

THE BRASS BED

by Jennifer Stevenson

CHAPTER ONE

On a sizzling Monday morning in July, Jewel Heiss was serving a ticket on a convenience store owner on Walton near Michigan Avenue, watching the air over Lake Shore Drive turn pink, and trying to stake out the Drake Hotel across the street at the same time. Her boss had sent her to watch his wife, who also happened to be her best friend.

The Swiftymart owner whined, "Every time you come here, you ticket me. This is persecution. I'm gonna call the city." He led her out the front door, looking over his shoulder at the minked-up customers paying too much for sliced cheese.

The guilty ones always attacked. Fish in a barrel. I love my job. Jewel smiled sunnily.

"Every time, your scale still isn't fixed. Fix it and keep it fixed."

Sweltering in her polyester pantsuit, she hoped the pink stuff would abate before she had to get on the Drive. The pink was one problem Da Mayor's admirable anti-magic policy hadn't been able to wish away.

The deli owner sweated and lit a cigarette, the dumbass. She backed away. Sure enough, a pigeon swooped down out of nowhere and snatched the lighted cig off his face. The store owner screamed, "I hate birds!"

"Look, there's one!" A gaggle of tourists aimed cell phones and cameras at the pigeon. "They really do smoke! That's so cool! Man, Chicago is seriously--"

Mindful of policy, Jewel spoke up. "They don't really smoke, you know. They just eat the tobacco."

She watched the pigeon carry the cigarette to a ledge over the Drake's front door. Shoot, she should have been keeping an eye out for Nina.

Stakeout was not Jewel's bag. Stakeout was for cops. An investigator for the City of Chicago's Department of Consumer Services, she rated a badge but no gun. The scariest things in her arsenal were a clipboard and thick book of tickets.

She tore off a ticket now and handed it to the Swiftymart owner. "That scale is condemned. If you're found guilty, it could be a five hundred dollar fine. Get the scale fixed and you can call an inspector out to reverify it."

"My customers don't complain." He backed into the shelter of his store doorway and lit another cigarette, cupping his hands around it this time.

"Sir, your store is a repeat offender. You know it can be worse." In her small way, Jewel made the world a decenter place.

"Are you always this cheerful?" he said with loathing.

"Yep." Smiling down into his weaselly little eyes from five-foot-eleven she said, "Fix it."

"Oo, look, it's trying to pick up the filter end!"

The deli owner sent her a resentful look and mooched back into his store.

Jewel gritted her teeth. "It is not smoking. It wants the filter for nesting materials." This part of her job she didn't like.

"Omigod, it just stole that guy's cigarette," said a tourist who apparently believed in instant replay of the obvious.

The pink stuff over the Drive had thickened. Something out there caught Jewel's eye, a streak of iridescence over the fog. Groovy. Something new she couldn't talk about.

"Pigeons don't smoke. They're attracted to additives in the cigarette paper."

"No, it's trying to smoke."

The iridescence formed a teardrop shape and then suddenly shrank, as if something were sucking it down into the pink fog.

"It's smoking! Wow! Get a picture of that!"

Jewel was about to deny again, but even she could see that the pigeon had the filter end in its beak and seemed to be puffing away merrily. Another pigeon waddled over to it and stuck its pointed head into the cloud of second-hand smoke. She sighed.

Just then her quarry emerged from the Drake and wobbled languidly toward a cab. Nina looked fucked and happy. Jewel's heart sank.

Her best friend was guilty as hell. Ed would blow a blood vessel.

"See ya." She plunged across traffic. "Nina, wait up!"

Nina Neccio's trim figure jerked around, her handbag flailing guiltily. "Don't scare me like that!" Bad.

"Going north? I'll share." Jewel hated the suspicious look Nina shot her. This was going to be awful. Nina's hair had a flat spot on the back. Pillow head. Oh God. "I need a drink," Jewel said truthfully. It wasn't even nine yet, but she was stressed to the max.

"I'll buy you one," Nina said in her gravelly voice. She was wearing tan fuck-me heels, a little beige knit suit over her size two chassis--in her fifties, Nina still dressed in stores where sizes went down to two--and for once she had no lipstick on. Kissed it off, Jewel speculated.

Nina towed Jewel into the Coq d'Or on the ground floor of the Drake. When they were seated in front of two tall margaritas, she looked resentfully at Jewel. "Ed sent you."

"He's worried."

"I knew it. I knew that sonofabitch couldn't let me have some fun. What does he think, I wanna stay home and make lasagna for the rest of my life?"

"You're having an affair. My best friend is screwing around."

"I am not. Do you think I can smoke in here?" Nina craned her neck after the waiter and lit up. "I am totally not." Her hands moved jerkily. Her dark expressive eyes looked everywhere except at Jewel.

"Bull." This was icky. Oh, Ed, can't you fix your own marriage? "You are."

Nina blew smoke. "Not."

"Ed found the credit card charges." You had to persist with Nina. She was as slippery as pup shit and capable of outshouting Jewel with one vocal chord. "Three hundred and fifty dollars each?"

"I am not having an affair."

Jewel pushed. "Do you want him to find out?" Was this the typical North Shore wife's buildup to divorce--run up a huge credit card debt and then file? She gazed sorrowfully at her friend. "I love your lasagna. I love your kids. What happens to Sunday dinner?" She shook her head. "Oh, Nina."

Nina sucked in smoke. "He's my sex therapist."

Jewel tossed a hand. "Quibble."

The waiter showed up with fresh margaritas. Nina held the cigarette down below the table edge and flirted with her eyes at him. "Ash tray, madam?" he said pointedly, setting one

next to her margarita.

"Nice butt," Nina said, stunning Jewel, bringing the cigarette up and dragging again.

The waiter smiled and left, and Nina craned her neck after him. She said, "I have never even seen Clay with his clothes off." Jewel's certainty was shaken. "Now, the hunk in the bed, that's another story. But I think even you might argue on my side, if you were there."

Ed should have come. "No wonder you've got new spring in your step. Is this why you've been losing weight?"

"This is the truth. I go in there, I have a drink with Clay, our clothes are on. He's not my lover, I swear it. He's my sex therapist."

For five years Nina had effortlessly pushed Jewel's buttons and mothered her and driven her crazy and girltalked her through homesickness, lovesickness, shopping crises and guy crises. Jewel didn't handle Nina. Nina handled Jewel.

"Tell me you're not having sex," Jewel begged.

"I've never seen the other guy either." Okay, now we come to it. "For all I know, I made him up in a dream. It's the truth. I can't lie to you. It's the plain truth."

Jewel wanted to say, Ed's hurt, but that would get her farther into the middle. She fought to keep the words back. "I am so disappointed in you."

That ought to have signalled the beginning of a fight. But Nina just squinted at her and smoked. "I like your makeup today. Did I buy that for you?"

"Don't change the subject."

Nina attacked. "It wouldn't hurt you to try this, you know."

Jewel rolled her eyes.

"You haven't had a boyfriend in six months. For you that's an emergency." Nina tapped ash into her empty margarita glass. "I worried about you when you were dating that creep, the one who liked to choke you during sex. Before that it was whosis, did it in restaurants. For screwing in restaurants you can get arrested, but that other guy! I don't want to see you dead in a ditch."

"Neither did I," Jewel said tightly. "That's why I dumped them." This was not a good moment to get drawn into a discussion of her hyperactive libido.

"Yeah, eventually you dumped him. After a while," Nina said. "You love the kinky shit. I worry." I worry too. That's why it's been six months. "Here's Clay's cell number." Nina pressed a card into Jewel's hand. "Don't rush, no pressure, think about it, will you?"

She sat and smoked and eyed Jewel. Standoff.

"Nina, this is not about who has worse judgment when she sleeps around. This is about you and Ed. I need you guys," Jewel pleaded. "I don't want you to divorce."

"He's Italian, he'll get over it." To Jewel's shocked face Nina said, "That's the quick way to say, He's Italian, for years he screwed around with pretty girls at the department, and he knows payback is inevitable. It's marriage. He's not a hundred percent dumb. When you turned him down, he brought you home for me to play with."

"I'm glad he did," Jewel said, blinking. Ed made a pass at me? "Nina, he's upset. He asked me to--to--"

"Snoop."

Jewel slapped the table. "And look what I find! This is worse than an affair. Girlfriend, your husband busts bunco artists for a living. You're paying a con man three-fifty a pop for fake sex therapy. It doesn't take Dr. Ruth to figure this out. If you're so mad at Ed, wouldn't the real

thing be better?"

Nina drew her self up, stubbing out her cigarette with a much-diamonded hand. "This is not about Ed. It's about me. I am fifty-five. I've only ever had Italian husband sex, which believe me is nothing to write home about, I can't speak for what he does with his girlfriends." She jabbed the diamonds at Jewel. "And I. Deserve. To enjoy. Myself."

"You don't have to pay for it!"

"What, Ed told you to find me a cheaper lover?"

Jewel threw her hands in the air. "No! I'm--"

Nina leaned forward. "Look," she said, in a coming-off-the-crap tone. "We talk. Clay gives me the key to the treatment room. I go in, I take a nap. That's it."

Jewel's voice rose. "This mope drugs you and screws you in your sleep!"

"Nope." There was no spin in Nina's tone. "You look good with a light green eyeliner. Next time I'll take you to Arden for the full makeover."

"What about this other guy?"

Nina sighed. "I don't think he exists. I think somehow Clay hypnotizes me and something in that brass bed, it's gotta be that bed because it never happens at home, I dunno, but it's like I imagine the best lover in the world and then I dream about him. Boy."

"He's a con artist."

"He's no phony. I know," Nina's palm came up. "I thought so too. I must have been drunk the first time." She leaned forward. "But he's not. It's real. You gotta try this, I'm serious. Someone with your problems, he could be the answer."

"I'm not having sex with your 'sex therapist.' Ew."

Nina's eyes flashed. "I do not have sex with him. It's--oh, I can't explain it, you'll just have to see him yourself."

"Oh, I'll see him," Jewel said grimly. "Cryminently, Nina. What have you gotten yourself into?"