. Probably just faulty wiring or something. Why the hurry?”

The clown fell silent a moment. I could imagine him holding his breath, his face swelling and turning ripe raspberry. He lit into me.

“You *haven’t* been listening. It’s a houseboat fire, yes. And it was an old, wooden houseboat, yes. And you have to know that our most important client owns most of that dock, and she insures the property with us.” He paused and gulped for air.

I could almost see him shaking and clenching and unclenching his fists. The man was seriously over-wound.

“Besides all that, as I already told you, this isn’t simply a fire. This time, there’s a body.”