

ONE

There is nothing more intimidating than a clean white canvas and a palette of colors.
– TJ Wilde

I'm TJ Wilde-Mason, soon to be simply TJ Wilde again – Tammy Jean Wilde to be exact. My mother was a big country western fan. No one, and I mean *no one*, calls me Tammy Jean, not even my mother. Before I entered kindergarten I began the resistance. I would only answer to TJ. It was an epic battle.

“Tammy Jean, I just spoke to your teacher. Misbehaving and it's only the first week of kindergarten, what am I going to do with you? Tammy Jean? Tammy Jean, don't you give me that silent treatment. Stubborn as your father, may he rest in peace. Tammy Jean?”

It was TJ or nothing. I refused to end up a big-haired country western singer with fake eyelashes and even faker boobs...or working a stripper's pole. You know, like my older cousin Kelli-Jo Kelley. I had definite ideas as a child. Not much has changed.

I bet you're wondering what I'm doing standing in the dark with my ear pressed against this door. Fair question. I'm

afraid the answers are more complicated than I have time for right now, considering I'm running for my life at this precise moment. But, I'll give you the highlights.

I'm standing in the dark because this is embalming room number two at Butterfield Funeral Home and Crematory. If I turn on the light, what I will see is Mr. Frank Absom in all his glory laid out on table one. On table two, depending on whom you believe, a Deputy U.S. Marshal who died in the line of duty or a dirty cop who got caught up in a gambling ring in the heart of Peoria, IL. He's naked as the day he was born and since I almost went out on a date with him, I'd rather not see him in that condition. Don't get me wrong, naked is fine when your equipment still works, but he's long past that point.

If I sound cold and disrespectful, it is only because if I stopped to think about what that really means, I wouldn't be able to breathe. In a situation like this, denial is your friend. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

The first thing you realize when you work at a funeral home – oh and I do work at this funeral home, temporarily, until my divorce is finalized. Well, actually, until my Soon-To-Be-Ex: (a) finally decides to sign the papers, (b) comes out of the closet, and (c) gets on with his life. Then I am out of here, never to be seen again. That is if I make it out of this room without needing this room. Anyway, as I was saying, the first thing I realized after I began working here, there is no dignity in death. No matter how much an undertaker tells you that your deceased loved one will be treated with dignity and respect, I rapidly learned there is no such thing. It's not that they are lying to you. It's that the business of death is messy and clinical. The dead are laid out naked on a shiny metal table, their neck elevated on a wooden block. Depending on

the family's wishes, they are either placed in a giant oven, baked to very well done, or a tube is stuck into a femoral artery and all their bodily fluids are drained out and replaced with embalming fluid. Don't even ask me about the horrors if rigor mortis has set in.

Now Mr. Absom, he's an interesting story. Eighty-four, died in the arms of thirty-year-old Maggie Smith. Not his wife. Cliché, I know, but if you have to go, that's the way to go. Scuttlebutt around town is he was quite the womanizer and no one, including his wife, was surprised by the manner he shuffled off his mortal coil. Deputy U.S. Marshal Michael Fraser, on the other hand, is the reason I'm running – okay hiding – for my life right now. How I became tangled up with Mike in all of this I'm not quite sure, I'm still trying to suss out that one.

To my current dilemma, I'm hiding from some really Scary Dudes. I figure that if I can stay hidden here until seven thirty when Jim Johnson arrives to open up the funeral home, I might stand a chance. He's the groundskeeper and handyman. He comes in, turns on all the lights, starts the heat or air conditioning and begins to tidy up before everyone else gets here around eight thirty. If I can remain undetected until he arrives, I may make it out of here, still breathing.

Generally, I'd say I could take care of myself. I'm a first degree black belt in Kendo. Recently, to work off the stress of divorce, financial insecurity, and my sexual frustration, I've become a hardcore kickboxer. However, my instincts tell me Scary Dudes are serious. Considering everything that has transpired in the last few days, I'm subscribing to the safety in numbers philosophy – unless the other team is armed, then no one is safe. I think it must be about six, maybe even six thirty,