

**Mike and Carmen head to New Orleans on a search...**

**By David A. Myers**



Mike Holcomb felt like a fish out of water. He felt as if he was in another country. Carmen Ducote felt right at home. In fact, she *was* at home. The gal was New Orleans born and Old Jefferson raised. When she'd visited North Alabama, she hadn't expected to stay more than a few months. It was to be a time of relaxation, fresh mountain air and seclusion. She hadn't counted on running into a retired Alabama lawman working a mystery case for the city. She hadn't counted on allowing herself to get drawn into the mystery.

Mike himself seemed a mystery. For instance, how was he already aware of the heart-shaped birthmark on her left cheek. And not the cheek that was part of her face. The other one. He claimed to never "reveal a source." She was confident she'd get it, eventually. But first things first. They weren't in New Orleans on vacation. They were here to find answers. They'd already spent a couple of days working the city, conducting research, with a couple of nights at Carmen's apartment on Dauphine Street. Tomorrow was Saturday so they decided to take a day off. It wasn't just any old Saturday. There were few 'any old Saturdays' in New

Orleans. This was the weekend festival of San Fermin in Nueva Orleans.

The ‘running of the bulls’ in New Orleans was the Big Easy version of Spain’s ‘Encierro de Pamplona’ and was set for the following morning, 8 a.m. sharp. Of course, releasing charging bulls into an American city was a ludicrous notion. Organizers countered by soliciting the participation of multiple professional and semi-pro roller derby clubs. The lady skaters’ masquerade included faux horns and foam sticks. The runners, on the other hand, were obliged to wear white shirts with a red ribbon around the waste. As in Spain, this was a “run at your own risk” affair.

Carmen awoke with excitement and anticipation. Mike awoke badly in need of coffee. She delivered a cup of Community, with chicory, to him at the kitchen table.

“You already have your bull-running outfit on? No bra, I see,” Mike said.

“Yours is in the bedroom. I wish we’d have thought to get you one of those things catchers wear. You know, down there,” she said, glancing at his crotch.

“I’m not going to try to run wearing a cup. I’ll get chafed and ruined for a week.”

“You’ll get ruined worse than that if one of them roller derby girls crack you in the balls.”

“I’m not worried about that. They’re supposed to just whack you across the arse with foam bats, right?” Mike said. “Besides, I can flat out run.”

“They’ll be on roller skates, though. They can move fast on them things. Plus, those foam bats are rather hard. They can sting.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Okay, but watch out for their horns, in case one of them girls recognize you for a hillbilly. I don’t want to see you get a horn up the ‘arse’! I’m gonna be needing you for at least a few more days.

“Go ahead and get ready. Your shirt and red sash are on the bed. Don’t mess around. They won’t hold the show up for you. I’m going down.”

Mike did a quick freshen-up, adorned his bull-running getup, and met Carmen downstairs on Dauphine Street.

“You’re wearing cowboy boots to run?” Carmen exclaimed more than asked.

“That’s all I ever wear.”

“You can’t run in those things, idjit. They’ll run you down like a damn opossum.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

At the appointed hour, the ‘bulls’ were released and the running participants took off for whatever each was worth. Carmen left Mike in the dust. Mike made it about a block.

He was moving pretty well, considering the footwear, when he hit an uneven section of French Quarter roadway and turned an ankle. As he stumbled, a skater rolled by and planted a whack soundly across his arse. It stung like hell as Mike struggled to maintain balance. When the next ‘bull’ approached, she found a dream-come-true, a hillbilly half bent forward. She was already moving fast, just like in the roller derby contests. She bent her knees, lowered her horns, and hit her target dead on. Mike was done for the day.

He managed to crawl to the curb as bulls whizzed by. Taking a seat, albeit an uncomfortable one, he finished the ‘running of the bulls’ as a spectator.

That’s where Carmen found him. She had made the run unscathed. She was a fast and wiry gal.

“Look at you. You didn’t make it a block.”

“The damn streets in this city are crap.”

“Everybody knows that.”

She helped him back to the apartment and consented to administer first aid.

“All right. Let’s take a look at the damage.”

He reluctantly placed his damage on display.

“I’ll be damned,” Carmen said. “There’s a hole in your left cheek at the exact same spot as my birthmark on mine.”

“And it hurts like hell,” Mike said.

“I’ll doctor it up for you, but while we’re on the subject of my birthmark, I have a few questions to ask first.”

Characters are from ‘The Shadow Man’

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