

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eye. A spiderweb is draped over her face, with numerous dewdrops resting on its threads. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the web and the moisture of the dew.

# BLACK WIDOW

# *Beauty*

**Q**READS

ANNE SCHRAFF



**M**onique Reed was the prettiest girl Greg Nash had ever seen. When he came to work at the Side Scene clothing store, he couldn't take his eyes off her. He was glad his pal Lew Denison had encouraged him to apply for the job. What a great gig! The Side Scene hired only attractive young salespeople. But Monique was off the charts!

“Hey, Lew,” Greg teased, “how come you didn't tell me Miss Universe was working here? Believe me, I would've applied sooner!”

Greg wondered why Lew didn't smile. Usually, Lew had a pretty good sense of humor. “You're talking about Monique? I'd stay away from her, man,” Lew said.

“How come? Is she one of those stuck-up kind of girls?” Greg asked.

“No, but I went to high school with Monique. We didn’t hang out together that much, but there *were* rumors. Some of the girls at school said that Monique was—well—sort of a witch,” Lew said.

Greg laughed. “I bet those chicks were jealous. What girl wouldn’t be jealous of Monique?”

“Not the kind of witch who rides a broom,” Lew said in a serious voice, “but the kind that can make bad things happen to people.”

“Come on, Lew. You don’t believe nonsense like that, do you?” Greg asked.

Lew shrugged. “I don’t know. The guy Monique was dating a few months ago was killed in a mysterious car accident. He was driving along on a sunny day, and then he just careened off the road into a ditch and was killed! Some of his friends were pretty sure that Monique had something to do with it.”

“Ahhh, I feel bad for the poor guy. But

accidents like that happen all the time. He probably fell asleep at the wheel,” Greg said.

It was a slow morning at the Side Scene, so Greg decided to wander over to the jewelry counter where Monique worked.

“Hi, Monique. Nice bracelets. I guess the girls really like the brightly colored beads this year,” Greg said.

Monique smiled. “Each bracelet sort of does something special for the person who wears it. This rose-colored bead, for example, is supposed to bring you love and romance,” she said. Her sweet voice reminded Greg of rich cream dribbling over strawberries.

He picked up a green bracelet and read a tag saying that green beads symbolize wisdom. “Which one is your favorite?” he asked.

Monique smiled and touched the rose-colored bracelet. “This one—because it promises love, of course,” she said.

Greg turned to mush. He *had* to take this girl out!



**D**o you like going to the movies?” Greg asked Monique hopefully.

“Actually, I just love country-western music,” she said. “I always try to catch a performance when somebody I like comes to town.”

Greg loved jazz. He couldn’t even name any current country-western music stars. But he smiled broadly and said, “Yeah, I’m into that kind of music, too. Maybe we could go to a concert together sometime.”

“I’d like that,” Monique said. Then a customer came in and Monique glided away. In a few minutes, she talked a teenaged girl into buying a pair of big hoop earrings.

Between customers, Greg snatched a look at the entertainment section of the newspaper. He found that a local country-western band was playing at a club near the mall. They called themselves the Dust Storm. As he skimmed the brief review, he read that the girl vocalist was supposed to be

another Emmylou Harris. Greg had no idea who Emmylou Harris was—but he figured she must be good.

When Monique’s customer left, Greg ambled over to her.

“You know, there’s a popular little country-western band playing at a local spot tonight. The band is called the Dust Storm. They say the girl singer sounds just like Emmylou Harris. Would you like to go, Monique?” Greg asked.

Monique giggled and said, “Oh, boy, you’re a fast worker. Sure, let’s go.”

Greg’s feet were no longer touching the floor as he walked away. He couldn’t believe it was so easy to get a date with such a beauty! Sure, he was a good-looking guy, but Monique was *incredible*.

“That gorgeous girl is going out with me tonight,” Greg boasted to Lew. “Am I king of the mountain or what?”

“Well,” Lew said, smiling faintly, “I hope your life insurance premiums are all paid up.”

After work, Greg drove his Acura to Monique's apartment. She shared the place with another girl, Ginger Asinger. The roommate was a nice-looking girl, but Monique put her in the shade.

As Greg waited in the living room for Monique, Ginger sat down to make small talk. "Monique is just nuts about country-western music. I can't get into it myself. I'm into mambo, hip hop—anything but country."

Greg felt the same way, but he nodded and said, "I love country, too."

Then Ginger's smile faded and she turned serious. Her voice took on a "big sister" tone. "Look, Greg, Monique has been through some rough times lately. Her boyfriend got killed a few months ago, and she really freaked—so be extra considerate of her, okay?"

"Sure," Greg was saying just as Monique came into the room. Greg stared. She wore a mauve pullover and jeans in a darker shade of the same color. A golden necklace was around her throat. She looked *magnificent*.



So tell me all about yourself, Greg,” Monique said as they drove toward the club. “Do you come from a big family?”

“No, but I do have a brother and a sister,” Greg said.

“Me, too,” Monique said. “I bet you’re the baby, too, just like me.”

“Bingo,” Greg said with a smile.

“How did your parents treat you—like they *never* really wanted you to grow up and go out on your own?” Monique asked curiously.

“Well, sort of,” Greg said. “It’s hard to see the last chick fly the nest.”

“Is it ever! Mom isn’t so bad—but Dad hangs on to me like I’m eleven years old!” Monique complained.

When they parked at the club, Monique got out her wallet and showed Greg pictures of her parents and siblings. There were other pictures, too, pictures of young guys mostly. Were they *all* her boyfriends?



To prepare for this date, Greg had done some reading about country-western music. He wanted to throw some names around—Loretta Lynn, Clint Black, Hank Williams, Garth Brooks—and some of the newer stars like Leanne Rimes.

Monique seemed to be impressed. “Imagine,” she cried, “two country music freaks both working at the Side Scene!”

As Greg opened the car door for Monique, he noticed a dark sedan parked on the far end of the lot. What looked like a middle-aged man was sitting behind the wheel. In the dim light, Greg could see the angry scowl on his face.

“Do you know that guy?” Greg asked. “He seems to be glaring at us.”

Monique turned her head and sighed. “Oh, I *told* you about my father! I’m twenty-one years old, and he still spies on me! He makes me furious! Sometimes I wish he would just die!” There was a hard edge to her voice.

Watching the dark sedan leave the parking lot, Greg wondered if the man

had a screw loose. A father of a young teenager might keep an eye on his daughter while she was out on a date—but not a grown young woman!

“Your father doesn’t like you to date *anyone?*” Greg asked.

“I’m telling you, Greg, the man has hated every boy or man who showed any interest in me. He didn’t even like my fiancé. When he died a few months ago, my father wouldn’t even go to his funeral! I had to stand there by his grave all alone.”

“Oh,” Greg said. “That must have been the poor guy who lost control of his car and ended up in a ravine.”

“I’ve had enough! I swear I’ll call him tomorrow and *demand* that he stop spying on me—or else!” Monique snarled.



“Well,” Greg thought to himself later that night, “Monique is anything but a witch. I’m surprised she doesn’t have some major hangups with such a weird dad, but