

MARTYRS TO A CAUSE

By Michelle Mellon

As soon as he walked in the door I could tell he was hoping I was the secretary.

“Uh, Mickey Mann?” he asked, looking around my office, searching for the door to some inner sanctum that didn’t exist.

I let him sweat a bit while I studied him. Mid 20s, long dark hair, pale and thin nearly to the point of unhealthy, wearing a wrinkled, faded tee shirt and well-worn jeans. He was probably 6’1” or 6’2”, but had the slouch and shuffle common to serious computer geeks.

“That’s me!” I gave him my girliest grin and head bob, hoping he’d back himself right out the door. I was in no mood to track down a lost computer part or spy on some other geek he thought might be stealing his brilliant software creations.

Instead, he swallowed hard, pushed some of the hair out of his face, and looked around the office at a couple of awards and some “stupid criminal” articles I had framed to amuse myself when business was slow. Then he moved forward to shake my hand.

Surprisingly firm grip, and I caught a flash of stunning green eyes, no glasses, before his hair flopped back into his face.

“Please, have a seat, Mr., uh...?”

“Anderson. Curt Anderson.” He folded himself rather comfortably into the stiff wooden chairs I had specifically bought to keep client meetings brief. I was here to perform a service, sure, but life was short and I wasn’t interested in spending most of it stuck in my office.

“So what can I do for you, Mr. Anderson?” I asked, assuming my most professional demeanor. Eyes like his deserved at least some consideration.

“It’s, uh, about my sister.”

His voice faded at the end, and I waited for the rest until I realized he was shaking. Crying, in fact.

I pushed a box of tissues across the width of my massive desk. The only other thing on there was my tiny tablet PC. I liked order, and I liked keeping considerable physical and emotional distance between myself and my clients. In this case, however, the grieving Mr. Anderson had my heartstrings vibrating so hard I was surprised he wasn’t humming along.

He wiped his eyes with his hands, dried them on his jeans, then grabbed a tissue to wipe his nose. “Sorry about that,” he said, raising himself off the chair enough to stuff the tissue in a pocket.

“No problem. Is your sister in serious trouble?”

“She’s, uh, she’s dead,” he said, breathing deeply.

“You were close?” I asked, stupidly.

“Yes,” he whispered, “even though she was eleven years older than me.” He took a deep breath and began again, more steadily.

“We worked together – started a computer company together, actually. I did the programming and she did the marketing and, well,” he chuckled a little, “everything else, really.”

“I’m so sorry. That must make her death extra hard.”

“Yeah. We were growing. Over the past couple of years, we’d been able to hire some people to help out. About nine months ago she began interviewing PR firms so she could hand the promotions off to them and just stick to the other stuff, and then things just... changed.”

“Changed how?”

“She started drifting away from me. She was quiet, secretive, then she became more political, publically. And someone killed her for it.”

“Julia? Julia Anderson was your sister?”

He nodded.

Julia Anderson had come out of nowhere as an outspoken human rights advocate for third-world countries. She had an amazing charisma that was actually beginning to make a difference before she was killed in one of the countries she’d been visiting.

“And you want me to –”

“Find out why she left all of her money and her half of our company to Meyer Arts, Inc.”

Visions of me bouncing along dusty forgotten dirt roads in a tiny non-English-speaking country, greasing local palms with grubby currency, and looking over my shoulder to make sure I wasn’t being followed by heartless killers, evaporated in a disappointing poof.

“Who, or what, is Meyer Arts?”

“I don’t know,” he said, gripping the arms of the chair. “That’s what I need you to find out!”

“Hold on,” I said. “Somebody has to have some record of these people if they were in her will.”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” he relaxed his grip. “What I mean is, they’re some sort of PR firm she hired. Based in L.A., but I’ve only ever met their lawyer, and whenever I call and leave messages at their number, he’s the only one who calls back.”

“And what does he tell you?”

“That my sister was an ‘esteemed’ client. That she had been working with some of their top executives on a revolutionary promotion, and that they would make a presentation at the next board meeting.”

“Board meeting?”

“Yes, with their control of Julia’s half of the company...”

He started shaking again, this time with frustration, a little anger. I let him ride it out.

"I'm sorry," he said after a minute or so, with a flip of his head and another flash of those emerald eyes. "It's just that we worked so hard, and I miss her, and I don't even know these people or—"

"I'll figure out what's going on," I interrupted, mostly to stop what I saw as his possible return to tears.

"Thank you," he said, as he unbent himself, stood up, and reached across the desk to shake my hand.

Long arms, perfect for hugging, was all I could think. I shook his hand and shook my head at the same time. No wonder my friends called me boy crazy.

"Are you okay?" he asked, no doubt alarmed by my strange body language.

"Just working some things out," I replied. "I'll start looking into Meyer Arts. I need you to fill this out so I can get back in touch with you."

I pulled a client card out of a drawer and slid it across the desk with a pen. He stooped over and filled out his contact information, not even pausing when he saw my rates.

"Is that it?" he asked, standing up and placing the pen on top of the card.

"That's it."

"Thanks again," he said, and headed toward the door.

"Mr. Anderson?"

He stopped and turned back. "Curt."

"Okay, Curt. Just curious. Why did you pick me?"

"Well, 'Mickey Mann' sounded like a good, strong name. You know, old school."

"So what did you think when you walked in? Honestly?"

"Well, I guess I thought you'd be, uh, you know..."

"Taller? Older? White?"

"Uh, male," he said, blushing.

Hmm. I'd been putting it off, but it looked like I'd have to consider making some small changes to my website and the sidewalk sign out front.

* * *

There was no listing for a Meyer Arts, Myer Arts, or Meier Arts through Directory Assistance or on the Internet. A PR firm without a web site? Unthinkable. But then Curt faxed me a copy of whatever information his lawyer had on file. Good thing, too, because it turned out their name was spelled Myr Arts, Inc.

I dialed the phone number and my call went straight into an automated voice system. I figured leaving a message would be even more of a dead-end for me than it had been for Curt. But there was an address listed.

It was Thursday, mid-morning. The drive from San Francisco to L.A. would take several hours, but if I left now I could avoid the worst of L.A.'s never-ending rush hour. Besides, a long weekend in sunny L.A. as opposed to another rainy winter weekend in the Bay area – who could beat that?

I called the cat sitter from the curb. She was used to my last-minute jaunts, even if she didn't really understand what I did. My overnight bag was in the trunk as always in case of emergencies, the address for Myr Arts was programmed into my GPS, and I had optimistically rolled the top down on my Mini convertible. I was ready for La-La land.

Myr Arts, Inc. was on one of those famous Los Angeles boulevards you'd hear about in songs or movies. At least, that's what their address said. When I rolled to a stop in front of an unassuming building with no signage out front, I began to get that tickle inside, signaling something amiss. Still, there was a front door, so I marched up to it and rang the bell.

I waited a couple of minutes, but there was no answer and no noise from inside. I rang the bell again and waited. Nothing. Third time just for grins and I was turning to go back to my car to check the address when the door opened.

A young-looking blonde woman stood in the doorway. She might have been only a few years older than me, but it was L.A., so who could tell? The hallway behind her was dark and silent. She looked me up and down, equally gloomy and mute.

"Uh, hi, is this Myr Arts?" I asked.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Do I need one? I'm hoping this won't take long, I just need a little help on something."

"Well, that's what we do here." She rattled off the names of a few prominent celebrities and activists, then said, with a laugh and a wink, "everyone's dying to get our help."

When I didn't respond, she scowled at me and closed the door in my face.

My survey of the other businesses in the neighborhood yielded nothing. They didn't see, hear, or know anything about what happened at Myr Arts.

Although I had some notes from Curt, I checked online. The company was not a member of the BBB, their web site was a static, one-page piece of fluff, and their only trail on the Internet were financial reports of their continued profitability.

Weird name, weird low profile, somehow weirdly successful, and what about that woman who answered the door and her weird little "joke"?

I was pondering all of these things while waiting two hours in line for my Pink's hot dog, but by the time I'd finished eating and scribbling random ideas on napkins I figured out at least that Myr Arts is an anagram for Martyrs.

Julia Anderson fit the bill. I thought about the other folks the blond mentioned. Same with them, but it was all too tenuous. Several pieces were still missing, and I didn't know where to look for them.

Thankfully the bright sunshine the next morning erased any guilt I had about leaving the other items un-pondered. I spent the day on the beach in Santa Monica, building upon my

natural tan. That night I tried to make some sense of things again, but fell asleep watching a John Wayne movie from the motel's antiquated cable selection.

Heading home I kept knocking around the things I knew. PR firm, flying under the radar yet financially successful. High-profile clients and word-of-mouth business could explain that. The martyrs thing didn't seem like a coincidence, but I couldn't believe that so many people – wealthy people – were that altruistic. Why would someone sign up for that kind of deal?

When I stopped for a bite to eat I looked at the countryside around me. It was desolate by city standards; the sad and lonely western desert, no longer home to high adventure and fearless champions. It reminded me a bit of the western I had watched the night before, *The Shootist*.

Then something clicked. I remembered Curt talking about his sister's changed behavior near the end. I just hoped my hunch was wrong about parallels between an old gunslinger and a modern hero.

* * *

I rolled into town, made up with my grudge-bearing cat, and called Curt.

"You said Julia became secretive near the end, began to withdraw from you a bit?"

"Yeah, everything was going fine, she was doing some more advocacy on the side, nothing big yet," he said. "Then she started feeling sick."

"Sick how?"

"I thought it was the stress, you know? She was tired, had headaches. She toughed it out for a while, then she went to the doctor."

"And what did they say?"

"She wouldn't tell me. Said that they needed to run some more tests. She seemed more worried about juggling everything that had to be done than about what might be wrong."

"Is that when she hired Myr Arts?"

"Must have been around then. I never saw any invoices or anything, but her advocacy stuff exploded, so they must have been helping her keep our stuff on schedule."

"Do you know where she went for her doctor appointments?"

He named a prominent medical center on the Peninsula, a place I knew well.

"Is this important?" he asked. "I mean, what does Julia's health have to do with Myr Arts?"

"Hopefully nothing," I told him, even though that was half true. Half of me hoped there was a less ghoulish explanation. But half of me thought it might be the key to everything.

I took the train down to the hospital to avoid the non-stop nightmare of highway 101 traffic. The walk from the station was oh-too-familiar, stirring up memories of my high school friends laughing when I told them I'd be spending my after-school hours working at the hospital where my mom was a nurse.

I can't say that I was especially pleased about it at the time. But it beat coming home smelling of grease, and bloating up and breaking out from sneaking too many French fries and shakes behind a fast-food counter.

Anyway, it turned out the hospital connection continued to serve me well. The general staff and security guards remembered me, so it was easy to stroll straight to the records department as if I belonged there. Unfortunately, the face behind the desk in records was new and unfriendly looking. I ducked around the corner to think of my next move.

"Micki! What on earth —" It was my mom's old supervisor, Janet, who had become like a part of the family years ago, and had been rather protective of me since my parents' accident.

I saw her eyes narrow at the way I jumped when she approached.

"Still playing detective?"

The joke had definitely lost its luster. We both knew I could live on the insurance money and go back to school or just not work for quite some time. It was her needling on the subject that made my visits here increasingly infrequent.

"Yeah," I grimaced. "I'm trying to help an orphan who just lost his sister. Kindred spirits and all that."

"Oh, my." Janet's eyes became glassy and she placed a hand on my arm.

I felt low about the orphan thing, but I had a job to do. Besides, it wasn't inaccurate, just inconsequential to the case.

"Her death. Did it happen here?" she asked.

"No, no." The last thing I needed was her becoming defensive of the hospital.

"But she was a patient here, and it might have something to do with some decisions she made near the end," I said. "Her brother just needs some closure."

Janet was nodding even before she asked me the name, then she did, and disappeared around the corner. She came back a minute or two later, placed a file in my hand, and kept on walking.

"Ten minutes!" she called out to me without turning back.

I ducked into a nearby closet and opened Julia Anderson's file. I read it, then re-read it, then I felt sick.

Even worse than ghoulish, this piece of the puzzle pointed to something horrifying. Julia had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Then the hospital tried to contact her to let her know there'd been a lab mix-up. But she was on her way overseas, so they reached out to her secondary contact: Myr Arts.

* * *

As Curt lowered himself into one of my office chairs, I took a deep breath.

"Like I said on the phone, I have some answers, but they may not be easy to hear."

He nodded. I took another deep breath.

“Myr Arts seems to specialize in making people famous. Their name, it’s an anagram for ‘martyrs.’ When I went there, the woman at the door mentioned a few of their other clients. Well-known people. Altruistic people.”

“Dead people,” Curt muttered. “What you mean is, they set people up to be targets and then take their assets once they’re gone.”

“Um, I guess that’s one way of looking at it.”

This was not going to be easy. I wasn’t a particular fan of the Myr Arts business model, but I knew it would be the easiest thing to accept by far of what I needed to tell Curt.

“I think those people felt it was a good trade,” I continued. “More focus on their cause, and they leave to Myr Arts what they can’t take with them.”

“To me it seems pretty mercenary,” Curt said, “but ok, I get it for some people. Just not Julia. She wasn’t the type to just one day decide to be famous. She had a legacy – our legacy.”

I opened my mouth but he cut me off.

“I know you did your due diligence on our company, so you know the software platform we’re creating can be used for building and tracking any campaign, any cause.”

I nodded and let him go on.

“I grew up watching Julia write letters for Amnesty International, donating to this group or that group, wearing ribbons and buttons and all of it. But it seemed so distant and scattered. Computers have the power to bring it all together, real-time, up close and personal. That’s where the idea for our start-up came in. It was the one way Julia and I could take what we were both passionate about and make it work. Together.”

“I get it. And based on what you said about her behavior, I got an idea about why Julia might have done this,” I said. “That’s why I checked on her at the hospital.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Julia thought she was dying, Curt. She must have wanted to make a bigger difference in the short time she thought she had left. She probably found out about Myr Arts through one of her contacts and—”

“What do you mean, she thought she was dying?”

“There was a mix-up with the test results. She was healthy, just a little stretched thin, like you thought. By the time the hospital contacted her to let her know, she was already out of the country.”

“So you think she was reckless, figuring she didn’t have long to live anyway?”

I looked down. Curt’s question had been angry and hopeful at the same time. Neither of us spoke and it seemed like an eternity before he sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

“You think Myr Arts had her killed so she wouldn’t try to back out of their deal,” he whispered.

I nodded. The country she was visiting was new to her, an exploratory trip to get the lay of the land. She hadn’t had time to make enemies yet, so the timing of her death with her good health news seemed too coincidental to me.

“There’s no way to prove it, is there?”

I shook my head. The only paper trails involving Myr Arts would be the wills of their clients and some phone records and billing. Nothing unseemly or illegal about that. Anything further would have to involve a willing witness. With the kind of money Myr Arts was bringing in, that seemed unlikely.

“I still don’t understand why she left her portion of the company to them. She had money, liquid assets. Why leave our work in the hands of strangers?”

“Think about it. You said yourself this was a way to realize a dream for both of you. How could Julia do that after she was gone?”

“By having people who are experts in making small causes big news take a vested interest in our success,” he said slowly.

He looked pained. Before I knew it, my mouth was talking again.

“Maybe she thought they were truly sympathetic to the cause, and not just going through the motions for a big payoff,” I said. “Maybe I’m overly suspicious and her death happened around an unfortunate set of coincidences.”

Curt scowled. “Or maybe you’re right, and Myr Arts is directly responsible for her murder.”

So many maybes on so many fronts. The only hard truth was that Julia Anderson was dead, fighting for justice for those who couldn’t. And it didn’t look like there would be any justice for her.

* * *

Several weeks later, Curt’s lanky form appeared in my office again. He knocked lightly before settling down into a chair.

“Myr Arts called me this morning and offered to sell Julia’s share of the company to me. They have no interest in maintaining a piece of the business.”

I nodded. Although I’d hoped for the Andersons’ sakes that Myr Arts was more than a morbid marketing scheme, this confirmed for me that the company’s hands were dirty with Julia’s death and they wanted to distance themselves.

“I’ve been trying to figure out if I was okay with regaining full control of my company by paying off the people who might have murdered Julia.”

“And?”

“I’m not. I told them no deal. They’re stuck with me.”

“Can’t they just sell their shares to someone else?”

“No, Julia’s will was very specific about that.”

“So what’s your plan?”

“I want to keep digging into what might have happened.”

“That will make for some awkward board meetings,” I joked.

“I know. I need to be careful, which means I need a plan,” he grimaced. “And I realize this might take a long time and come to nothing. But I was hoping I could get some pointers from a professional.”

He tossed his hair aside, spearing me with those eyes. “Wanna join me for a drink?”

What’s that sound you hear in your head? You know, the one where your brain is screaming at everybody to keep going? Breathe, swallow, pump, no drooling. Ah, sweet agony.

“Well, I’m only nineteen, so I can’t really.”

He laughed. “Okay, then. I think I saw a juice bar on the corner. Is it any good?”

I nodded, smiled, then grabbed my purse and keys. As we got down to the sidewalk I stopped and pointed. “What do you think of my new and improved sign?”

I had the spelling fixed, the text enlarged, and put it in a classic font like in those old black-and-white detective movies.

MICKI MANN

GIRL DETECTIVE

He grinned, then looked serious for a minute.

“You’re not afraid it’ll cost you clients?”

“Nah. The people who really need my help will find me.”

He looked at me and smiled, and I envied every computer screen that had ever basked in his glow.

Boy crazy indeed. I love this job.

Michelle Mellon has had horror and science fiction stories published in several anthologies, but this is the first mystery story.

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