



BLACK WIDOW

Beauty

QUICKREADS

ANNE SCHRAFF



Monique Reed was the prettiest girl Greg Nash had ever seen. When he came to work at the Side Scene clothing store, he couldn't take his eyes off her. He was glad his pal Lew Denison had encouraged him to apply for the job. What a great gig! The Side Scene hired only attractive young salespeople. But Monique was off the charts!

“Hey, Lew,” Greg teased, “how come you didn't tell me Miss Universe was working here? Believe me, I would've applied sooner!”

Greg wondered why Lew didn't smile. Usually, Lew had a pretty good sense of humor. “You're talking about Monique? I'd stay away from her, man,” Lew said.

“How come? Is she one of those stuck-up kind of girls?” Greg asked.

“No, but I went to high school with Monique. We didn’t hang out together that much, but there *were* rumors. Some of the girls at school said that Monique was—well—sort of a witch,” Lew said.

Greg laughed. “I bet those chicks were jealous. What girl wouldn’t be jealous of Monique?”

“Not the kind of witch who rides a broom,” Lew said in a serious voice, “but the kind that can make bad things happen to people.”

“Come on, Lew. You don’t believe nonsense like that, do you?” Greg asked.

Lew shrugged. “I don’t know. The guy Monique was dating a few months ago was killed in a mysterious car accident. He was driving along on a sunny day, and then he just careened off the road into a ditch and was killed! Some of his friends were pretty sure that Monique had something to do with it.”

“Ahhh, I feel bad for the poor guy. But

accidents like that happen all the time. He probably fell asleep at the wheel,” Greg said.

It was a slow morning at the Side Scene, so Greg decided to wander over to the jewelry counter where Monique worked.

“Hi, Monique. Nice bracelets. I guess the girls really like the brightly colored beads this year,” Greg said.

Monique smiled. “Each bracelet sort of does something special for the person who wears it. This rose-colored bead, for example, is supposed to bring you love and romance,” she said. Her sweet voice reminded Greg of rich cream dribbling over strawberries.

He picked up a green bracelet and read a tag saying that green beads symbolize wisdom. “Which one is your favorite?” he asked.

Monique smiled and touched the rose-colored bracelet. “This one—because it promises love, of course,” she said.

Greg turned to mush. He *had* to take this girl out!



“Do you like going to the movies?”

Greg asked Monique hopefully.

“Actually, I just love country-western music,” she said. “I always try to catch a performance when somebody I like comes to town.”

Greg loved jazz. He couldn’t even name any current country-western music stars. But he smiled broadly and said, “Yeah, I’m into that kind of music, too. Maybe we could go to a concert together sometime.”

“I’d like that,” Monique said. Then a customer came in and Monique glided away. In a few minutes, she talked a teenaged girl into buying a pair of big hoop earrings.

Between customers, Greg snatched a look at the entertainment section of the newspaper. He found that a local country-western band was playing at a club near the mall. They called themselves the Dust Storm. As he skimmed the brief review, he read that the girl vocalist was supposed to be

another Emmylou Harris. Greg had no idea who Emmylou Harris was—but he figured she must be good.

When Monique’s customer left, Greg ambled over to her.

“You know, there’s a popular little country-western band playing at a local spot tonight. The band is called the Dust Storm. They say the girl singer sounds just like Emmylou Harris. Would you like to go, Monique?” Greg asked.

Monique giggled and said, “Oh, boy, you’re a fast worker. Sure, let’s go.”

Greg’s feet were no longer touching the floor as he walked away. He couldn’t believe it was so easy to get a date with such a beauty! Sure, he was a good-looking guy, but Monique was *incredible*.

“That gorgeous girl is going out with me tonight,” Greg boasted to Lew. “Am I king of the mountain or what?”

“Well,” Lew said, smiling faintly, “I hope your life insurance premiums are all paid up.”

After work, Greg drove his Acura to Monique's apartment. She shared the place with another girl, Ginger Asinger. The roommate was a nice-looking girl, but Monique put her in the shade.

As Greg waited in the living room for Monique, Ginger sat down to make small talk. "Monique is just nuts about country-western music. I can't get into it myself. I'm into mambo, hip hop—anything but country."

Greg felt the same way, but he nodded and said, "I love country, too."

Then Ginger's smile faded and she turned serious. Her voice took on a "big sister" tone. "Look, Greg, Monique has been through some rough times lately. Her boyfriend got killed a few months ago, and she really freaked—so be extra considerate of her, okay?"

"Sure," Greg was saying just as Monique came into the room. Greg stared. She wore a mauve pullover and jeans in a darker shade of the same color. A golden necklace was around her throat. She looked *magnificent*.



“So tell me all about yourself, Greg,” Monique said as they drove toward the club. “Do you come from a big family?”

“No, but I do have a brother and a sister,” Greg said.

“Me, too,” Monique said. “I bet you’re the baby, too, just like me.”

“Bingo,” Greg said with a smile.

“How did your parents treat you—like they *never* really wanted you to grow up and go out on your own?” Monique asked curiously.

“Well, sort of,” Greg said. “It’s hard to see the last chick fly the nest.”

“Is it ever! Mom isn’t so bad—but Dad hangs on to me like I’m eleven years old!” Monique complained.

When they parked at the club, Monique got out her wallet and showed Greg pictures of her parents and siblings. There were other pictures, too, pictures of young guys mostly. Were they *all* her boyfriends?

To prepare for this date, Greg had done some reading about country-western music. He wanted to throw some names around—Loretta Lynn, Clint Black, Hank Williams, Garth Brooks—and some of the newer stars like Leanne Rimes.

Monique seemed to be impressed. “Imagine,” she cried, “two country music freaks both working at the Side Scene!”

As Greg opened the car door for Monique, he noticed a dark sedan parked on the far end of the lot. What looked like a middle-aged man was sitting behind the wheel. In the dim light, Greg could see the angry scowl on his face.

“Do you know that guy?” Greg asked. “He seems to be glaring at us.”

Monique turned her head and sighed. “Oh, I *told* you about my father! I’m twenty-one years old, and he still spies on me! He makes me furious! Sometimes I wish he would just die!” There was a hard edge to her voice.

Watching the dark sedan leave the parking lot, Greg wondered if the man

had a screw loose. A father of a young teenager might keep an eye on his daughter while she was out on a date—but not a grown young woman!

“Your father doesn’t like you to date *anyone?*” Greg asked.

“I’m telling you, Greg, the man has hated every boy or man who showed any interest in me. He didn’t even like my fiancé. When he died a few months ago, my father wouldn’t even go to his funeral! I had to stand there by his grave all alone.”

“Oh,” Greg said. “That must have been the poor guy who lost control of his car and ended up in a ravine.”

“I’ve had enough! I swear I’ll call him tomorrow and *demand* that he stop spying on me—or else!” Monique snarled.



“**W**ell,” Greg thought to himself later that night, “Monique is anything but a witch. I’m surprised she doesn’t have some major hangups with such a weird dad, but

A photograph of a person's back and shoulder, wearing a dark tank top. A detailed black tattoo of a dragon or mythical creature is visible on the left shoulder. The background consists of horizontal corrugated metal slats, which are lit from below, creating a warm, orange glow. The title text is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

THE KULAI STREET KNIGHTS

QUICKREADS

JANET LORIMER



Eddie gazed into a sea of angry faces. The men and women gathered in the Kalihi Community Center were people he'd known all his life. But tonight, their fear and frustration made them seem like strangers.

“—Why can't you do something?” Everyone was talking at once, so Eddie heard only part of what Mr. Chang was asking. But he could easily figure out the rest. Everyone in the Center was wondering the same thing. *Why can't you protect us, Eddie Kahele? You're a cop!*

He held up his hands for silence. Bit by bit the talking stopped.

“Mr. Chang,” Eddie said patiently, “I'm

only one cop. This neighborhood is not the only trouble spot in Honolulu. That's why you folks need to form a Neighborhood Watch. You have to look out for each other."

Mr. Chang made a disgusted face. "I grew up in Kalihi," the old man said. "We had gangs when I was a kid—but not like what we have today. Back then, kids were mischievous, not vicious or even mean. Things are worse now."

"I know," Eddie said quickly. "Things have changed a lot. But that's not what we're here to talk about. Let's stay on the subject, please."

An elderly woman in the front row stood up. Eddie smiled to himself. Auntie Malia had seemed old when he was little, but now she really was old! She was also one of his favorite aunties. Not that she and Eddie were related by blood. In Hawaii, young people called their elders "auntie" and "uncle" out of respect.

"Eddie," she said, "I'm too old to patrol the streets. What can I do to help?"

Eddie explained that not everyone had to go out on patrol. He talked about block captains. He explained how the people in the neighborhood could look out for each other. But he could see it was a lost cause. By the time the meeting was over, only a handful of people had signed up for the Neighborhood Watch.

When Eddie left the Center, he felt frustrated. Deep in thought, he headed for his small apartment a couple of blocks away.

A full moon splashed silver light over the monkeypod trees that lined the street. The warm air was sweet with the lemony scent of plumeria blossoms. As he walked, Eddie remembered being a kid here, playing ball in the street on nights like this. In those days he hadn't had a care in the world.

Then he grew up, and the world changed.

Hawaii had breathtaking rainbows, beautiful beaches, and perfumed air—but it was not really paradise. Honolulu had the same problems as any other big city. Kalihi was an old neighborhood, a poor

neighborhood. But people of all different races lived, worked, and played here together. Eddie loved that. As far back as he could remember, living in Kalihi meant having a sense of “ohana”—a feeling of family.

Kalihi had always had its share of crime. Now and then, kids ripped off something from Mr. Chang’s little grocery store. Sometimes a car got stolen for a joy ride. But for the most part, the gangs were a nuisance, not a threat.

Then the face of crime began to change. The criminals started packing knives and guns. And stealing wasn’t enough. They seemed to get a thrill out of beatings and killings. They respected no one and nothing. In fact, just a week ago, old Mrs. Shiroma had been badly beaten after cashing her pension check. She had stubbornly refused to hand over the money to her attacker.

Eddie was thinking about Mrs. Shiroma when a loud scream ripped through the night. He froze, trying to figure out where the sound had come from. Then he heard men’s voices

raised in anger and the sounds of fighting. Eddie tore down the street and into a narrow alley.

It was pitch black. Eddie had to slow his pace. Halfway down the alley, he tripped over a trash can. Luckily he caught himself before he fell, and kicked the can to one side. The sound of metal scraping asphalt echoed in the night air.

When Eddie reached the mouth of the alley, he saw Auntie Malia and the shadowy figures of four men. Eddie yelled, hoping to distract them. At the sound of his voice, the figures vanished into the shadows.

Eddie hurried to Auntie Malia. The old woman was shaking from head to toe. She clung to Eddie's arm as she talked excitedly. "It was unreal, Eddie. Three young *kolohe*—rascals—tried to knock me over and steal my purse. But then four guys came out of nowhere to help me. They *saved* me, Eddie!"

Eddie shook his head, trying to make sense of what Auntie was telling him. "Who—" he started to say, but Auntie Malia

went on excitedly.

“They said they were the Kula‘i Street Knights. I never heard of that gang before.”

Neither had Eddie. And he wasn’t sure he liked what he was hearing. The trouble was Auntie. As far as she was concerned, these Street Knights were angels sent from heaven.



When Eddie arrived at the station the next morning, he told his sergeant all about the incident. Sgt. Amosa shrugged. “Not much we can do unless your auntie fingers the punks who tried to rob her. All the same, keep your eyes and ears open. Let’s just hope these guys aren’t outsiders moving in to start a gang war.”

Eddie nodded. “What I can’t figure out is why they stopped to *help* an old woman.”

The sergeant shook his head and grinned. “Maybe heroism is back in fashion,” he said sarcastically.

Eddie raised one eyebrow. “Yeah—and maybe I’m going to Vegas next weekend and

win a million bucks.”

Both men burst out laughing.

Eddie didn't think much more about the Street Knights that morning. But when he stopped for lunch at a local diner, everyone there was talking about the denim-clad angels. The story of Auntie's rescue had spread through the neighborhood like wildfire.

“Eddie, did you hear?” Mr. Apana said as he wiped the counter. The diner was old. The paint was faded, and the plastic-covered stools were mended with tape. But Mr. Apana made the best plate lunch in Kalihi.

“Did you hear how those Street Knights saved Auntie Malia?” Mr. Apana went on. The old man was grinning. Eddie noticed that everyone else in the diner was nodding and smiling, too.

Eddie nodded. “I was there when it happened,” he said. “I'm just glad that Auntie wasn't hurt.”

Then Mrs. Apana handed Eddie his favorite plate lunch—teriyaki beef, two

scoops of rice, and macaroni salad. Eddie lifted a big bite of teriyaki beef with his chopsticks. In spite of everyone's enthusiasm over the Street Knights, he couldn't shake the feeling that something about these heroes was just plain *wrong*.

"No need now for a Neighborhood Watch," someone said. Eddie glanced over his shoulder. Other folks in the diner were nodding in agreement.

Eddie spun around on the stool. "Look," he said firmly, "just because these guys helped Auntie doesn't mean they'll help anyone else. If they're so wonderful, why did they run off before I could talk to them?"

Their smiles quickly disappeared. It was as if the temperature in the room had dropped. Eddie could feel the people's hostility.

"Come on, Eddie, cut it out," Mrs. Apana scolded. "How come you have to find fault with everything? Those boys saved Malia, and that's that."

Eddie sighed, swung back around on the

stool, and went on eating. He knew it would do no good to argue. The neighborhood people *wanted* to believe that they had a team of guardian angels looking out for them.

That afternoon at work, Eddie kept thinking about the incident from the night before. Why hadn't the four men hung around? Maybe they had records and were afraid he would recognize them. Who *were* they? Just another gang moving into the neighborhood? Eddie sighed. That didn't make sense, either. Gang members didn't bother to save little old ladies.

Later, while he was filing some reports, he heard a loud commotion. Sgt. Amosa stuck his head around the door. "Hey, Eddie, you might want to hear this," he said.

Eddie raised an eyebrow. "About—?"

"Mr. Fernandez just got mugged. He came in to report it. He says he was on his way home when three guys stopped him. They threatened to hurt him if he didn't hand over his wallet. Then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, four more guys appear. They tell