



THE EVIDENCE

"Some more coffee?"
"Oh, yes please, Rohanna."
Jennifer nudged Rufus.

"Uh... another cup for me, too, please," said Rufus, snapping to attention.

They were in Rohanna's elegant office situated in the rear portion of the boutique. Rufus, the smooth talking middle-rung executive was in his early forties. His bulk belied the agile brain that he possessed. He was, in fact, a rising star in his office: a man to watch. To his wife, Jennifer, Rufus was indeed very much a man to watch—but for a reason she could rather do without. Over the years, her zealous efforts at keeping an eagle eye and a tight rein on her husband had grown to become a major pre-occupation. Jennifer was a battle axe of a woman: petite in stature

but cutting in speech and intimidating in temperament. Then there was Rohanna, long legged and pencil slim, a model-turned-boutique owner. She was an ex-classmate of Jennifer's and had remained her close friend.

Rufus leaned back in the leather upholstered chair as he sipped his coffee. He could think of better ways to spend Saturday afternoon than to accompany his wife to her good friend's boutique. In the first place, he was not the least interested in ladies' fashion, but Jennifer had insisted. Rohanna had just returned from her Paris buying trip and Jennifer wanted to be the first in line to pick from the collection.

Yes, indeed. He could imagine how the afternoon would be quite different at Glenda's apartment. He was paying the rent of course, but it could

hardly be said that he was sharing it with Glenda in the true sense of the word. He was there perhaps every alternate Sunday afternoon or so, when he would tell Jennifer he was tied up in business meetings or was having a round of golf with the boys. Then there was the occasional two hour trysts after work immediately after which he would rush home lest Jennifer became too suspicious of his being detained yet again at the office. It was not that Jennifer was naive: banish the thought! In fact, Rufus had always had the feeling that she could almost read his mind. He knew she must have had more than a tinge of suspicion. But what she lacked was concrete proof.

"This trip has really been hectic—a real hassle," said Rohanna. "I would at least have been better prepared if it hadn't suddenly been brought forward by two weeks. I was really caught off balance. Do you know that I actually missed two of my own fashion shows because of this foul-up? There was this charity show at the Bukit Bintang Plaza and then

there was the private session at the Shangri-La. Imagine me—the owner and design co-ordinator—being absent from my own show!”

Rohanna might have missed her shows, thought Rufus. But he, Rufus, had not! Not one of them anyway. Rufus’ mind flashed back to that afternoon at the Melaka Room of the Shangri-La Hotel with Glenda. Lovely Glenda. Her helplessness and vulnerability that was her make-up was such a contrast to Jennifer’s iron-clad countenance. He had not wanted to go and had tried to explain that fashion shows were just not his cup of tea.

Glenda had whined piteously, “You never take me anywhere! I’m bored to death by myself at the apartment.”

Rufus knew she was right. He had fought shy of appearing anywhere with her in public lest they be seen together by friends or relatives, if not by Jennifer herself. He had reluctantly agreed to go after being assured by Glenda that the show was a private viewing strictly by invitation only. The chances that someone in the audience would know him was in fact quite remote.

The compere was at the microphone making her introductory remarks.

“... we are proud to bring you the very latest in fashion from *Rags to Riches Boutique*...”

“That name rings a bell,” Rufus had thought, “Could it be...” The voice through the loudspeakers continued.

“... designed by Jafri Hassan, Amelia Chan, Peter Menon...”

“Could it possibly be...”

“... and by the fashion co-ordinator of *Rags to Riches Boutique* herself, Rohanna Ismail.”

The last announcement sent a chill down Rufus’ spine. There was no mistaking it now. “Oh my God! If Rohanna were to see me here—with Glenda!”

“We have to go now,” Rufus whispered urgently to Glenda.

“But why? We’ve only just arrived.”

“I’ve just remembered I have some urgent work in the office I just have to finish today,” said Rufus, trying to keep his voice steady. “Look, I’m terribly sorry. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“But couldn’t that work wait? What could be so important?”

The wide-eyed look of hurt and disappointment on Glenda’s face was more than Rufus could bear. But there was little choice. He glanced furtively around the hall. Every minute he was there put him in increasing danger of being spotted. He was already standing up to leave when he caught another segment of the compere’s announcement.

“... due to unforeseen circumstances, Rohanna Ismail cannot be with us this afternoon...”

Rufus could hardly believe it. He was off the hook!

“Uh... well, I guess you’re right. Nothing could be that important. Yes, it’ll just have to wait.” Rufus’ furrowed brow had smoothened out and his lips softened into a smile as he took his seat again.

She leaned over and gave him a hug. “You are such a dear!” Glenda was aware of the power she had over Rufus and his sigh of relief was readily accepted as a sigh of surrender to her appeal.

Jennifer lowered her cup from her lips.

“So you don’t even have any idea whatsoever how your two shows turned out?”

“Well, not exactly,” said Rohanna, “but we had our photographer on the scene. So there’s at least a photographic record” Rufus remembered the in-house photographer scurrying about the edge of the catwalk, contorting his body to get the right angles for his shots.

“And speaking of that,” Rohanna continued, “I still haven’t seen those photos myself. I *must* really get organised. Well, I suppose now’s as good a time as any. Why don’t we look through them together, Jennifer?”

“I’ll get Elaine to bring in the photo albums,” said Rohanna. She pressed a switch on her intercom and gave an instruction. She then turned to Rufus.

“Oh, I know all this won’t interest you much, Rufus, but please do bear with us.” Rufus smiled. On the contrary, he thought to himself, he wouldn’t mind having a look at those photographs himself; they would bring back pleasant memories. He sipped his coffee, lounging comfortably in his chair.

Suddenly it struck him. Rufus sat

upright in his chair. The photographs! Oh my God! he thought. The photographs! Supposing Glenda and he appeared in the background in some of the photographs!

At that moment, Elaine, Rohanna’s assistant, pushed open the glass panelled door of the office, two photo albums cradled in her arms. Rufus knew he had to think fast and act fast. Elaine held out an album in her hand as she walked towards Rohanna.

“These are the ones from the Shangri-La show, and these...” Rufus made his move.

“I’ll take that,” said Rufus as he shot out from his chair and intercepted the photo album Elaine was handing over to Rohanna.

“I didn’t know you had any interest in fashion,” remarked Jennifer. “Why the sudden enthusiasm?” Rufus smiled weakly and said he was only curious what the show was like.

“Enthusiasm for fashion must be catching,” Rohanna laughed, placing the other photo album between Jennifer and herself. “We can exchange albums with Rufus afterwards.”

Rufus held his breath as he nervously opened the photo album. Of course, there was always the possibility that he did not appear at all among the photographs. He quickly flipped through the pages and then went through it again a second time. No such luck. He appeared four times in the album. Two of these were quite innocuous. In one, his face was turned away and so was not identifiable. The other photograph had his face partially obliterated by one of the models on the catwalk. But the two remaining photographs were damning evidence of his little escapade. One showed him clearly seated in one of the front rows alongside the catwalk with Glenda by his side. The other was even more damaging. It had Glenda resting her head lovingly on his shoulder. How was he to keep this evidence from Jennifer’s eyes? Once again, his agile brain was being put to the test.

He pondered. The photo album was the popular type readily obtainable from bookshops and emporiums. The leaves were of plastic with transparent plastic pockets which allowed photographs to be slipped in. It would be easy enough to slip the two offending photographs out of their pockets,

but that would leave two obvious gaps that wouldn't go unnoticed. Rufus flipped through the album again. Time was pressing on; Jennifer and Rohanna were already more than half way through their album.

Then Rufus' eyes lit up; he might have the solution. The album was not full and chances are that no one knew how many photographs exactly there were in it. Equally important, the photographs were not arranged in any particular order. If the two offending photographs were removed and replaced by two others from the back of the album, no one would be any the wiser. The thing then was to make the switch without being seen.

Rufus leaned over the coffee table to put down his empty cup and saucer. As he straightened himself, he nonchalantly picked up the folded newspaper he had earlier left on the coffee table and placed it on his lap. Jennifer and Rohanna still had their eyes down, pouring over the photographs in their album and commenting on them. Rufus eased the last two photographs in the album out of their pockets and into his folded newspaper. He then turned a few pages towards the front of the album. He slipped the photograph—the one of him with Glenda—out of its pocket and, in a deft movement, replaced it with a print from his folded newspaper.

It was at this precise moment that a shriek was heard from the front portion of the boutique, outside the office. Jennifer and Rohanna looked up. Rufus knew he had been a split second from disaster. Rohanna cocked her head to look through the glass panelling of the door as a stream of excited chatter drifted into the office.

"Looks like you have some sort of commotion out there," observed Jennifer.

"And I think I know what it's about!" smiled Rohanna as she stood up and headed for the door. "Could you please excuse me for a minute?"

Rufus waited a moment until Jennifer's head was again bowed over her photo album. The second photograph slid out of its plastic pocket. It was momentarily still between Rufus' fingers when Jennifer's voice cut through the air.

"What on earth are you doing?" Rufus froze.



"Why have you removed that photograph from the album?" "Oh... uh... I've spilt some coffee on it." The opportunity to make the switch had come and gone. Rufus made a show of wiping the photograph with his handkerchief, slipped it back into its place in the album and hurriedly turned the page.

"Oh?...," Jennifer paused, then countered, "Wait a minute... aren't the photographs in plastic pockets in the album?" Her eyes narrowed. "How could coffee have spilt on it?" Rufus' brain raced furiously.

"Well, if the photo can find its way into the pocket, so can the coffee!" he announced triumphantly. He was still keeping one step ahead of Jennifer. But Jennifer was not to be denied. She sensed something was afoot; her intuition told her so. It was just that she could not put her finger on it.

"Just let me have a look at that photograph," Rufus numbly handed the album over. But still, his brain was not idling.

"Now, this is interesting," said Jennifer acidly. "Who do we have here but dear Rufus?"

"Well, yes... In fact, I've just realised I was at this..."

"And who, may I ask, is this lovely young lady with you?" For a moment, Rufus' mind was blank. But only for a very brief moment.

"What young lady?" asked Rufus in mock surprise, leaning over the photo album that Jennifer now held. "This one? I've never seen her before

in my life! She was not with me—she just happened to be sitting next to me."

"She wasn't with you, was she? Ah, so our dear Rufus, who hasn't the slightest interest in fashion, had suddenly decided to attend a fashion show all by himself!" Jennifer's voice was thick with sarcasm.

"Went by myself? Of course not. I was with David Tan." Rufus pointed to the photograph. Rufus was there with Glenda seated on his left. On his right sat another couple, total strangers to him. The man was seated immediately to his right. Total stranger he might be; but to Rufus, he was the man of the hour.

"That's David, the one seated next to me. A very important client, you know... I had to humour him. You see, fashion is his hobby... He insisted on going. What could I do? If that's what it takes to clinch the contract..."

Rufus knew he had slipped out of the net again. He was pleased with himself. He had neatly explained this photograph away while the other incriminating photograph was already safely in his possession. He congratulated himself.

At this moment, the door opened and a beaming Rohanna re-entered the office, clutching a copy of the woman's magazine *Femme*.

"Guess what! *Femme* has been preparing a feature article on one of our shows. And it's out at last!" An overjoyed Rohanna shoved the copy to Jennifer.

Rufus suddenly felt uneasy.

"Just look at all these glossy pictures from the Shangri-La show... such brilliant colours!"

Rufus felt dizzy. His head felt light. Only a moment ago, he had extricated himself from the most precarious of situations. He had thought he was home and dry...

"And see how they have enlarged our photos... the details come out so much clearer..."

Rufus was really quite ill now. Only a moment ago, he had in his safe possession that one photograph—the one and only piece of evidence Jennifer could use against him...

"Think of all the publicity we'll be getting from this! I hear they've printed 45,000 copies of this issue. Imagine! 45,000 copies!"