

# **CONTRAPTION**

A Comedy Thriller

Ryan Garns

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# 1

IT WAS THE first time Shawn Riley had ever been approached in a nightclub by a beautiful and mysterious woman who wasn't a process server. So naturally, his anxiety spiked when, on that first Friday of October in downtown Phoenix, a pair of deep blue eyes and a whiff of vanilla sat opposite him in his favorite booth. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two, twenty-three—practically half his age. That alone should have spelled trouble.

The woman said, "Sorry I'm late."

Shawn said, "No problem."

He had no idea who this woman was.

He could feel the butterflies in his stomach limbering up for a performance. He wished he had splashed on some aftershave before leaving the house. Some Just For Men would have been good, too. He suddenly felt underdressed. A T-shirt and jeans, Shawn? Really? Couldn't he come up with a classier ensemble more appropriate for Rib Ticklers Comedy Cabaret? This wasn't Olive Garden, you know. Never mind that now. Let's just see where this goes. He decided to play it cool despite the commotion coming from

his abdomen. Those butterflies had apparently joined Cirque du Soleil.

The woman absently pawed at her chocolate brown hair as she caught her reflection in the adjacent window. She turned to Shawn and, noticing his blank expression, gave him a warm smile. “So. Here I am.”

“There you are.” He smiled back. He waited. Then he gave up. “And who are you?”

“The person you’re waiting for.”

“Ah,” he nodded. Nope, he was still confused. “I didn’t know I was waiting for anybody.”

“But what’s important,” she said, “is *I* knew.”

Shawn had just been winding down from his performance earlier that evening; now he had to wind himself up again just to keep up with this woman. He wasn’t in the mood to flirt, much less kibitz—it was why he chose the booth instead of the bar in the first place. The comedy club grind was getting to him. He had joked on stage how he’d feel a lot better about being forty-four if he didn’t have his midlife crisis at twenty-two. For almost twenty years, he’d been plying his punchlines at clubs, colleges, and corporate functions, but what had it gotten him, and where was he going? Maybe it was time to hang it all up, maybe go back to his old job. Was RadioShack still around? But that decision would have to wait. Right now, all he wanted was to finish his drink and go home.

The waitress approached and asked Shawn’s unexpected visitor what she wanted. The woman looked right at Shawn when she answered, “What he has looks good.”

“I’m afraid they’re fresh out of me,” said Shawn.

Cornball, but it was quick. The woman laughed, and just to help out, so did the waitress. Okay, this might be fun after all.

The waitress asked Shawn if he was ready for another; he nodded, and she went away. He turned to the woman who extended her hand like she wanted him to kiss it.

“Mercedes,” she said.

He took her hand but didn’t kiss it, giving it an awkward shake. “I’m Shawn.”

“Shawn...” She said it like she was trying on silk pajamas. “I like the sound of that. Don’t you?”

“It usually gets my attention.”

“Oh yeah,” she purred. “Shawn is a guy who’s unassuming, a little shy, but has a mind that’s always turning.” She leaned forward, elbows on the table, cradling her chin in her intertwined fingers, the picture of absolute fascination. “Makes a woman want to know what he’s thinking about.” Her eyes turned her statement into a question.

“Arizona statutes,” Shawn answered.

Mercedes reared back with a hard laugh and tossed her hair behind her shoulders. “Relax, Humbert Humbert, I was carded on the way in.”

Comedy club bouncers weren’t exactly a crack security squad, especially when it came to sizing up attractive female patrons, but he felt Mercedes was all right. That *Lolita* reference she rattled off hinted she probably wasn’t a prostitute. How many streetwalkers read Nabokov? Well, maybe in Scottsdale, but not Phoenix. No, she was likely an ASU student. One of those who hit the clubs and threw out pheromones after a Gender Studies cram session. On second thought, a prostitute would have been less dangerous.

“You should be glad I sat down,” said Mercedes. “A man drinking alone is not a good look. I just elevated your status.”

“Maybe I’ve elevated yours.”

Mercedes shook her head. “With the men? Unlikely. Besides, I’ve elevated you in the minds of the women, and what women think has always been more important.”

“Well, good. That takes the pressure off my side of this conversation.”

“Don’t misunderstand. We still care what you *say*. Women are very particular about what men say. For example, are you married?”

“Divorced.”

“See? That was the right thing to say. You’re doing very well.”

Shawn could feel her leg brush up against his under the table, casual at first, then making itself comfortable. “I suppose,” she continued, “you’re wondering why I sat down.”

“Collecting for UNICEF?”

“Noooo,” she said. “Because you look how I feel.”

“I do? How’s that?”

Mercedes rested her cheek in her hand like someone trapped in a management seminar, puffed up her chest, and released a slow sigh. “Bored,” she said.

“Bored?”

“Miserably.”

“That’s no way to spend an evening.”

“Do you mind if I sit here and be bored with you?”

“I can guarantee it.”

There was that laugh again, the toss of the hair. “I like a man who understates his qualities.”

“I’m the King of Understatement. Whoops.”

“And you’re funny. I like that.”

This was too easy. Shawn raised his glass and proposed a sarcastic toast, “Then you’re gonna love me.”

Mercedes took the glass from him and said, “Now *that* sounds like a way to spend an evening.” She swallowed the rest of his rye, leaving him to swallow the lump in his throat. “I’m attending a convention at the Merriview across the street. This is my last night in town.” She leaned forward to point at something outside the window, giving him a peek down her blouse and another whiff of vanilla. “You can literally see my room riiiiight there.”

Just then, the waitress returned with fresh drinks. Mercedes’s eyes brightened as she took hers with both hands and sat back. When the waitress asked if they needed anything else, Shawn let out a small yelp and jumped in his seat. Something had rubbed up against his crotch.

Mercedes’s foot had slipped off its shoe and made a surprise appearance.

“Everything’s fine, thanks,” Mercedes said, shooing away the waitress. “Like my tattoo? It’s on the ankle.”

Shawn took hold of her foot like it was an excited dog. He feigned interest in the tattoo, but his real focus was keeping the boner he’d been harboring for the last several minutes away from her adventurous toes. When he looked up and saw the devilish smile across her face, he knew the jig was up, so to speak.

She took back her foot and adopted a more formal demeanor. “My friends all tell me I’m too forward.”

Shawn’s face reddened. “You can always make new friends.”

She held back a smile. “That’s what I think.” She fished an ice cube from her drink and kissed it to cool her lips. “Will you be my friend?”

Shawn said knowingly, “You’re not looking for a ride to the airport, are you?”

“You’re cute.”

“My friends all tell me I’m too cute.”

“You do like to make jokes. Especially when you’re nervous.”

“Me? Nervous?”

“Anybody ever tell you you should be a comedian?”

“Unfortunately, yes. So I became one.”

She gaped at him.

“It’s true,” he continued, “I did a set earlier this evening. Didn’t you see it?”

“I just came in a little bit ago. Tell me one of your jokes.”

“Oh, no, I—”

“Just one.”

“I don’t—”

“Come on. You told jokes to a room full of people; now you can’t tell me?”

“It’s a little unusual. I don’t really tell jokes, per se. It’s really more of a... like a conversation I’m having with the audience. There’s a lot of setup—”

“You worry a lot, don’t you?”

Shawn stopped and tried to appear calm.

Mercedes said, “What have you got to worry about? It’s just me.”

Shawn expelled a laugh that revealed more than intended.

Mercedes smiled as realization spread across her face. “Is it me? Do I worry you?”

She leaned back and took a sip from her drink, her eyes never leaving his. There was an awkward silence. Then she leaned in closer, placed her hand on his, and spoke in a soft and deliberate voice. “Listen to me: there is nothing you could say or do that would make me not want to fuck you.”

Shawn thought he felt her foot in his lap again, but he was mistaken.



Wait a minute, wait a minute. Stop and think. Take a deep breath. He couldn't sleep with Mercedes. It was too crazy. She was half his age! Right. And why was that a problem exactly? Because people might think less of him. Yeah, but what people? It's not like they were going to sell tickets. (Frankly, this was a relief. It was one thing to please a woman in bed, quite another to please drama critics.)

No, no, let's get serious. He couldn't sleep with her because... Mercedes was from a different generation. They would have little in common. She wouldn't understand his pop culture references. Oh, man, was he pathetic or what? Did he think they were going back to her hotel room to watch *Sanford and Son*? (Not that he hadn't done it before. Something about that theme song gets everyone in the mood.)

No, the real reason he couldn't do it was... he was afraid. Plain and simple. He was forty-four. He still felt young, but let's face it, not all of his parts grinded and shimmied and twerked the way they used to. There was such a thing called erectile dysfunction, you know. E.D., as the kids say. And he drank two glasses of rye already. Whiskey dick! Oh, God. That's what everyone would call him: Whiskey Dick. After they demanded a refund on their tickets, of course. He couldn't handle that kind of humiliation.

But that wouldn't happen. Come on.

*CLANK!*

Mercedes raised her hand to search for her drink on the table but knocked it over with a clatter. Her laughter was a bit too loud.

"I guess those whiskeys were above my pay grade," she said. The words were getting noticeably slurred.

Shawn picked up her glass. "No harm done," he said, "it's empty." He told the waitress to bring the check.

The customers at the other tables were beginning to look at them. Knowing looks. Any benefit of the doubt they might have given a middle-aged man with an attractive younger woman had just vanished.

It didn't make sense; her drunkenness had come out of the blue. Maybe she'd been drinking mimosas all night before she ever sat down. He should have paid more attention. How far gone was she? He watched her frown and fidget with the items on the table in an attempt to rewind everything to ten seconds ago. She gave him a closed smile as reassurance, undermined by glassy eyes.

Her persona as a sex fantasy had faded to a vulnerable, perhaps troubled person.

Shawn felt like a total ass. This was somebody's daughter.

Now she was his 125-pound responsibility.

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The elevator doors opened on the twelfth floor of the Merriview Hotel. Shawn had his arm around Mercedes, holding her up as they exited. She had quieted down considerably since Rib Ticklers. Either the fresh night air had induced sleepiness, or the movement of the elevator had drained the blood from her head. Whatever the reason, her eyelids were barely open, and she now needed Shawn for propulsion and steering.

The last time Mercedes uttered anything coherent had been down in the lobby. Room 1214, she had said as if their date was still on, but all Shawn wanted was to get her safely to her room and out of his conscience.

The hallway was quiet, just the murmur of a television coming from one of the rooms.

One of the doors opened as they passed. A woman in her sixties wearing a faded fleece robe peered out to place a Do Not Disturb sign on the handle. She noticed Mercedes and stopped mid-gasp when she made eye contact with Shawn.

“Evening,” said Shawn.

“Is she all right?”

“Too much fun for one night.”

“I must have picked the party hotel,” the woman said, irritated, as she resecured her robe. “I called security because of all the ruckus from earlier down the hall. I’ve got a six a.m. flight.”

Shawn wondered at what age the word *ruckus* was added to one’s vocabulary. Then he wondered if there was a comedy bit there: how saying certain words could make a person appear old. Shenanigans. Ruffian. Dukakis. He made a note of it for later.

“We’ll try to keep it down,” said Shawn. “G’night.”

He could feel the woman’s eyes still on him as he moved Mercedes along, relieved when he heard her door close.

At last, he looked up and found the door marked 1214. He removed his arm from Mercedes and tested her balance. She swayed as though the hotel were traversing rough waters. He positioned her against the wall adjacent to the door, propping her up like a set of golf clubs.

“This is it,” he said.

She didn’t respond.

He needed the room key. He carefully removed the purse from over her shoulder, opened it, and began fishing. Wasn’t there a comedian who did a bit about how men should never go through a woman’s purse? Was it Carlin? No. Seinfeld, maybe?

He sifted through crumpled receipts, ticket stubs, tissues (new and used), a compact mirror, lipstick, a bi-fold wallet...

and a small journal. Should he open it? No, let's just get this girl in her room first. He found something that looked like a hotel key card but was actually one of those laminated IDs attached to a lanyard. This one was from somewhere called the Oasis, with the "O" drawn as a cube within a cube for its logo. Below that was a name: Mercedes Belmonte. He spoke her full name to himself, trying it out, then put the ID back in her purse.

Finally, he found what he was looking for: a credit card-sized envelope with "1214" written on it, containing a hotel room key card.

He closed up her purse and placed it gently back on her shoulder. She stirred a bit, her eyes closed, just conscious enough to keep her legs underneath her as her head bobbed.

Well, Ms. Belmonte—or is it Mrs? (He hadn't thought of that. Jesus. This was looking more and more like a dodged bullet.) Anyway, Ms. Belmonte, this is where our evening must come to an end.

He held the key card over the doorknob, and the light switched from red to green and clicked. He opened it. The room inside was dark. He stepped in and fumbled for the light switch.

*Click!*

There were men in the room.

Two of them, dressed in dark suits.

Their sullen faces and unblinking eyes looked at Shawn as if he were expected. They didn't move, preferring the posture of casual menace they each had chosen for this moment. Before Shawn could say anything, an unseen third man pressed something cold and hard against the back of his head. Shawn almost turned to see what it was, but the pressure being applied to the base of his skull made a strong

case in opposition. *Cold and hard* would do for now. No sense in belaboring the point.

Without so much as a clever quip, Shawn stood in acquiescence, silent and still, as he heard the door shut behind him.

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