

MAGNO GIRL

A WILD WORLD OF HUMOR, ACTION, AND ROMANCE!

JOE CANZANO



MAGNO GIRL



Happy Joe Control

Highland Park, New Jersey, U.S.A.

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FOR JILL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to everyone I've ever met. You've all been part of the experience.

1 — MAGNO IN MANHATTAN



Magno Girl stared across the windswept roof. Her lips shimmered in the moonlight like a couple of beer-soaked cherries. From the depths of Manhattan below came the clanging sound of a city that was never satisfied.

Was she thinking about me? I was desperate to know.

I took a deep breath. “Mags, when can I see you again?”

She stared at me with those vivid green eyes. Her black hair, streaked with savage shades of crimson, billowed in the hot summer breeze.

“I’ll be around,” she said. Then she looked away. “I have to warn you, Ron. I’m not very good at relationships.”

I grinned. “That’s just one more thing we have in common.”

“Also, I don’t want to do any commercials for soft drinks. That’s definitely out.”

“No problem—the soft drinks can slide. What else?”

“Well, since you asked, I’d like to fight some crime. I’ve discovered an evil plot, and my superpowers might not be enough to handle it. Things could get crazy and absurd.”

“Hey, I want to help you with that. I’m totally on board!”

She smiled. “Okay, call me tomorrow. I’ve got a job for you.”

“Count me in.”

I puffed out my chest and stepped toward her, wanting to wrap

my arms around her sleek body and kiss her long and hard—but she saw it coming, and she put out her hand and stopped me. She leaned forward and gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

It was something, and it was good. My whole body felt electric. “Just tell me what you need, Mags. Anything.”

There was a spark in her eye. “Sometimes I need to be left alone. We’ll talk soon.”

She leapt from the roof, her powerful body snapping like a switchblade as she dove into the death-black valley of bricks, glass, and steel. I briefly envied her ability to fly and then took the stairs to the street. I hopped on my chopper and rode to the liquor store.

I woke up alone the next day, with the morning sky vomiting its sunshine through the grimy window of my East Village apartment. I groped around for my phone and found it under a pile of empty beer cans. I fumbled a bit and finally made the call.

“Hi, Mags. It’s me.”

“Hi, Ron. Can you meet me somewhere?”

She sounded friendly, and for a second I felt like I was floating. But as usual, there wasn’t much talk.

“Any place you want. Did you eat breakfast?”

“Yeah, but it’s noon, so I guess we can eat lunch. I’m over on St. Mark’s.”

“I’ll be right there.”

2 — GREEN TEA CONVERSATION



I met Magnolia in Brooklyn a week ago. I'd been doing my job as a bouncer, trying to get a grip on my car crash kind of life, when she floated down from the sky. She could fly, she could fight, and the Gaze of the Guilt was her special superpower. Mags could reduce a hardened criminal to a state of blubbering confession. She was on my mind every minute.

I knew she'd be at the café when I arrived. She was always early.

I squeezed my chopper into an illegal parking spot on St. Mark's Place and walked fast down the street. The sidewalk was bulging with tourists and tattooed hipsters sucking on cigarettes, and the air was filled with honking horns and blinking lights—but I spotted Magnolia, sitting by a window inside a cafe, drinking green tea. She was talking to some guy.

I clenched my fist. The guy was standing next to her table, wearing a shirt and tie. He looked like a software engineer, and I figured he was trying to coax her into an enchanted evening on a virtual tropical island. I felt myself itching to crown him with a coconut, but there wasn't a palm tree in sight. She saw me and flashed a little smile.

"Hi, Ron."

I grinned. "Hi, Mags."

"What are you doing over there?"

“Nothing. I was looking for a coconut.”

The guy glanced at me and then looked back at Magnolia. “Nice meeting you,” he said.

I tried not to snarl too much as he walked away. Then I slid down into the wooden chair across from her, and I shrugged.

“Is something wrong, Mags?”

She cocked her head and gave me a cool stare. “Yeah. If you’re going to be jealous every time a guy talks to me, that’s a problem.”

“No!” I said with wide eyes. “I wasn’t jealous at all!”

She kept staring at me, and I swallowed hard.

“Okay, maybe I was a little jealous,” I said. “Maybe I wanted to bust a tropical tree over his pointy skull. I promise I won’t do it again.” I took a deep breath. “I just think you’re interesting.”

“I think you’re interesting, too. But I don’t want any trouble.”

“You think I’m interesting? That’s great!”

“Yeah, but I don’t want any trouble.”

I was beaming. She thought I was interesting! Had she mentioned something about “trouble”? I was great at that, too.

She shook her head. “You totally scared that guy?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Take a good look at yourself.”

I shrugged again. I was wearing a black sleeveless T-shirt and black Levis, like I always did. I also had a couple of bulging biceps and a body inspired by a few thousand psychotic workouts. I’d forgotten to shave, and I hadn’t cut my hair for a while, and I had a few edged weapons stashed in various places. And of course I had that one tattoo on my arm that said “Out Of Order,” or something like that.

“Ron, you look dangerous.”

I smiled. “Do you like it?”

She didn’t smile—but she said, “Maybe.” I was about to puff out my pectorals, but she hurried on to the next subject.

“Here’s the situation... There’s a butler named Jonathan who works for Thaddeus Stone III—you know, the guy who founded Americamart. Anyway, this butler got the job two years ago

through my friend Martina's employment agency. Martina says this butler is looking for a new job because there's something evil going on in Thad's house, and he doesn't want to be involved. Apparently, Thaddeus has teamed up with another bad guy, and they're planning to launch some kind of plot. I'd like you to go undercover at his house and find out what's going on. You can go in as a cook. Martina can get you in there tonight."

I grinned. "Mags, you look really great this morning."

"Thanks," she said, putting down her tea. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

"Sure, I'm gonna be a cook. And you think I'm interesting. Do you want me to make you a burger later?"

She leaned forward a bit. "Ron, there's something you should know."

I braced myself. This sounded bad.

"What?"

"I'm a vegetarian."

My heart almost stopped. So there it was—an area of incompatibility. My brain quickly considered a life without barbecue. I took a deep breath and soldiered on.

"That's okay. I can deal with it."

"Deal with what?"

"The fact that you don't eat meat."

"There's nothing to deal with, Ron. Just don't give me any hamburgers."

"Oh—right. I can do that, Mags. I'll just...eat them myself."

"Great. Also, I'm not very good at relationships."

"You told me that yesterday."

"I'm telling you again," she said with a tight smile. "I don't want you to be disappointed."

"I get it. No burgers, and no relationships."

She studied me for a bit, and then glanced away. "Look, I'm not that fanatical. I still eat shrimp, and sometimes tuna."

I smiled big. "So maybe there's some hope."

"Maybe."

3 — THE BIG HOUSE



To most guys, the average girl is an emotional enigma. Of course, we're usually too fixated on getting them naked to really care. Mags had me thinking different thoughts. I was frantic to know how she felt about me, and I didn't want to screw up this chance to help her—and to get closer to her. But why did I have to be a cook? Why couldn't Thaddeus own a motorcycle factory?

He had a place on the Upper East Side, so I jumped on my Harley Softail chopper and headed over there. I was using a phony name, "Salvatore Siciliano," because I thought it sounded exotic—like a racecar driver. I was supposed to be a chef, but what the hell, I'd once opened a can of tuna with a tire iron.

As the founder and CEO of Americamart, Thaddeus Stone III lived on a street of whitewashed stone towers that overlooked Central Park, in a mansion that popped from the pavement like a gargyle-encrusted cathedral. I rang the bell and was greeted by a smiling black guy named Terrence who escorted me into the house. The place was modern with a medieval flare, and featured Picassos in the parlor and satellite dishes strewn across the battlements. The kitchen included a Viking stove with ten burners, top-of-the-line Corning Ware, three ovens, and a center-island big enough to corral a cruise ship.

Terry grinned. "I'm the head of security around here. So, you're the new cook? What's your specialty?"

"Six-pack flambé. Don't touch the cans until they're cool."

A cute little Haitian woman walked into the room and started sweeping the floor. She had eyes like pinto beans and sugar cube teeth. "Hello, you're the new chef? My name is Leila. I'm the maid."

"Yeah, my name is Sal."

She giggled. "Oh, I don't remember the names. The cooks get fired so fast."

"Really?"

"Yeah. The boss likes things a special way. The last cook broiled the salmon too long and he was out. So watch your salmon, Sal."

"Salmon? That's a fish, right?"

She giggled again and scurried out of the kitchen. I decided to call Mags on my phone. What the hell, it was an excuse to hear her voice.

"Mags, it's me. What do you know about cooking salmon?"

"Hi, Ron. It's easy. Use fire."

"Thanks. I'll nominate you for a Nobel Prize. Mags, I'm probably not going to last too long on this job."

"Well, try to find out something first."

"What am I going to find out before dinner? Hey, I see they have a brand new flax seed grinder. I guess that's something."

I hung up the phone and swore at myself. Then another guy approached me. He was a crinkled old butler who spoke with an obligatory English accent, and he said, "Hello, you must be the latest culinary master. I am Jonathan."

"Hey, Johnny, nice to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. "So, I hear there are strange things going on here."

"Strange? Why, yes, it's always strange here." He narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice. "This place is haunted, and this weekend there will be a special dinner. Melvin Shrick, the food industry magnate, will grace us with his presence, and you will be expected to prepare something worthy of your gourmet expertise."

“Haunted, huh? You mean by a ghost?”

I guessed Jonathan was the disgruntled butler Mags had mentioned. Obviously, he knew a few things, and I’d have to come up with a clever way of getting more information from him. I figured I’d get him drunk. But first, I’d better come up with tonight’s meal. I got on the phone and called my brother, Al, who owned a restaurant on Bleeker Street called Al’s Big Pie.

“Al, you gotta get a couple of Sicilian pies ready, with peppers and onions. I’ll pick them up in an hour. I’ll pay you later.”

“Pay me later? You always say that.”

“Listen, Al, the whole world could be at stake.”

“You always say that, too—when you’re trying to get into some girl’s pants. I’ll get ’em ready.”

“Yeah, great, and throw in a couple of slices on the side, too.”

I was hungry, and it was going to be a long night.

4 — THE ROUND MAN GOES DOWN



The night turned out to be short. Apparently, Thaddeus Stone III was away until the weekend and my services wouldn't be needed, so I was told to go home for a couple of days.

This was a good thing. I knew my position as a chef would be compromised if I actually had to cook. I called Magnolia from 5th Avenue, standing in front of my chopper while the cars, buses, and shoppers rumbled by. I kept my voice calm on the phone while giving her a few details—and then I made my move.

“So, Mags, I'd like to cook you dinner. How about coming over to my place? After all, I am a chef.”

There was a moment of silence, and I held my breath.

“Sure, that sounds good,” she said. “What time? And where do you live?”

She was coming to dinner! My head was swimming.

“My apartment's a mess,” I blurted. “And I'm a lousy cook. Can you come at six?”

She gave a short laugh. “Wow, that's some invitation. I hope I can contain my enthusiasm.”

“I can get pizza. We can eat it outside, on the balcony.”

“You have a balcony? That's great.”

“Well, it looks like a fire escape. But I don't have air conditioning, and it's probably too hot to eat in the kitchen.”

She paused again. "I'll be there."

I gunned my bike through the snarling traffic, barely noticing the honking horns and raised middle fingers. I had to get home and give my place an overhaul.

I rushed up the squeaky steps to the third floor. I flung open the kitchen door and surveyed the scene.

The place was a disaster, with peeling paint, battered cabinets without knobs, piles of dishes, and a scattered collection of wrenches and power tools. The best form of overhaul would involve a match. I was doomed, but then I spied the three samurai swords hanging over the toaster. They shined! They really brightened up the dingy room and I was saved.

I decided to clean myself up, so I shaved and took a shower. There's something about a straight razor that makes me feel good, even when I'm only cutting myself. I didn't know why I was so nervous. Put me in the middle of a barroom brawl and I'm more comfortable than chrome on a wheel. And as far as women were concerned, they liked me and I liked them, at least for a couple of hours. But I'd known Mags for over a week, and it was different. She was well outside the painted lines, and that's where I lived.

There was a knock on the door and I jumped—and then there she was, looking beautiful in sleek black jeans and a pink T-shirt featuring the image of a fist wrapped in a flower.

She gave me that calm little Magno Girl smile and walked into my kitchen.

"Hi, Ron. Nice weaponry. Are you worried someone might try and steal your toast?"

"Hey, you have no idea how many people I've killed in this kitchen. Are you the kind of girl who appreciates a good samurai sword?"

"Most of the time. I can't say I haven't tried other things."

I was thrilled she was here. I offered her a bottle of beer and a glass. She examined the glass and politely decided to drink out of the bottle. Damn! I knew she was hygienic, and I cursed myself for not using more dish detergent.

We sat down at a beat-up wooden table. It was hot, and I felt the sweat running down my back. Mags seemed cool enough, though her shirt was a little clingy.

“So, what did you find out?” she said.

I grinned. “There’s a fancy dinner on Saturday. Melvin Shrick will be there.”

She took a small sip of her beer. “Melvin Shrick owns Pie Hole Pizza. Their headquarters are in Brooklyn, not far from my mom’s house.”

“Right. Is your mom still giving you a hard time?”

Mags sighed. “Yeah, she likes doing that. But she has issues, and I’m trying to be understanding.”

“What kind of issues would make her hassle a sweet girl like you?”

“Lots of stuff,” she said, looking away. “And what makes you think I’m so sweet?”

“I can just tell. You’re like a flying bowl of sugar.”

“Ha, this bowl has crashed a few times. There’s a lot of spilled sugar out there.”

I grinned. “Don’t worry about it. Who doesn’t love a good spill now and then? So what did your mom say?”

She gave a shake of her head. “She thinks I should get married and turn into a baby factory. Apparently, I need to find a man with ‘real prospects.’”

“Do you think she’d like me? I can change a tire pretty fast.”

“I don’t know, Ron. She doesn’t own a car.”

She smiled at me. It wasn’t a party smile or a flirtatious smile—it was a soft smile, like someone who wanted a friend. Man, I wanted to be that guy. I wanted to be so much more. I reached out and put my hand on top of hers.

She stared at my hand. Then her phone rang, and she looked at the display.

She leaped to her feet. “Hey, it’s Skinny Man Jones. He’s a cop I know. Sorry, but I should really take this.” She put the phone next to her ear. “What? Okay, I’ll be right there.” She hung up

and looked at me with wide eyes. “Someone just killed Joey the Round Man down at The People’s Pizzeria. He’s been burned and covered with pizza dough. They turned him into a man-sized stromboli!”

My jaw dropped. “Those dirty bastards.” Most of my family was in the pizza business, and while Joey was not a relative, I hated to see a good tomato soldier go down.

Mags narrowed her eyes. “Ron, I need to get over there. I’m sorry. I’ll see you soon.”

She ran over to an open window and leaped out.

I was tempted to follow her, but of course I couldn’t fly. I was still tempted to follow her, but I wanted to live long enough to have more sex. It was a basic thought that keeps most men from jumping out the window.

I raced downstairs and hopped on my Harley. I was only going a few blocks, but they were Manhattan blocks—dense walls of idiot-infested traffic, honking horns, and insanely expensive shoe boutiques. I exchanged a few rocket-propelled obscenities with a couple of overpriced pedestrians and finally arrived at The People’s Pizzeria on Avenue A, right across the street from Tompkins Square Park.

There were three blinking police cars parked out front near a bunch of gawking onlookers. There were also a few cops standing there sucking down slices. I saw Magno Girl talking to a huge, bullet-headed police officer I recognized as Lieutenant Rod Saint Royd.

Saint Royd had less personality than a can of bug spray. He towered over Mags and said, “I told you, Magno Girl, keep out of official police business.”

Mags laughed and stood her ground. “What are you doing here, Royd? Did you get thrown out of Brooklyn?”

“I got transferred.”

“Why? You weren’t committing enough police brutality?”

“I had my usual amount. It was all politics. And I should have you arrested. That T-shirt is not appropriate crime-fighting attire.”

“Do you ever question SuperStan’s right of access? Are fluorescent pantaloons acceptable to the NYPD?”

“SuperStan is the top dog of superheroes, honey. He’s also a good friend, and all his stuff is tailored.”

While Royd was distracted, I slipped inside the building and found a scrawny cop swigging a Coke and devouring a calzone. Instinctively, I guessed he was Skinny Man Jones.

“Hey, how are you, Skinny Man?” I said, holding out my hand. “I’m Ron, a friend of Magnolia’s.”

“Nice to meet you, Ron,” he said with a mouth full of dough. “This is a real tragedy. Joey sure knew how to make a pizza.”

“I know. We lost a good one. So let me see what’s going on.”

I walked behind the counter. A couple of guys were loading Joey’s corpse onto a stretcher. They’d done the right thing and scraped most of the dough from his face.

I grimaced. “Any clues?”

“Just this...”

I recoiled a bit. It was a hideous note written in black ink, scrawled in spider web-like lines across the lid of a pizza box. It said: *The dough man is done. If you meddle, your worst fear will come true.*

Skinny Man cringed. “Hey, someone’s threatening to send me home to watch the kids. I usually dump all that stuff on my wife.”

While Skinny Man was busy detailing his fatherly neglect, I pulled myself together and noticed a half-assembled pizza on the counter. I also noticed something else—a jar filled with a dried herb labeled “FOOKI XXX.” Huh? I knew this wasn’t a normal pizza ingredient, so I scooped up a handful and stuffed it into a plastic baggy.

“Okay, anything else?”

“How many clues do you want? You’ve got a dead guy, a note from the killer, and lots of free pizza. A hot detective would’ve had the guy’s jock size by now.”

I walked back outside, knowing I didn’t need to be that hot. And that’s when I saw her.

She was a willowy blonde in a white dress, and she was staring

at Magnolia. She could've been just another gawking onlooker—but my special *future sense* told me she wasn't. She smiled at me with teeth like smirking icicles. Then I turned my head for an instant and she was gone. I barely had time to drum up my sense of dread. Maybe it was nothing.

Meanwhile, Royd was still harassing Mags. He growled and said, "Magno Girl, why don't you take your menstrual cycle and go home?"

Mags laughed. "Royd, are you afraid I might destroy you with a tampon?"

Saint Royd thrust a finger muscle into her face. "You don't belong here. If you get killed, no one will help you."

"If I get killed, you'll still be ignorant."

Suddenly the screeching of car tires caused everyone to turn, and a red rocket-mobile came squealing to a stop in front of the restaurant. Out jumped Smashboy, superhero extraordinaire. He was dressed in a slick red bodysuit and a matching mask. The mask covered the top half of his face but did little to conceal his smugness. He ran to Saint Royd, who nodded in his direction. Smashboy said, "What's going on, Rod?"

"Hi, Smashboy," Saint Royd said. "It looks like someone put a hit on Joey. It doesn't seem like anything too important, but you can look around."

Mags cocked her head and gave the cop a cold stare. "Excuse me, Royd, but why is he getting in? Has he got a photo of you having intimate relations with a barbell?"

Smashboy turned toward Mags and laughed. "Who are you?" he said.

Royd said, "This is Magno Girl."

Smashboy smirked. "Great, just what we need—a magnetic female superhero. I'll call you when we have to fight the Tin Man."

"I'm not magnetic," Mags said. "My parents named me 'Magnolia.' And tin is a non-ferrous, nonmagnetic metal."

Smashboy gave a snort. "Oh, yeah? I'll remember that next time someone shoots me with a science exam. I hope you're not planning to throw flowers at the bad guys."

“I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll tell you what, you’re very sexy. Come back to my place and I’ll give your flower patch a good pruning.”

“I doubt that your weed-wacker is up to it.”

Smashboy laughed again. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a crime to fight.”

Mags looked at me, and I smiled. I also considered ripping off Smashboy’s arms and legs, but decided to keep cool.

Magnolia glanced at the other guys. “Look, I’ll take my little X chromosome and go home—for now.” Then she launched herself into the night sky.