Shoes and Handbags

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You know how when you're walking across a parking lot, you're scoping out possible escape routes, watching everyone around you for signs of instability or danger, and figuring out how—if you were attacked by the shifty-eyed guy in the inappropriately large coat over there, or the other one who's skulking along a line of cars not meeting anyone's eye, like he's trying to hide something—you'd kill him with the weapon he pulled on you, or your car keys, or your thumbs, teeth, and knees?

Or how, when you're in a nice restaurant with your beloved husband and kid, you're figuring out what you would do if a lunatic with multiple firearms charged in intending a massacre, and you had to take him out to save their lives?

No?

Just me, then?

Well, that's awkward. So… *aaaanyway*… I'm going to discuss creating characters you can respect.

And it starts with shoes and handbags.

I own three pairs of shoes. Before I bought each pair, it had to meet two criteria. I had to be able to flee in the shoes. I had to be able to fight in them. That's it. If I had to run from an attacker in a parking lot or kill a deranged maniac in a restaurant or wherever, my shoes could not in any way hamper what I needed to do. Could I vault over table tops, or crouch-walk beneath them? Could I run across the tops of a line of parked cars, jumping from car roof to car roof? (Yes, I'm still a good runner, I still have a good long jump, and I can

both vault and crouch-walk. I'm not talking Walter Mitty stuff here.)

I own no handbags. The problem with handbags is defined in the name itself. **Hand** bag. You have to have one hand on them at all times. Otherwise they will fall off the shoulder that they have made lower than your other shoulder because you've been dragging one around for so long it's bent your body. If you have to back into a guy who has grabbed you from behind, lever him over your back and slam him to the ground, and then take out his eyes with your thumbs, you need to have both hands free.

Yes. That's what I think about on bright sunny days walking across parking lots.

Years ago, my friend Michael, who was an officer in the Army at the time, decided once to demonstrate something about women needing to be protected (we'd had a vigorous discussion on this some days earlier). So without warning, he lunged at me in my kitchen, doing some sort of attacker yell…and landed against a wall on the opposite side of the kitchen, with a bruised shoulder and a hurt expression on his face. "You weren't supposed to attack," he said.

Doing what you're not supposed to do can save your life, I explained to him. And my instinct is not to scream and wait for rescue. Bad shit had already happened to me by that point. I'd learned when I was fourteen that you can't trust strangers, and I learned when I was fifteen that you can't trust the people you should be able to trust with your life. I was still a couple of years away from discovering that you can't trust the person with whom you had two children…but I'd already learned to keep my survival plan active at all times. Flee if there's a place to flee, attack if there isn't. That's me.

So I do not own a handbag, a clutch purse, a briefcase, or a

hefty carryall. I have a backpack, and wear it over both shoulders so it does not impede either of my hands.

I'm never going to make it as a fashionista. Hell, I may not make it out of the parking lot. But if I don't, I still want the cops to say, "Yeah. It's a damn shame she didn't make it. But they'll still be digging pieces of the assailant out of the pavement next month."

Back to characters.

I could not with a straight face write a novel where the heroine wears Prada and owns seventy pairs of kitten heels and spike heels and talks about how ani she is and waits for the man with the big bank account to come along and fall in love with her because she's so…so…whatever the hell it is these characters are that men will fling themselves over cliffs to get.

If I were writing her, she'd be the woman found in pieces in the dumpster as the chapter two opener. I know me.

I could not write a novel where the hero is nothing but a vibrator strapped to an unlimited credit card. I wouldn't want to hang out with that guy. I like to talk about hockey and writing and ideas and philosophy, and my guy pushes me to think harder, to ask better questions, and to evaluate every statement I make for flaws in logic and reasoning…which is what makes him the right man for me. But I have read a number of books where "vibrator+credit card" is the perfect definition of the hero. He rescues her from her helpless little self, he puts out, and then he stays out of the way so the heroine's throng of yappy, shallow friends can ooh and ah over how big his… ah… bank account is.

Clearly somebody has to write those novels, because there are hordes of readers waiting to buy them. I ended up reading them because I was given copies and told, "You should write something like this. You'd make a lot of money."

Writers and their characters don't—or at least shouldn't—work that way. Never write a character you can't stand because you think it'll make you rich. You'll hate yourself in the morning, and for the exact same reason whores are not filled with pride and self-esteem from their line of work.

You have to write the people who resonate with YOU.

My heroines—like me—understand that bad shit can happen at any time, and they are determined from the first that if survival is possible, they will survive, and if survival is not possible, then they will not die cowering in a corner waiting for the rescue that never comes. And like me, they understand this because bad shit has already happened. And because they learned WHY you don't wait for rescue—you save yourself. And because they have learned to value their own lives, not for what their lives mean to other people, but because of what their lives mean to *them*.

And so, my heroines do not consider shoes and handbags based on their stylishness, their designer labels, or their fashion cachet. If I have a need to discuss shoes, running shoes or walking shoes may get a mention. If I mention bags at all, look for backpacks.

My heroines will be self-supporting. And my heroes are not wealthy as a primary attribute. They may be successful, but if they are, their ambition and goals are what I admire about them. See, I spent a bunch of miserable years in a country club life, and I have discovered that I don't like men who lead with their wealth, especially wealth they didn't earn. My heroes are smart and honorable, and they can be pretty funny, but they're earning their lives, too.

Your primary characters, your heroes and heroines, the people you write that you want your readers to care about, should not be carbon copies of you. Mine aren't. But they **are** people I would be friends with, whom I want to spend time with. They

are people who understand the importance of having your hands free. Of making sure your feet work the way they were designed to work at any given time. They’re people who understand that you have to actually like members of the opposite sex before you go to bed with them. They’re people who can watch their own backs, but will watch yours because they care about you and value you.

Before you can ask your reader to spend replaceable money in order to *then* spend irreplaceable time with someone you’ve created, you have to make sure that you’d want to spend time with those characters first. That they meet YOUR criteria for people worth knowing.

That they fit you like a good pair of shoes… however *you* might define good shoes.

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