

PAUL DI FILIPPO

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

You Won't Take Me Alive! (Without atLeast Ten Percent of the Box Office Gross)

"A ROMANCE writer's two-year flight from justice ended in a style befitting one of her novels this week, when law enforcement agents knocked on her door at a low-budget motel just outside Los Angeles. Rather than surrender without a struggle, Barbara Joslyn stabbed herself in the chest.

"As Federal agents closed in on her...Ms. Joslyn barricaded herself in her cramped motel room and shouted that she `would not be taken alive.'"--The New York Times, May 5, 1997.

"Let me through, I'm from the SFWA."

As soon as the hard-eyed, bigshouldered young cop--standing intimidatingly with folded arms on the crowd side of the yellow police tape--heard those words, he gave me a deferential nod, lifted up the plastic ribbon, and ushered me under. Even this rookie plainly knew who had saved the asses of his buddies in countless similar situations across the country. I was hoping his superiors did too.

Once on the far side of the barrier, walkie-talkies crackling practically in my ears, I found myself in the middle of a barely controlled mob. Plainclothes detectives, armored SWAT snipers, squat HAZMATrobots, reporters, priests, psychologists, editors, agents, publicists, film directors--the usual mix of do-gooders and vultures you always find at this kind of tragic scene. Using perceptions and intuitions honed from dozens of equally chaotic past confrontations, I zeroed in on the guy most likely in charge: a smartly coiffed City Hall type wearing a suit that probably cost as much as I made in a month.

I waved my open wallet, credentials showing, under his nose. "Dorsey Kazin, SFWA Griefcom. Whadda we got here?"

Maybe it was the sight of the understatedly famous silver rocket next to my name in gold-leaf, maybe it was the calm assurance in my voice. Maybe it was the chance to dump this whole mess in somebody else's lap. Whatever the case, the guy's stern but nervous exterior collapsed faster than the Wizards of the Coast publishing program, and he spilled his fears into my tender ear like a kid telling his mother what he did that day in second grade.

"Am I glad to see you, Mr. Kazin! Ruben Spinelost here, assistant to Mayor Whiffle." I tendered the guy a perfunctory shake. "Afraid I'm in a little over my head in this dustup. Never dealt with one of these new-fangled hostage-based contract negotiations before."

I cut him off. "Get used to it, Rube, this new tactic's all the rage --and I do mean rage. Brief me quick now, before our gun-toting Gernsbackian decides to lay a few of his more violent cards on the table--or maybe his hostage's ear."

Spinelost consulted a paper. "Well, the writer involved is someone named Theodolite Sangborn. He's published--"

"Not necessary. I got everything I need to know about him along those lines out of his SFWA file. I'm an instant Sangborn expert on his whole life, from his formative childhood traumas down to how he deducted his mistress's hotel room as a convention expense on his last 1040. Not to mention his entire miserable midlist genre career. What I need from you is some idea of the kinds of demands he's making, and who he's got in there."

Spinelost used his cheat notes to answer the last question first. "He's holding his editor, a woman named Sherri Drysack. Ex-editor, I should say. Apparently she made the mistake of deciding to pay him a visit in person to offer her condolences--"

"On Bollix Books dropping Sangborn like a squirming roach when his last novel stiffed. What a damn fool! Didn't she know her presence would be like holding a lit match to a powder-keg?"

"Obviously not. I believe she's, um, fresh out of Bennington. Fine school, of course, but.... Anyway, now Sangborn is using the leverage represented by her peril to demand a new three-book, seven-figure contract, with twenty percent royal ties and assured softcover editions Oh yes, he also wants Leapsgerb Studios to option his last book for; cool million."

I cursed eloquently. "These Heinlein wannabes with their de fusions of canonical stature make me sick. They should consider themselves lucky to get a Whelan cover, like Sangborn did on his Interstellar UPS, never mind option' and kick-in clauses. And it always falls to Griefcom to hand them a reality check."

Spinelost coughed politely "Speaking of checks...."

"Don't get your boxers in a twist over nothing, Rube. Assuming I can bring this whole debacle to a safe conclusion mutually agreeable to all parties, the city will be fully compensated for any extraordinary expenses--as long as no charges are pressed against our author, of course. Whichever publisher picks up Sangborn will cut a check to the municipality tomorrow--and probably make a nice little donation to the FOP. It's standard industry practice now. They just write it off as a line item on the author's royalty statement."

"Very good. Still, I rather miss the old days--"

Just then a bullet zipped by over our heads like something out of Harrison's Deathworld. Spinelost and the other suits fell to the ground, while the rest of us hardened campaigners just groaned cynically at the requisite touch of melodrama. From the innocent-looking suburban house where Sangborn was holed up

came a shouted threat.

"Hey, people! I want to see some goddamn action here, maybe a cover proof or a multi-city booktour itinerary, and fast! Or Little Miss Blue Pencil is going to have a new buttonhole in her Donna Karan jacket!"

I patted my coat pocket to make sure my cell-phone and palmtop with speed-dialer attachment were there, then grabbed a loud-hailer from agape-mouthed-social-worker.

"Sangborn! It's Dorsey Kazin! I'm coming in for some face time. Don't shoot anymore, or these guys will put you on the remainder table faster than you can say Robert James Waller!"

Silence for a moment, before Sangborn answered. "Okay, Kazin, I trust you. But no one else!"

Handing back the hailer, I marched forward, the mob of officials falling aside respectfully to let me through.

The time spent crossing that inevitable empty and unnaturally silent street to the writer's house is always unnerving, no matter how often you've done it before. Sure, you figure they're not gonna do anything crazy at this point, with a solution to their problems so close, but you never know for certain. I still broke out into a sweat when I remembered how my onetime partner, Alyx Jorus, had gone permanently out of print, drilled through the heart as she approached a writer involved in that hellacious work-for-hire Star Wars novelizations snafu. There are some cases I wouldn't touch with a ten-light-year pole.

As I crossed to Sangborn's bungalow, I tried to reassure myself by thinking of all my peers who were even now successfully and routinely doing my same job across this nation of belligerent, mad-dog writers. Those various Griefcom professionals from all the sister and brother organizations to SFWA--the guilds of the mystery writers, the romance writers, the western writers, the horror writers, the screen- and teleplay writers, even PEN--they all stood invisibly shoulder-to-shoulder with me as I strode up to Sangborn's door. So bolstering was my ghostly crew that when I got there I was able to knock with confidence, call my name, then enter.

A disheveled Sangborn sat on the couch in the darkened living-room, semi-automatic rifle loosely gripped. (SFWA sold armaments through the Forum now, and had coffers overflowing with cash.) His hair was as messy as a sheaf of manuscript pages dropped in a wastebasket, his face was stubbled, and he was sweating like one of Fabio's fans getting an autograph. Perched insouciantly on the edge of a coffee-table, Sherri Drysack was, by contrast, cool as one of Anne Rice's vampires. Tucking long hair behind one perfect ear, she said, "It's about time you got here, Kazin. My Dayrunner's showing two appointments and a meeting later this afternoon, and I'm like, hello, can we get these negotiations moving, or are we still in like the Stone Age?"

"Sangborn didn't kidnap you, did he? You're in collusion with him."

"Duh, Earth to Kazin, Earth to Kazin: wake up and smell your double-latte! Of course I'm in this with him. I was planning to jump ship at Bollix all the while, and Sangborn is my meal-ticket out."

I looked at the pitiful hulk on the couch. Shoeless, his hands shaking, his eyes redder than Mars before Robinson got his mitts on it, he looked the most unlikely prospect for success I had ever seen.

"You must have an ace in the hole. What is it?"

Drysack whipped a manuscript out of her briefcase. "Thought you'd never ask, Kazin. Here's three chapters and an outline for an open-ended series that's going to take the sf world by storm. Sangborn's going to make Niven and Pournelle look like Hall and Flint after this."

I took the handful of papers from her and started reading. After a while, I let out a genuine whistle of astonishment. "Looks like the real thing. A postmodern space opera based on an amalgam of Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre. Didn't think the old hack had it in him."

Drysack moved to sit beside her property, draping a possessive arm around his shoulder. She slitheringly crossed one Victoria's Secret-sheathed leg over the other. Sangborn let out a plaintive mew like a Hurtle. "Oh, Theo's far from washed up. He has a lot of good years left in him. All he needs is some tender loving care from the right editor--and of course some fat residuals on any TV series loosed on the Bronteverse."

I dug out my cell phone and palmtop and summoned up a fist of publishers in a screen window. Having picked a likely candidate, I mated the speed-dialer and phone. While the connection was being made, I moved to one of the windows, pulled the drapes aside, and gave the all-clear sign to the cops. As they began to move in, I saw one of the figures in the crowd answer his own ringing cell-phone.

"Loomis Harmonica here. Is that you, Kazin?"

"Damn right. And I'm sitting on the hottest concept to hit sf since Asimov read Gibbon. Is the publisher of Mary Kay Books interested?"

"You bet your bottom Imperial credit we are. Put Drysack right on."

I passed the phone to the eager lady editor, then walked across the room to a shelf of liquor bottles. I poured myself an undiluted vodka, and knocked back half of it.

Hell of a way to earn a paycheck. But when the Muse calls, you gotta answer.

Especially if she's packing heat.