

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE

by Elaine Togneri

The Broward County Deputy looked like a blonde bimbo. Dressed in a short skirt, lacy halter, and black fishnet stockings, instead of a uniform, she had to be working Vice. I wondered if the busy desk sergeant had sent me to her as a way to embarrass two female officers at once. Yellow frizz framed the blonde's face and hung in uneven clumps over substantial cleavage. I considered arresting her hairdresser for practicing without a license, but I was way out of my jurisdiction.

I was here to report my presence in the state and county as a courtesy insisted upon by my Lieutenant. He'd never forgiven me for the brass's criticism after the New York City shootout. I'd tried to tell him I shouldn't have gotten crap for not reporting my presence. I'd been there to meet a blind date. Who could have predicted that the locals and the FBI had set up a sting between the Facebook Killer and a redheaded agent at the same restaurant on the same night? I walked in, fresh from the shower, my auburn locks shining. He met me instead, and they ended up with my guy. Anyway no civilians had been killed in the parking lot gun battle when he tried to take me out, and only two had been injured. The Chief had blown the whole affair out of proportion, jealous that it had netted me a book deal. Who could resist a title like "I Dated the Facebook Killer?" Needless to say, my blind date ran the other way.

I approached the blonde. “Detective Theresa McGee, Jamesburg, New Jersey. I'm not here in an official capacity. Just meeting with my publisher and signing my book at the Sleuthfest Conference.”

She asked for my shield and noted the number. “Your hotel and emergency contact?” she asked.

“Believe me, you're not going to need that,” I said, but gave it anyway when she pinned me with that “don't-waste-my-time” cop's glare. I grabbed one of her cards, figuring I'd send her a copy of the book. Sergeant Shelia Something. Might as well make the wasted time a marketing opportunity. Maybe she'd talk up my book.

“A little advice, Detective,” she said. “Stick to the book business. We can handle Broward just fine without you.” That was when I figured out my reputation had preceded me. Her gaze was cold and hard, weathered from seeing the worst of human nature every day. She kind of reminded me of myself and the reason I'd started playing around with fiction.

I slid my hand around her card, ready to crush the damn thing. What was I thinking? She didn't read crime novels, was probably too busy catching johns to even read. I shook my head. There would be plenty of readers at the conference.

After I arrived at the hotel and checked in, I headed for the book room, ready to admire my first published novel. I found a paltry stack of five copies among the hundreds of other mysteries. They're saving them for my signing, I reassured myself. I flipped one over, author photo up. No one recognized me. Maybe a color picture showing my red hair would have made a difference. Surely, sure once I appeared on my “Spinning Reality into Fiction” panel, everything would turn around.

I retreated to the bar. A guy settled next to me, his once red hair dulled to a ginger fuzz circling a bald spot. “Can I buy you a drink?” he asked, arm muscles flexing as he leaned my way. Younger and fitter than he looked at first glance.

“Vodka Martini,” I answered. “With two olives.” I needed sustenance after battling with Shelia.

“Welcome to the Red-Headed League,” he said as the bartender served my drink.

I took a long sip and watched the man retrieve a clipboard he'd stowed against his bar stool.

“Now, I need you to fill out this form, swearing that I fulfilled my entrance requirements by recruiting you. Just put your name, address, e-mail, etc. Then it's your turn to find another redhead to sign up.”

“I don't sign anything,” I said. “Other than my book, of course. Count me out.” I opened my purse and dug for my wallet. “I'll buy my own drink.”

“No. Please. Come on. It's all in fun. Signing up gets you invited to an after conference party.”

“Why just redheads? Who's throwing it?” My lips parted, another dubious question ready to pour out until he interrupted me.

“David Caruso.”

Wasn't he on one of those cop shows that got everything wrong? CSI Florida or something? “Where does it say David Caruso?” I asked.

The man pointed to tiny print on the bottom of the form.

I squinted. “It looks like a list of famous redheads.”

“But it notes appearances underneath.”

“I doubt that Lucille Ball is going to show.”

“It's a party. Free booze. I'm going. If you won't sign, I've got to find someone else.” He scanned the crowd.

I sighed. “Okay.” I scribbled my pseudonym and publisher's address and e-mail and returned the form. “Now what?”

He scrawled his name on the bottom. Roger Johnson. “You drop the form in a box on the conference table. We'll get a notice with the room before the conference is over. I'll see you at the party.”

I positioned myself in the lobby to watch all the registering guests. It took a good while before I trapped another redhead and gained my completed form. Neither my publisher nor any of the conference attendees I encountered over the next two days knew anything about the Red-Headed League, although one older man recounted the entire Conan Doyle story before I could make an escape.

My panel went as well as could be expected when I discovered we were up against “Sex on the Beach.” Attendance was light, but five people showed for my signing and purchased the book. The publisher said he was issuing a press release saying we sold out at Sleuthfest. Whup-de-do.

As the time for the Redheaded League party approached, my cop instincts clicked into full alert. I had no contacts, no information, had even been warned off by Sergeant Shelia Bombshell. But I couldn't help myself. Something was up. I smoothed out her card and gave her a call. Though on duty, she agreed to meet me. Only problem, I had to dress the part.

I slipped into a black garter belt and thigh-highs, hiked my skirt with two turns of the waistband, and donned a push-up bra. I found a low-cut flashy top that would have to do, ratted

out my hair and applied heavy-handed make up. Thirty minutes later, I met her in the tourist quarter close to the beach.

She looked much as she had when I last saw her. “You clean up good, girl,” she said, striking me in the shoulder. “I might be able to get you a job.” She laughed loudly, like she'd been drinking all day. She turned toward a slow-driving station wagon. “Hi, honey, two for one tonight.”

I held my breath until the car drove away, the man leering. “Did you find anything on the Red-Headed League?” I asked

“Maybe,” she whispered. “A search on redheads turned up four rapes in the last year.”

“So you're thinking a serial rapist?”

“Could be. One with a predilection for redheads.”

“Redheads are only two percent of the population. Maybe he's using this as a way to find victims?”

“Only one way to know,” she said. The same car that had just passed rolled to a stop next to us. “Get in,” she said, opening the passenger door.

I looked at her, confused.

“Darling, he's my partner. We're not actually on duty. I just wanted to see if I could trust you.” She pointed at my outfit and smiled.

A light flashed and I realized, he'd taken my picture. “Just in case,” she said. “I might have to place you under arrest. Jeff here will testify that you were soliciting.”

I slid next to her partner. “Theresa,” I said.

Shelia bounced in after me. “Delray Hilton,” she said. “We're going to a party.”

“You need a red wig,” I said.

“No, I don't.”

I didn't like the way that sounded and frowned.

She pulled on a lock of my hair. “I have you.”

“But, but--”

“Exactly, we're here unofficially. If anything comes down, it's all on you. My Chief's orders.”

Fifteen minutes later I was wired, packing Jeff's throw-down in one of my thigh-highs, and knocking on the suite door where the note I'd picked up at the desk had indicated the Red-Headed League Party would be held.

Roger Johnson, the dweeb who recruited me, answered the door. Glasses clinked and conversation hummed. Bagpipes wheezed a Scottish song in the background. “Our final guest has arrived,” he announced and waved his hand at a tall waiter who brought a tray of champagne flutes.

“All the redheads are young women,” I whispered. “Four including myself.” He must have culled all the males and older women. I hoped the damn bagpipes didn't interfere with my transmission. I chose a glass of champagne. Everyone else, including Roger, had a one.

“Attention, please.” Roger said. The other women hushed and someone mercifully pulled the plug on the music. Roger raised his glass. “I hereby induct you into the honorary Red-Headed League. Our business must be conducted in private, so the waiter will leave us now.”

When Roger drank, I placed the glass to my lips. I hadn't seen where my glass came from, so I pretended to sip. Roger shut the door behind the waiter. I used the minute to empty my drink into a conveniently-located potted plant.

Two of the women sat unsteadily on the couches. One young woman with auburn curls and a skirt shorter than mine grabbed another glass of champagne and downed it before I could get to her. Her green eyes rolled back into her head and she dropped. I caught one arm, Roger the other. We walked her to chair. "She can't handle her liquor," he said, staring at me.

I deliberately wobbled as I walked away. I flopped on a hassock, trying to match the behavior I witnessed from the others. Obviously they had been drugged. Was this pervert going to rape all the women? Did I have to wait for him to start before I could alert Shelia and company? I hated being out of my jurisdiction! I didn't know how they operated. We hadn't had much time to prepare for this ridiculous situation.

Roger unlocked a connecting door. Ten men filed in. Shivers ran down my arms. My hands shook. Outnumbered to say the least. "Call SWAT," I whispered, hoping Shelia heard me. All but one of the men were dressed casually for a day in the Florida sun. My gaze followed a chubby man in white robes. A sheik? He stopped next to me and ran a finger down my cheek. It was all I could do to not pull my gun and shout, "police."

Roger cleared his throat. Two men lifted floral shirts to reveal guns holstered in their waistbands. "A preventive measure," he said. He wandered to the curly-haired woman who had collapsed, pulling her blouse open to reveal a sexy black bra. "Let's start with this one. Who wants to bid?"

All of the men nodded.

Holy shit! The white slave trade. I stumbled to my feet and put a hand over my mouth. One of the armed men grabbed me. I made a retching sound behind my hand.

"Bad reaction." Roger nodded to a guard. "Help her to the bathroom."

I leaned heavily on the man's right arm, making it impossible for him to reach his gun. Giving the mayday signal to Shelia and Jeff would put everyone at risk. Once in the bathroom, I turned on the water to mask the sound of my voice and whispered, "Call SWAT. We've got eleven men, at least two with guns." I repeated the message several times and hoped the transmission reached Shelia. I needed to buy time.

After a few minutes, a knock sounded on the bathroom door. I faked a retch and said, "I'm still sick," while I desperately stared at the mirror, shower, and toilet, looking for something, anything. Finally I looked up.

The sprinkler system. If I could set it off, it would probably draw the fire department. I grabbed the gun from my stocking and used the butt to smash the head until I broke the small vial inside the sprinkler. Water spouted and the alarm sounded. I heard shouts outside the door. I put the gun back in my thigh-high and stumbled out of the bathroom. "Where's the fire?" I slurred. Stagnant water was pouring from the sprinklers in the suite too. The three other redheads lay passed out on the couches, getting soaked, but safe enough with Shelia and Jeff close at hand. I could hear sirens whining nearby as fire trucks raced to the hotel. Out the window, I saw a large black van and police officers in SWAT gear hurrying to the hotel's entrance.

The sheik clenched my hand in his and dragged me after Roger, his men, and the bidders who scurried through the connecting door and out into the hallway. Guess the fat guy liked whores. That was fine with me. I intended to deliver the whole crew right to the SWAT leader. I raced down the same stairs, SWAT was rushing up.

I ran faster. Now I was dragging the sheik. I saw a shadow on the next landing. SWAT. I yanked on the sheik's hand and dove out of the way as he lost his footing. His body twisted, and he knocked the others down like a bowling ball.

“Police, don't move,” I shouted, yanking out my gun.

With SWAT's help, soon it was all over. The fire department reported the sprinklers flooded both the suite and the room next door. Water also leaked through the ceiling to two rooms on the floor below. The hotel lost power for a couple of hours but got to practice their evacuation plan, and I had the title for my next novel, “I Was a Sheik's Sex Slave.”

There was one good thing. The commander of the SWAT Team took me aside and said that his troops hadn't had that much fun in a long time. The Broward Sheriff took a less charitable track. The Sun-Sentinel quoted him calling us, "Irresponsible idiots." Luckily most of the other things he said couldn't be printed in a family newspaper. The cable news networks had a field day and, I'll admit, most of the criticism was harsh but justified. However I didn't quite understand Vice President Cheney's comments on Fox News blaming what happened on President Obama. But the ex-Veep was on book tour and had an advance to earn back, so we had to give our fellow author a little leeway. We did briefly considered moving SleuthFest to Brazil, but it now looks like insurance will cover most of the damage, so we'll be back at the Delray Hilton next year after all.

END