

DEAD ON MY FEET

PATRICIA BRODERICK

Greed, betrayal, vengeance, gangsters and old Hollywood glamour make for great copy – if Nellie can stay alive long enough to meet her deadline.

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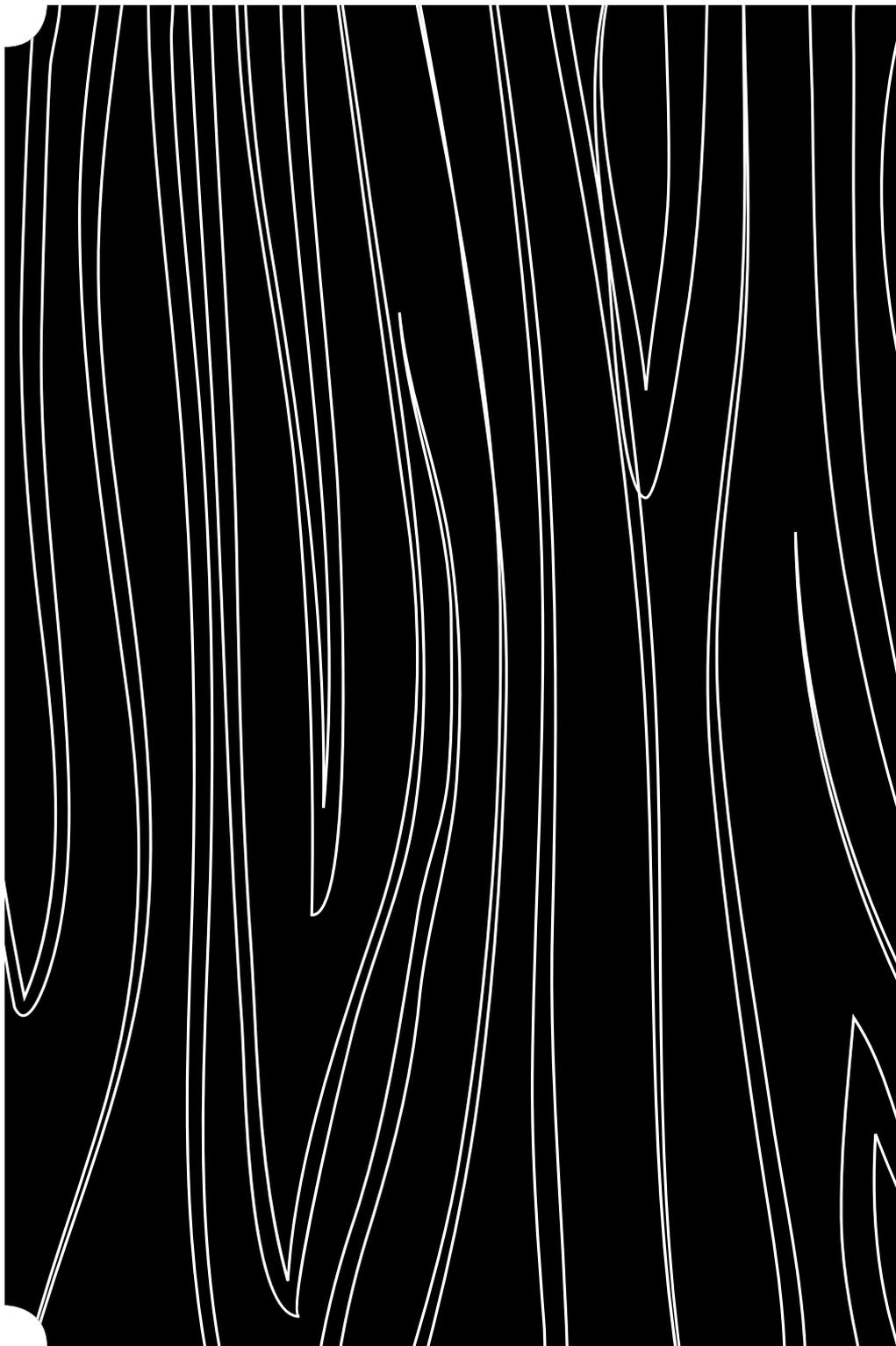
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CHAPTER ONE

Milo is dead. Milo has died. Milo's body was found. How was it possible that I was suffering from writer's block? This had everything—a glamorous, mysterious man, sudden death, the rich and famous. This obit should write itself. I looked at the clock on the wall, ticking out the minutes and seconds to my deadline—dead being the operative part of that word.

I looked over at Finn O'Connor. Milo had been on ice for a few hours before Finn got the news from his source at the cop shop.

Since then, I had been scrambling through our puny archives and the internet to dredge what I could about the creative genius who had shod the carefully tended feet of the

elite, from coast to coast, and across the globe. Simultaneously, I had been trying to nail a few quotes from the swells who populated La Joya society.

Fortunately, my pal and society writer, Priscilla Potter, had come to my rescue by mining her contacts and supplying a few gems.

“Nooo!” one of Milo’s circle commented. “That’s not possible. Only last night, we attended an amazing dinner party on his boat. He couldn’t have been more alive!”

Yes, dead people are usually alive before they’re, well, dead, but I had to use what Cilla was sending my way. On the other hand, it was interesting that the designer to the stars and shipping magnate was still alive and kicking only a few hours before his untimely demise. But, at this point, the cops weren’t sharing any details about the shoe mogul’s actual cause of death, just that a couple of kayakers had discovered his body in the cove at around sunrise.

“Hey, Nell! Howzit going over there? We need a few minutes to coordinate the copy, so what’s your ETA?”

Oh, shut up, Finnian.

“Give me 15 . . .”

“I’ll give you 10 . . .”

“Who died and made you Ben Bradlee?”

That’s when we heard the booming voice of Captain Jack Cobb, the editor-in-chief of the *Coastal Crier*, who had apparently just woken up from his afternoon snooze on the hammock outside, sleeping off his liquid lunch at O’Toole’s Irish pub.

“Will you two shuddup and get back to work? We got lots of folks out there waiting to get the lowdown on the stiff.”

Sure, what would the denizens of La Joya, California, the jewel by the sea, do without their community rag? Well, they did have access to the internet and social media, not to mention other local media outlets. But we had lots of awesome ads all geared to keeping the rich folks shelling out their mega bucks, so who cared about breaking news? Cap'n Jack was a former commercial fisherman, not a newsman, and lived in his own little bubble. I sure didn't want to be sticking any pins in it today.

By midafternoon, Finn, Cilla and I were huddled together, trying to make a coherent package, considering we had so little info and so far had been unable to find the kayakers/witnesses. So Finn did his best to set the scene, while Cilla and I handled the background on Milo, an enigmatic figure, and salted the obit with the aforementioned gems, such as they were. Tick tock.

"What about Dame Cavendish?" I asked Cilla, referring to the dotty dowager who was letting me stay in her guesthouse in exchange for ghosting her memoir. "Could you reach her?"

Cilla shook her head, making her shiny mound of red curls shimmy.

"Dame C has no cell and she is unlisted. No way will she give out the number for her landline, not even to an influential society scribe like me."

Finn and I exchanged a look, but we let that go.

"Okay, you two, enough with the eye rolls," Cilla growled. "That was said with irony. And besides, why don't you try and get her digits?"

Well, I had no time left to drive up scenic La Joya Shores Road, but I made a mental note to wrestle a phone number out of Dame C.

“Okay, I’ll talk to her tonight for the follow-up, assuming she has anything juicy to convey.”

“Are you kidding?” Cilla said. “That dame dishes on everybody in ‘the Village,’ especially around cocktail hour. Haven’t you started chatting with her about the memoir yet?”

Actually, it would be easier trying to pin down her squawky parrot, Robespierre. Dame C was continually flitting around her manse and gardens, tending to her aviary and her exotic plants, while treating me to stream-of-consciousness declarations about her colorful life. I had yet to start transcribing the notes from the recorder I always kept handy and I wasn’t looking forward to it.

“In a manner of speaking,” I said. “But I don’t recall hearing her mention Milo.”

At that point, Finn butt in and pointed at the clock.

“We done here, ladies?”

We were. It was time to put this baby to bed.



When I arrived in tony La Joya six months ago, at Cilla’s invitation, I had already zigged and zagged my way through a hodgepodge of media outlets, broadcast and print, pushing for my big break. While I was tucked away in the basement of a cable TV station in Kansas, tracking twisters and putting out alerts . . . “Get thee to your storm cellars! Now!” . . . an epiphany occurred.

Cilla to the rescue. She and I had attended the University of New Hampshire and co-edited the student newspaper with dreams of winning the Pulitzer before we turned 30. That ship had sailed by a few years. Cilla was always more politically

astute in handling her career and, unlike me, kept her head down and her opinions to herself. This didn't land her at *The New York Times*, but she was more than content carving out a nice little niche for herself, ingratiating herself into La Joya society and the party circuit. Life was good. So, when I told her that I desperately needed to get out of Kansas, she offered me this gig on the *Crier*, a creaky shopper that had taken over a vacated Jack in the Box, complete with the lingering scent of fried onions and rancid oil.

So I packed up my cats, Prudence and Patience, and the rest of my meager stuff in my 2003 Mustang and hit the yellow-brick road, otherwise known as I-70, for a rollicking ride for miles and miles, my mewling kitties stuck in their carriers, in a sweltering summer with a busted air-conditioner. With a few stays at Motel 6s, I managed to survive the twenty three-hour trek with my sanity. My cats have never been sane.

I was so eager to take this job that it didn't occur to me to ask Cilla about housing, a mistake, given I was moving to one of the most expensive seaside enclaves on the West Coast. As she is allergic to cats, and has an affinity for rich guys, young and old, sharing an apartment was not an option. But she had that all figured out. That's how I met Dame C, a former chorus girl, who turned B-movie femme fatale a lot of years ago. Word has it that she started out as a butcher's daughter from Queens. But, she had married well, apparently more than once, and reinvented herself as the grand dame of La Joya. She lived in a mansion by the sea and just happened to have a granny flat available.

"Are you kidding?" I had told Cilla. "I can't afford an outhouse in La Joya on my salary."

She just rolled her eyes, telling me, “It’s not an outhouse, it’s a granny flat outside her house, and I brokered a deal for you. All you have to do is help her write her memoir and the place is “yours.”

Sounded okay. But as soon as the butler ushered me in, it was like walking into a Hitchcock movie. The living room was an aviary, where birds of every species perched, cooing and cackling and pooping. Then . . . gaaaa! This feathered falcon of fury swooped down, wings thrashing, and I shrieked, covered my head with my arms, and ducked for cover.

When I looked up, there was Dame Cavendish, descending the spiral staircase, seemingly oblivious to my terror. She was decked out in a vivid green gown, trimmed with feathers, and sporting a feather boa, her head crowned with multi-hued feathers.

She swept her arm above her head, and the birdies were silenced. Impressive. Gliding over to me, and looking at me head to foot, she frowned.

“Miss Bly, Priscilla informs me that you are a cat person.” She grimaced, as though I was actually a rat person. “I’m afraid that won’t due. If you wish to stay here, you will have to dispose of the felines.”

Dispose of? Like put them in a sack and weigh them down with stones? But I’m not one to miss an opportunity, so I gave it my best shot.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about Patience and Prudence, Dame Cavendish. You see, both of my felines are strict vegans. They’d never touch a mouse, let alone a bird.”

I offered her my most sincere smile.

She considered this and nodded.

“Well, that’s different and most commendable.”

Little did she know that my kitties would consider her aviary an all-you-can-eat buffet. Dame C then turned on her heel, which was surprisingly shod in a sensible looking gardening shoe, as was the other heel.

“Follow me and I’ll show you to your new quarters.”

On our way to the outhouse, I mean the granny flat, she stopped and turned to me.

“Is Nellie Bly a pen name?” Before letting me answer, she added, “You must be aware that Nellie Bly is the *nom de plume* of a nineteenth century journalist . . . a muckraker?”

Sob sister was a popular term for female journalists back then, but I didn’t correct her.

“I come by the name honestly, Dame Cavendish. Bly is my mother’s birth name. She’s a journalist herself, and hoped I’d follow in her footsteps. Hence the name Nellie.” I didn’t mention that my mother chased down real stories all over the world, while I merely . . . dabbled. “She considered her a fine role model for me.”

We filed the story and I headed home, that is, Dame C’s estate. I was eager to hear her thoughts on Milo and her reaction to his untimely demise.

I wasn’t even certain my landlady had heard about Milo. From what I have been able to determine, she has no cable, only a small ‘50s era TV set tucked away in a back room, and a matching radio, circa mid-century. Maybe earlier.

Whether they worked or not, who knew? Her landline was one of those outsized phones, ornate and lacquered white, the sort that Bette Davis or Joan Crawford would scream into hysterically.

She also lived up a twisty, turny road, overlooking the sea, but isolated. It's not as though a neighbor could pop over anytime to chat about what's new in the Village, as the hub of La Joya was known. She did receive the daily paper, along with the *Crier*, but they wouldn't arrive until tomorrow. Still, as Cilla informed me, Dame C always seemed to have an endless stream of gossip, so she had a pipeline somewhere. Maybe a ham radio?

Well, I was about to find out and wasn't crazy about being the bearer of bad news, if it turned out that Milo had been a close friend.

I had taken to calling my new home Birdland, as those squawky seed bags were everywhere. Quigley, her butler, retainer, and aide de camp, seemed oblivious to the din, a stoic older gentleman, with steel gray hair and a military bearing. I rapped the ornate bronze knocker, carved in the shape of some winged creature, and he answered.

"Hi, Quigley," I saluted, only because he inspired that kind of greeting. "Is she in?"

He nodded and waved me in. As usual, I found myself ducking and weaving to avoid her feathered friends as they swooped and shrieked. The poop smells were not a treat either and I avoided this place as much as possible.

"Madam is in her craft room, putting the finishing touches on a feeder for the garden." He gave me a sharp look and added, "You know that she does not like to be disturbed while she is working."

Quigley's voice was deep and sonorous, reminding me of one of those old-time radio announcers . . . "Who knows? The Shadow knows!"

“I understand, but a body’s been found down in the cove, and I need to chat with Dame C about it. I think she’d want to know, because it will be all over the news tomorrow.”

Quigley sighed and told me to head over to the granny flat and she’d join me there if she had the time. Dame C seemed to prefer tête à têtes there, probably because she got a tad cranky seeing me diving under furniture to fend off her demon birds.

I trekked across the cobblestones that cut through an emerald green lawn and sloped down to my wee cozy cottage. From the outside, it looked like a gingerbread house, and inside, that theme continued with a tasteful collection of quaint furnishings. It was the sort of place a family of gnomes would call home and there was not one single image of a feathered fiend. I didn’t know whether this pleased or dismayed my kitties, who were now snoozing in matching window boxes, between the kitchen and living area. My sleeping quarters were in a loft up a short flight of stairs.

I had just finished changing out of my work togs into a T-shirt and clamdiggers when I heard the wrap on my door and there stood Dame Cavendish, looking regal despite being dressed in paint-splattered overalls and a matching hat, apparently no longer feeling the need to put on airs for the likes of me. She was holding a martini in each hand. Before I could greet her, she handed me a drink and brushed past me, giving my dozing cats the stink eye.

“Milo is dead,” she informed me, settling down on the comfy chair and taking a sip of her drink. “I assume you know this, Nellie?”

So much for breaking news.

“How did you find out so fast?”

She waved this off, took another sip and said, “I have my sources. Now, tell me what you know.”

I settled in on the settee and took a generous gulp of the martini, not a beverage I normally imbibe, but what the heck. It had been a long day.

“We spent the afternoon pulling the story together,” I said, nibbling on an olive. “The cops didn’t share much with us, just that a couple of kayakers found Milo’s body in the cove and they didn’t say if it was an accident or . . .”

“His feet.”

I almost choked on the olive.

“His feet?”

“Milo’s feet were encased in very expensive hand-tooled leather boots, trimmed with the hide of an alligator,” she said and all I could do was sputter.

“Boots . . .”

“Stuffed with cement—what do they call it in those gangster movies I used to make? Cement shoes, that’s it. Anyway, he didn’t sink. Apparently, he got caught up in some flotsam and jetsam and ended up on a sandbar, with his head exposed above the water.”

I tried to process all of this and my head was swimming. Maybe it was the martini, which tasted like a double.

“Well, I guess that rules out Milo falling out of his yacht. I was told that he was hosting a party last night, so he must have been murdered after everyone left. John Jeffers went on and on about how alive Milo was . . .”

Dame C put forth a very loud and wet raspberry.

“John Jeffers is a fool. In any event, Milo had his enemies, you know, Nellie.”

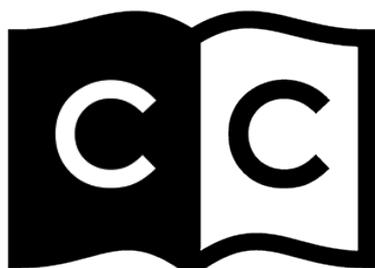
My antennae went up.

“The kind that would send him to sleep with the fishes? Well, I guess dead men tell no tales.”

Dame C took another swig.

“Oh, Milo won’t be telling any more tales, dear. It would be difficult when one has a hunk of ivory jammed down one’s throat.”





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LOOKING FOR A NEW LEASE ON LIFE, NELLIE FINDS HERSELF ON THE DEAD BEAT.

Obituary writer Nellie Bly finds herself at the center of attention when the glamorous members of a posh Southern California beach side community start turning up dead in ghastly ways. Pieces of ivory involved in the murders send Nellie and her pals at the *Coastal Crier* on the trail of a ruthless cartel that traffics in endangered wildlife. Greed, betrayal, vengeance, gangsters and old Hollywood glamour make for great copy—if Nellie can stay alive long enough to meet her deadline.

Dead on My Feet is a quirky tongue-in-cheek adventure that will leave you breathless.



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