

Her L.A. Knight

An excerpt

By Lynne Marshall

January 2007

CHAPTER TWO

CHINA Had to run them over. There was no getting around it. Zooming down the 405 Freeway in Los Angeles, closed in on both sides by cars traveling no less than seventy-five miles an hour, the runaway balloons couldn't be avoided.

Her hands tightened on the wheel. Fear crushed through her chest. What if she swerved? She might sideswipe another car. Oh, God, she didn't want to do that.

She had no choice but to hit and run. Fighting the urge to close her eyes, she kept her foot on the gas and plowed full speed ahead.

It wasn't a clean drive-over. No. The air flow from the cars on each outside lane whipped up and off the road, and she hit the balloons at an angle, a cluster of deflating party balloons, complete with bright ribbons, and instead of popping, they hooked onto her front bumper.

The black and silver, over-the-hill, thick-skinned helium balloons meant for someone else flopped and thumped against her windshield, blocking her vision. They were a sad commentary on how her big day had been going.

Her heart rapped against her chest. The last thing she needed was to have an accident on her way to a fundraiser for safe driving.

China slowed down a bit and, reaching between her seat and the inside of the car door, adjusted the bucket seat position. Maybe then she could see around the balloons until she had a chance to exit the freeway.

Nothing changed, at least not inside the car. Having pulled the wrong lever, the trunk of her car flew open. Now not only was her front vision impaired, but the view out the back was, too.

She gripped the steering wheel tighter and let up a little more on the accelerator. She didn't want to die on her twenty-seventh birthday.

Above the flapping trunk, a red light flashed in her eyes.

She shook her head. Hell.

Strangely relieved, she took her first breath, not having been aware she'd been holding it. Traffic parted in her path. She steered the car to the shoulder of the road and waited for the highway patrol officer to approach. Hopefully, he'd offer a sympathetic ear.

After fishing out her car registration from the glove compartment, China checked her rear-view mirror. She caught a glimpse of herself, once again shocked at how short her bangs

were, and rolled her eyes.

How had she let her hairdresser talk her into it? Not once in her life had she ever aspired to look like Cleopatra. Yet here she was, sitting on the side of the 405 Freeway, about to get a moving violation ticket while dressed in a black velvet toga-style dress, looking like the old asp-handling seductress herself.

Sheesh.

She couldn't think of one single day in her life that sucked worse than today.

Memory wouldn't let the lie take hold. No, that wasn't true. Even with her lousy hairdo, the half-dead balloons stuck on her car, the imminent ticket, and yet another birthday without a date, today hadn't come close to the worst day of her life ten years earlier.

In her mind's eye, she saw the twisted metal, heard the cacophony of screams and horns, and felt the molten daggers of pain, on the day that had changed her for ever.

Shaking off the recurring nightmarish memory, China put the balloon incident into perspective.

It didn't even come close.

She waited for the highway patrolman to finish his paperwork.

Thankful to be alive, she watched cars whiz past. The officer walked to the front of her automobile, unhooked the droopy balloons, held them like a sad bouquet, and strolled toward her window.

Wincing with embarrassment, she held out hope he'd see her side of the story. The reticent officer took the license and registration she handed him through the window, glanced at them and, with a deadpan face, handed her the deflating balloons and said, "Happy Birthday, Ms. Seabury."