

CHASING THE DRAGON

: A *GUNSMITH CATS*
FAN FICTION STORY :



BY MADAME MANGA

::: VOLUME ONE :::
CHAPTERS ONE AND TWO

::: DISCLAIMERS AND SO FORTH :::

Please direct all questions, feedback, criticism and other comments regarding 'Chasing the Dragon' to **MmeManga@aol.com**. I welcome the whole spectrum of responses to my fan fiction. Hearing from readers is a priceless compensation for my time and work!

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Originally posted in serial chapters on these websites:
http://www.livejournal.com/users/madame_manga
<http://www.fanfiction.net>
<http://madamemanga.50megs.com> (no longer extant)

The PDF edition has been revised and corrected from the original posted chapters.

Author's Notes:

This serial story was written over a period of more than five years, 1999-2005, while the manga it is based on was still running in Japan and being translated into English. A few elements were adapted from the 1989 'Riding Bean' OAV. Most of those elements have since surfaced in 'Gunsmith Cats' and 'Gunsmith Cats Burst', the currently running series as of 2007. However, the story is otherwise entirely based on the original run of 'Gunsmith Cats', and doesn't draw at all from 'Burst'.

The English translation of 'Gunsmith Cats' published by Dark Horse was printed in a "flipped" mirror-imaged format in order to read left to right. For purposes of this story, I have relied on the Japanese right to left orientation. So the reader may notice some inconsistencies between the English translation and this story; they are deliberate, and are meant to reflect the mangaka's original intentions.

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::: CHAPTER ONE :::

ONE hundred and twenty-seven miles per hour.

The speedometer needle inched steadily upward as Rally Vincent leaned on the accelerator of her Shelby Mustang GT-500, hoping fervently that California Highway Patrol officers were not more vigilant than their Illinois counterparts. Cotton fields blew by in a dusty blur, the hills that had seemed distant half an hour ago now looming close to the west. An orange Toyota in the left lane ahead – she whipped the wheel to the right and blasted past him. The indignant honk quickly died away with the Doppler shift.

She inched the window down for a jet of air and wished that she could turn on the A/C. It was hot out here on Interstate 5: level, brown and treeless on the southern approach to Sacramento. But right now she needed every ounce of acceleration her engine could give her.

Was that him at last? Rally squinted through the bug-splattered windshield and rolled the window all the way down. She reached for the rifle that lay securely crosswise in the passenger seat well, its long deadly slimness adorned with her Schmidt and Bender sniper scope.

Steering with the right hand, she gripped the rifle in her left and slipped it out the window. She aimed it at the distant blot, hardly larger than the little black fatalities on the windshield, and took a quick look through the scope.

Crosshairs right on him. Low and black, glinting in the late-afternoon sun. That was the back of a 1968 Corvette Stingray ‘shark’, distinctive even at this distance. He must have changed cars since his escape, but it had to be him.

He was still a mile and a half ahead of her, doing maybe a hundred and ten, but she could see to the horizon. This part of the Central Valley was considerably flatter than the Great Plains. Rally pulled the rifle back through the window and replaced it in the seat well. It wouldn’t be long before she might be able to put it to use.

One hundred and thirty-nine miles per hour, and she barely had to steer to stay on the straightaway. This four-lane divided section of I-5 had to be the one of the greatest drag runs in the lower 48. The perfect stretch of asphalt for a muscle-car

showdown. And she was racing with Bean Bandit for half a million dollars in cash.

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Only six hours ago she'd been in West Hollywood, choking on greenish-yellow smog and the scent of cheap Mexican food.

"How can you eat that stuff, May? It... it's *vile!*" Rally waved the smell away with one hand.

"Whaddya mean, Rally? I like it!" said May through a mouthful of bean burrito with tomatillo salsa and extra cheese. She took her change from the pushcart vendor. "Gracias. Buenos tardes, amigo!"

"But you said this morning that your stomach felt like a grenade had gone off in it. Aren't you afraid you'll get sick again?"

"It's one P.M. Why would they call it morning sickness if you got it in the afternoon?"

"I think that's just an expression, May." Rally sighed and looked up at the billboard on the rooftop above them: a Pam Grier revival movie ad reading 'DON'T MESS AROUND WITH FOXY BROWN! SHE'S THE MEANEST CHICK IN TOWN!'

"Not right now, she's not..." Rally chuckled and patted her shoulder holster through her jacket. Although they were nearly impossible to get, she had obtained a California concealed carry permit just in time for the trip. She didn't anticipate any gun-play, but her native caution and native passion for firearms dictated that she be armed at all times.

"Can we go to Universal Studios now, Rally? I want to see the Terminator 3 show! Ken said they do pyrotechnics right over your head, and the sound effects are MONSTER!"

Rally rolled her eyes with a smile both exasperated and affectionate. "I think that baby's going to be born with his fingers stuck in his ears..."

"I'm going to teach him everything I know about explosives. He's going to be the most popular kid in junior high school!"

Rally sighed. "I know you're having your last fling before motherhood, but don't you think you're overdoing it, May? You ought to be resting more."

“I’m not tired! I feel great!” May took another large bite of burrito and slurped up half her soda through the straw. “I want to do every amusement park in Southern California in one week!”

“Wasn’t Disneyland enough? Do we have to go to Magic Mountain?”

“Hey, I didn’t insist on Knott’s Berry Farm. Pleeese, Rally?”

“Oh, geez...”

“Hey!” said a passerby. “Bitchin’ car, lady!” He cast an envious glance at Rally’s Mustang. “Is that a GT-500? Muy macho!”

“You got it.” Rally beamed and patted the blue-and-white striped hood with affection.

“Hey, Raoul, check it out!” said the man to his companion. “This one will give your Firebird a run for its money!”

“*Firebird?* Don’t insult the wheels!” scoffed Rally.

“Yeah, it’s OK,” said the second man.

“OK?” Rally’s blood pressure rose. “This is a 1967 *Shelby Cobra Mustang!* Original 428-cubic-inch Police Interceptor, dual four-barrel Holley carbs! The real thing, buddy! Not one of your post-emissions-standards wimp machines!”

“Sure, but I saw something this morning that makes yours look like that pushcart.” The man bobbed his head at the burrito vendor and grinned. “Custom job. Five hundred ponies, he said, which I’d say leaves this jalopy in the dust.”

He was right — her engine pulled more like 400 horsepower. Rally frowned. “Oh yeah? Friend of yours?”

“No, I never saw him before. I’d’a taken notice of that hombre even without the car.” He scanned Rally up and down with an appreciative air. “I’d love to see a drag race with the two of you, conchita. Assuming you can really drive that thing!”

“Can I DRIVE this thing? I’ll show you driving — just tell me where Mr. Custom Job is hanging out!”

“Ral-ly!” squeaked May. “Universal Studios!”

“I dunno where he is now — he was cruising along Melrose. Asked me for directions and said he was looking for some coke dealer. Boy, I feel sorry for that guy if he finds him!”

“How come?”

“Madre de Dios! He was huge!” The man described an expansive shape in the air with both hands. “Shoulders like that. And *teeth*. And a jaw like the front end of a Humvee. I said, no, I ain’t seen him, SIR!”

“Uh, Rally...” said May. “That sounds kinda familiar.” They stared at each other for a moment.

“Two things.” Rally’s teeth set on edge. “Was the car bright red? With a spoiler and really thick glass?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“And did you see a scar over his nose? Like an X?”

“Yeah... you know him?”

“What the hell is he doing in California?” Her fists clenched; her heart pounded. “This isn’t fair. I drive for a week to get away from all the crap in Chicago, and Bean Bandit turns up in the same NEIGHBORHOOD?”

“Bean Bandits?” said the first man. “Aren’t they some drag racers from San Diego?”

“No, *Bean Bandit!* He’s a courier, and that’s his best car — the bulletproof one.”

“He must be on a job,” said May. “He doesn’t use Buff for just driving around.”

“A job in California? Well, maybe, but usually New York is as far as he ever goes!”

“Hey, it might be kind of nice to see him.” May shrugged and smiled. “It’s been months since we talked to Bean.”

“Yeah, it has, and for damn good reason.” Rally scowled at her. “I don’t want to talk to him, and you’d think taking a trip out here would have guaranteed that! He’s got NO business visiting the same state!”

The two men looked at each other in a speculative way. “Old boyfriend, huh?” said one, and they raised their brows at each other. “Too bad for him, conchita!”

“He is NOT my boyfriend, and thank goodness, he never was! But, uh...thanks for the info, guys. Can I treat you to lunch?” She gestured at the burrito vendor.

The two men exchanged looks. “From Manuel’s cucaracha coach?” said the first one. “No thanks. I like my stomach the way it is.”

May was just swallowing the last bite of her burrito, and looked a little green.

“I’ll tell Señor Bandito you’re looking for him, bonita,” said the second man with a wink. “If I was him, I’d come running.” They ambled off and Rally got out her cell phone.

“You’re still holding that against him, huh?” May wiped her mouth and threw the burrito wrapper into a trash can. “When does he get forgiven for thinking you’re good enough at what you do to go into business with him?”

“That’s not the point. The point is...” Rally selected the first quick-dial and put the phone to her ear. “I am not a crook, that’s what the point is. And Bean IS a crook, no matter what rationalizations he likes to use about his line of work. Thinking I’m too good to stay on the straight is NOT a compliment!”

The line picked up after the first ring. “Detective Coleman.”

“Roy! Hey, it’s Rally.”

“Rally? Thought you were on vacation, girl. How’s the weather out there in sunny California?”

“Hot. And smoggy. May loves it.”

“Great. What’s up?”

“I just got a good report that, uh, someone I’ve run into before has been seen out here. Roy, would you have any idea why a Chicago underground courier would be cruising Hollywood looking for a coke dealer?”

“None at all. Courier? If you’re talking about who I think you’re talking about, he doesn’t exactly report in to the Chicago police department.” Roy chuckled.

“Uh...yes, that could be who I’m talking about.” She flushed slightly; Roy had never met Bean, but knew she and May had encountered him on a few occasions. What he didn’t realize was that several months ago their communications with Bean had been friendly and even cooperative. If she could possibly help it, Roy would never know that. “I’m just wondering if this could tie into something at home. Has anything happened in the last ten days you could tell me about? Any loose ends having to do with a cocaine deal?”

“Hmmm... well, there was a big drug shipment rumored to be coming through from New York. Not coke, though. Heroin, right off the boat from Asia. We didn’t track anything down. Got an anonymous phone tip to be at a certain warehouse last Monday, but the chickens had flown the coop.”

“A tip? That’s interesting.” Rally frowned, scanning the street. “I wonder…”

“Something?”

“Maybe. I can’t pin it down quite yet. Just a feeling.”

“I’ve learned to pay attention when you get a feeling about something. You think this guy came all the way out there to deliver a load from Chicago?”

“Could be. Or maybe this dealer owes him money.” Rally rolled her eyes. “Now that I think about it, that could be the most plausible reason! Still, I’m going to keep my eyes peeled for this guy. I really do want to know what he’s up to.”

“Not such a bad idea. If you need any help on the spot, you can call my cousin Steve in the LAPD. Tell him I’ll vouch for your expertise.”

“Thanks, Roy. Give my best to your wife.”

“Mine too!” chirped May. “Bye, Roy!”

“Thanks, kids. Will do.”

May had retrieved her camera and was taking pictures of the sidewalk stars. “So you really want to know what Bean’s up to, huh? You could just call him and ASK! You’ve still got his cell number saved.”

It was third on her quick-dial list, as a matter of fact, right after Roy and May. Rally hurriedly put her phone away. “Why would I want to do that?”

“You tell me. Why spend time hunting for ol’ Bean in the first place? We’re on vacation!”

“Because this strikes me as weird, that’s why. There has to be something going down. Two thousand miles from his stomping grounds?”

May crossed her arms and stuck her lower lip out. “You just don’t want to go to Universal Studios!”

“So I’ll drop you off. You’re going to want to spend the rest of the day there anyway. I’ll pick you up later and we’ll go for dinner. Huh?” Rally smiled with an edge of guilt. “C’mon, May — don’t look like that. We’ll go to Magic Mountain later, I promise.”

“You said you wanted to get away from bounty work for a little while. From all those crooks who’d like to skin you alive. You said you wanted to have fun.”

“I…”

“This IS your fun, isn’t it? You aren’t happy unless you’re chasing people and shooting at them!” May cocked her camera and took a picture of Rally. “Bang! You’re dead!”

“May!”

“Really! You ought to get yourself a boyfriend, Rally. Then you’d find out about something better than big guns!” She giggled and waggled her hips.

Rally looked at May’s round stomach. “Better? At least my CZ75 won’t knock me up and run off to New York!”

“Ken’s only going to be gone for a month! He’ll be back in plenty of time for the baby.”

“Sure, sure. How about *marrying* you in time for the baby?”

“Oooh, Rally, you are such a prude! No wonder you’d rather play with cars than with men!”

“I like cars. Cars do what I tell them to do! I understand cars.” She opened the driver’s door and slid behind the wheel of the Cobra. “Come on, get in. I’ll take you to Universal Studios and then come back here to find out what I can. I’m going to have to hurry...”

“Oh, Ral! Can we stay somewhere near the speed limit this time?” May got in and buckled her seat belt.

“Oh, come on! It takes forever to get where you’re going around here unless you step on it! California drivers are so *polite* — they wait and wait for the other guy to go first and no one gets anywhere.”

Rally peeled away from the curb and darted into traffic, inserting herself between a pair of shiny SUVs. May lurched forward and back with the acceleration, her face beginning to turn green again. Rally checked her mirrors and stamped on the gas to pass the forward SUV.

The light at the next intersection turned red and she braked with a sigh of annoyance. “I liked the drive out here. Lots of interstates! But Los Angeles is a mess.” The light changed and she roared forward again. “May, navigate for me — which freeway is it? I see some kind of on-ramp coming up...”

“Uhh... oh, I hate reading in a car!” moaned May, struggling with a large folded map. “It makes me... urrrp... uh, I think you want to take 505 — no, wait, it’s — ”

Rally whipped into the left lane, took a turn and started up the on-ramp to the elevated freeway span. Traffic had backed up on the ramp nearly down to the street, and she had to stop at the bottom of the incline. A low guard rail along the side of the ramp to her right had lost a few spans to a sideswipe.

“Rrrr!” She rapped her fingernails on the steering wheel. “Let’s get MOVING!” Traffic inched up the ramp. Rally waited for a car-length gap to develop in front of her before she let the brake out. The Cobra’s engine was so powerful it tended to make the car surge forward, and she didn’t want to deal with a fender-bender on top of everything else.

“Rally!” shouted May. “There he goes! It’s Buff!” Rally whipped her head around to the right to see what May was pointing at, and saw a bright flash from a well-waxed car. Red, long, low. With a spoiler, and glass so thick the driver was only half-visible.

Down at street level and on the other side of the center island, he had just drawn abreast of them,. Then he changed lanes and sliced through the pack of cars he had been trailing, so quickly and neatly Rally could barely register how he had done it.

“Well, guess we missed him.” May laughed and sat back. “We can’t get off the on-ramp now, so we’ll just have to go to —”

Rally had a six-foot gap in front of her and a missing section of guard rail to the right. The drop to the street increased as the on-ramp rose to the freeway. But it wasn’t more than ten feet down —

She threw the car into gear, pulled the wheel sharply to the right and rammed the gas pedal to the floor.

“AAH!” May clapped her hands over her eyes. The Cobra shot through the gap in the guard rail, clipped the next section, rocketed off the on-ramp and went airborne. “RALLLLLY!!”

The Cobra sailed over an approaching Honda and landed with a crash on all four wheels, sliding across lanes at an angle. Cars in front of her braked and skidded. Rally straightened the wheel and floored the gas again. May slid halfway off the passenger seat, her skirt up around her waist and her seat belt under her armpits. In pursuit of the red car, Rally jumped the traffic divider with more hard jolts to her suspension and gained the right-hand side of the street.

Buff took a left turn under the freeway three blocks ahead. Traffic blocked her way forward and the cars ahead stopped for a light. Rally slewed to the left, bounced up on the center island again and straddled it, racing past the stopped cars. She jumped off again to the left when a light standard popped up.

Now she was driving the wrong way, dodging cars into the left lane and approaching the intersection filled with heavy cross traffic. Rally took a hard left turn and slid the Cobra into a gap, scanning for Buff. “Damn! Where did he go?”

“Rally! Are you completely NUTS!?! You’re going to get arrested!” May hitched herself back up on the seat and pulled her belt tight.

“Ha! There he is!” The red car was two blocks ahead, going straight in the left lane. This was a warehouse district, filled with grimy-windowed concrete and corrugated metal buildings. Buff took another left turn and then a right into a smaller street.

No sidewalks, just gravelly ruts off the pavement. The heavy traffic didn’t conceal them any more — only a few cars moved up and down this street. Rally braked and pulled to the right before she passed the corner where Buff had turned, creeping along the curb. When she reached a spot between a dumpster and a parked panel truck, she braked and peered through the gap.

About thirty yards away, Buff slowed and turned around. The hair rose on the back of her neck — if he’d taken a wrong turn and came back into this street, Bean might spot her. Buff rumbled to a stop near the corner and the engine cut out. Rally quickly shut off her ignition as well, since the deep growl of the GT-500’s engine was no longer camouflaged by Buff’s thunderous powerplant. The driver’s door opened.

One long leg, booted and blue-jeaned. A long arm, leather-jacketed and attached to a huge shoulder. His head dipped under the door frame and Bean Bandit stood up, all six foot seven of him, crowned with a thick shock of dead-black hair and a red headband.

Rally gave an involuntary shudder and drew in a sharp breath. A long time had passed since her last sighting of Bean, and that had been an unfriendly parting. He’d probably been avoiding her as carefully as she avoided him — at least while she was at home. Even when they had been on good enough terms to hold casual conversations in the street, they usually met under tense circumstances: gun battles, car chases: life and death and speed in the balance. Perhaps that was why his entrance to the scene always seemed to grip her like a strong hand.

Bean took off his sunglasses and tucked them in his jacket. Even at this distance, Rally could see the sharp scowl on his face. He hadn’t changed at all, except to seem even bigger and more intimidating than she remembered. Rally gulped, a strange quiver going through her. Bean’s hard-edged profile and measured movements brought back vivid associations she had assumed would fade to insignificance with time.

“Geez. I think he’s mad about something...” May looked a little sick.

“He looks ready to kill someone.” Rally’s combat senses crackled; she seized on that feeling and let it amplify to cover any other sensations less invigorating. “If he’s feeling that mean, I sure hope he doesn’t spot my car.” She felt under her jacket and unsnapped the security strap of her shoulder holster.

“Uh, maybe we shouldn’t have followed him...?”

Bean didn’t look in their direction. He glanced behind him, consulted a piece of paper in his gloved hand and headed up the small street out of their line of vision.

Rally let her hand fall from the butt of her gun. “He’s parked for a quick getaway, you notice? He didn’t want to take the chance of getting stuck in the ruts.”

“Well, that sort of fits with being ready to kill someone. I guess you were right — something big IS going down.”

“Those guys said he was looking for a coke dealer. If he’s been running drugs again, *I* am going to kill *him*.” Rally gritted her teeth, then got out of the car. “You stay here, May. I’m going to check this out.”

May’s big blue-green eyes looked troubled. “You really think Bean would have taken a drug run? He promised you he’d never do it again. I don’t think he’d try to get out of that — I mean, I always thought he almost hoped he’d lose that bet just so he’d have an excuse to quit.”

“Oh, come on! He’s a goddamn crook. How could he ever change his spots?” Rally popped her trunk and took out her shotgun. “Ha! Maybe he thought I wouldn’t catch him!”

“He always keeps his contracts. He takes penalties from anyone who tries to cheat him. That kind of thing’s important to him, Rally!”

Rally checked her holster; the CZ75 sat snugly in its place against her ribs. Her heart beat rapidly against it, both from the adrenaline of the stunt she’d just pulled on the street and from anticipation of what might await her.

“Yeah, well, it’s important to me too! He gave me his word. If he thinks he can revert to his old tricks way out here in California, he’s got another think coming.” She hefted the shotgun and moved around the corner.

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One hundred and fifty-some miles per hour: her speedometer didn’t register past one hundred and forty. The Cobra wasn’t even straining, though the road noise was deafening at this speed. She was well within pistol shot now, the rear of Bean’s Corvette clearly visible. He’d put on a vintage black and gold California plate that certainly didn’t belong to this car.

Obviously the 'Vette was superior for this longer-distance run; Buff's heavy armor plate probably reduced both its top speed and its range. Someone else had come into play, a white Lamborghini Diablo about five hundred yards ahead. Its peculiar squat shape and huge spoiler were unmistakable.

Those things cost about a quarter of a million bucks. She didn't know why the guy hadn't just let Bean have the money if he was that rich. It would have been a lot easier for him in the long run!

She coasted into bumping distance and matched Bean's speed, watching his face in his rear-view mirror. His expression was obscured by his sunglasses, but she saw him nod at her and smile into the rear-view mirror. Rally knew he must have spotted her chasing him at least fifteen minutes before, but he hadn't yet called her cell phone. She picked it up and hit the third program button.

Bean answered immediately and tucked the phone between jaw and shoulder, keeping both hands on the wheel.

"Hey, girl. Stay back. It's gonna get interesting, and I wouldn't like to bang up that pretty car of yours."

"How interesting do you mean? You planning to kill him?"

"Yep."

"That's murder!"

"Not in my book, it ain't. No man sets me up like that and lives. Hell, Vincent, I guess you saved my life." She heard a dry chuckle. "I felt the wind from that bullet kiss my cheek. Besides, he's got my money."

"Bean, I'm going to take him in. I called and the reward's a hundred thousand. Help me out, and I'll split it with you. Fifty thousand bucks!"

"He owes me ten times that, babe. Quintuple damages, or his life. He knew that."

"I heard some of the conversation. I know he has half a million with him. But it's drug money, Bean!"

"I didn't say I wouldn't take drug money. I said I wouldn't haul drugs. You oughta be flattered I'm taking so much trouble to keep my promises."

"You're splitting hairs!"

"Civilian coming up!" said Bean, and clicked off the phone. He instantly swerved to the left and revealed a Ford Taurus in the lane ahead of him. Rally followed

suit and they both roared past the shocked driver, missing his rear by inches. The Diablo was only a hundred yards ahead now.

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Rally looked up at the grimy facade of the warehouse that sat at the end of the small street. The only obvious entrance was the front door, and of course that was not the entrance she wanted to use.

Thirty seconds ago, Bean had walked through it and slammed it with a force that still quivered the entire building like aftershocks of an earthquake. On the right side of the warehouse was a chain-link fence, and parked in the shadow behind it sat a white Lamborghini Diablo. That might well be a drug dealer's car — a very wealthy drug dealer.

She could see a side door sitting ajar, but decided to check further. She darted into a narrow alley along the left side of the warehouse, squeezing past a rusty dumpster and piles of moldering cardboard boxes. At the back of the alley, a sagging wooden staircase clung to the building and led up to a landing at second-floor level.

Rally ran lightly up the steps and tried the door. It was locked. The small awning window next to it was broken, however. She peered through and saw a dim office, the furniture disarranged. This place hadn't been used for legitimate business in years.

Rally took off her jacket and wrapped it around her arm. Quietly she elbowed out the shards of glass until the frame was empty. She unlatched the window, opened it, put her shotgun through and grabbed the frame to boost herself up. Her slim body was a tight fit, but she got through and clambered onto a dusty desk top. She put her jacket back on — it was Kevlar-lined and she knew it was probably about to come in handy.

The office door had a dirty wire-reinforced window that she looked through before emerging. Nothing was visible except an elevated walkway that circumnavigated the building, and part of the concrete floor of the warehouse with a few empty pallets scattered across it. She opened the door, shotgun in hand, and listened for activity.

Someone was talking loudly down below, but no one was in sight. Rally slipped out and went to the outside door that led to the landing. It was dead-bolted. She shot the bolt back and set the door slightly ajar.

One escape route established. Rally crept to the railing of the elevated walkway. The loud voice continued, harsh and smoky. It was Bean.

“... compensation, like in the contract. But after chasing you cross-country for three freakin’ days, I’d rather take it out of your freakin’ hide!”

Something hit a support pillar with a thunderous clatter. The walkway vibrated under Rally’s feet. Bean sounded just as angry as he had looked. The sounds echoed off the concrete and the corrugated metal walls, but appeared to come from her left and at floor level.

“Be reasonable, dude. I’ve got the dough. I wasn’t going to stiff you, right? It’s all a misunderstanding, huh?” A smoother voice, with a California accent and a false friendliness.

“Bullshit.”

“Hey, I got it here — put the knife away, for chrissake. My man’s getting it now. You did a good job, man. You deserve it. No hard feelings, huh?”

So the dealer did owe Bean money. Rally began to creep along the walkway in the direction of the voices, trying to find a vantage point from which she could observe the conversation.

“I told you my conditions first thing. Pretty hard to misunderstand that.”

“Oh, dude, they wouldn’t believe me, man. I mean, the Roadbuster? He doesn’t run the shit any more? Who’s gonna believe me when I say that?”

“I’ll be glad to explain it to them.”

He hadn’t broken his promise! Rally was startled at the rush of warm relief she felt. But she hugged her ten-gauge even tighter to her chest.

“Oh, man, they tell me the shit has to be in Chi-town on Wednesday and they are not whistling Dixie. And they tell me, contact the Roadbuster because he is the man, he can do it and he don’t get picked up and he don’t skim the goods. There is no one better — no, there is no one even in the man’s class. He got to run the shit, man. They tell me, pay him what-so-ever he asks and it’s a fucking bargain, man.”

“Scrape the bullshit off your tongue, Brown. You can kiss my ass all you want and it ain’t going to make one cent’s worth of difference to this deal.”

“Look, dude, here it is.” A heavy thump, and the catches of a suitcase springing open. “Half a million. Five hundred Gs. Your compensation for your trouble, five times the original fee. All in used hundreds, my man. And hey, I got a bonus for you. Here’s some expenses for the vacation trip. Five thousand in the envelope, dude. Find yourself some fine L.A. lady and party down, huh?”

Half a million dollars! Maybe he hadn't broken the promise, but wasn't this stretching the point? Had he only told his clients he wouldn't run drugs in order to extort a higher fee?

Rally lay prone on the cold metal and peered over the edge of the walkway. In a small pool of electric light far from the darkened windows stood one big man and two smaller ones. Bean's back was turned to her, but she could see the faces of the other two. Both in their middle to late thirties, one blond and one dark. The blond man was slim and dressed in casual Southern California expense, and the dark man wore a creased suit with sweat stains at the armpits and one button undone over his pot belly. Not fighting men. Nothing like Bean.

"Shit," said Bean, with meaning. He raised the bowie knife he held and the blond man cast a quick glance upwards, to the right and above Rally's head. Bean tossed the knife in the air and caught it again by the handle with a metallic clang. "You lied to me. Those packages were stuffed and you took me for a damn fool. I saw your man test 'em at the dropoff, and you can bet I checked it out. I know smack when I see it, asshole. And you know the penalty for breaking my contracts."

Both men swallowed hard, but stood firm. Rally began to wonder: why were they not more visibly frightened? In their place, she might have lost bladder control.

The blond one smiled and opened his hands wide. "Believe me, dude, I know you are not the man to be crossed. I told them that, huh? They told me I got to have the shit off the boat and into distribution in twenty-four. China White, man, too good to wait for. They got their own debts to pay and I don't ask what they are."

Half listening, Rally examined the dim rafters to her right. What had Brown been looking for, and what had assured him that he was not in danger? What was a good backup defense if a man knew he was about to go up against an angry Bean Bandit?

"Yeah? Either you figured I was just thick in the head, or something else is goin' on. Whatever the hell it was, you can shove those bosses of yours right up your smooth white — "

"Hey, uh, let's not get personal here. I do my job, man. I know you do your job. Hey, man, you got a family? A nice lady?"

"What?" spat Bean.

What about a sharpshooter stationed high above the meeting place? With a scope and a high-powered rifle? Rally stared hard, shielding her eyes from the bright pool of light and letting them adjust to darkness. Slowly scanning along the ceiling, she caught a movement and a glint at the darkened far end, then gradually made out a crouching figure on the rafters.

A man, compactly built and easily balanced in his precarious perch. He wore a balaclava and a dark track suit. In the crook of his right elbow, just lowered from his eye, was a long black weapon.

Rally smiled, more or less in gratification.

With the greatest care and silence she could manage, she laid her shotgun flat on the catwalk and drew her CZ75 from her shoulder holster. Up against another marksman, the fine-machined accuracy of the pistol seemed more sporting than a heavy spray of buckshot. Though if she could, she would ruin the man's sharpshooting career for him.

Instinctively she checked the safety and the hammer — she always kept the weapon cocked and locked with a round in the chamber, ready to fire with the flick of a lever. She eased the safety off and held the pistol ready.

What was that rifle? The outline wasn't apparent in the gloom, and the man's body blocked most of her view of the weapon. But since he was a sniper who needed perfect accuracy, to pick off one man from a group at a long distance, it might be a large-caliber hunting piece.

That would have three shots, probably .308s or a custom round like a Lazzeroni Saturn. He'd get only one good shot anyway, and the .223 rounds of an AR-15 or a similar semi-auto didn't have the stopping power of a heavy round meant for big game. Big game indeed — a .308 through Bean's head would splatter his brains twenty feet across the concrete. And if the sniper went for the easier torso shot, even Bean's flak jacket could not stop its deadly trajectory.

Brown kept up his inane patter; she turned her attention to him again. "I got a wife, dude. Yeah, me. And we got us one cute little girl, I'm telling you. I do my job for my family, because I am a family man. And they take care of me and my family as long as I do my job, you get me? I don't do my job, they don't take care of my family any more."

What did she know about this fast-talker? His name was Brown, he worked for an unspecified criminal organization, he usually ran coke but had just graduated to heroin — Rally mentally snapped her fingers. She had seen a file on this man in Chicago. The organization was a shadowy one, probably based in Asia. The FBI was trying to get information on Brown and on his employers, and certainly would appreciate it if she turned him in with half a million in drug money. He could be the biggest catch of her life.

Brown went on, touching his heart and gesturing towards Bean. "Or... they tell me they know I love my family, you know? They say, you love your family and we know you do your job for your family. So do your job, man. What-so-ever it takes. Even if you gotta get someone to take a job he told you he didn't want to do any

more. Because he is the best at his job and this job is going to take the best. My little baby, man, I look in her eyes and I know I got to do my job. Huh?”

“Aw, hell.” Bean’s posture lost some of its tension.

Was Bean actually falling for that crap? She knew he had a soft spot for kids, but really!

“Take that case, man. And the five grand, too. That’s just a present from me to you, huh? This is a fine town if you got the green to spend. Have yourself a good time before you head on home.”

Bean let out a long sigh and scratched his head, as if confused at his own loss of will. “All right, Brown. I’ll take it and I’ll call it square.”

Of course, he could just have remembered he liked money better than anything else, including revenge. The sniper in the rafters still held his rifle at the ready, though his body had relaxed slightly.

The crisis was over — Bean wasn’t set on murder. Now, how could she bag both Brown and the money? First that rifle had to be taken out of commission... The CZ’s tapered grip settled firmly into the palm of her hand, the crisp edge of the trigger denting the flesh of her right forefinger.

Bean sheathed his knife, put the envelope in his jacket and gestured for the second man to close the case, then picked it up. “But you tell those bosses of yours that the Roadbuster is not hauling any more drug shipments. That don’t mean I do it for a higher price. That means I don’t do it at all.”

“Your funeral, dude — hey, figure of speech, huh? Take care.”

Bean only grunted. He turned to go, and Brown shot a glare up into the rafters. The sniper instantly snapped his weapon into position, peered through his scope, and tracked Bean with the muzzle as he moved out of line with the other two men. Brown made a fist, the sniper’s shoulders rose with a deep breath —

KRAK exploded Rally’s CZ75. A 9+Pmm round whizzed into the rafters just as the rifle kicked back with a heavy report and a blinding muzzle flash.

Rally’s dark-adapted eyes were momentarily dazzled, her whole body tingling from the pistol’s recoil. Someone yelled — the sniper. Had she hit her intended target — his trigger finger?

The rifle round kicked up shards of concrete from the floor a yard from Bean. She’d spoiled his aim, at any rate. From the sound, a .308. The sniper vanished from his perch. Down below Bean whirled towards Brown and his companion. His right hand flicked out from his chest to release two blurs of steel.

The men ran for the darkened back of the warehouse and an interior staircase that led to the elevated walkway. The second man stumbled on the first step, the handle of a throwing knife protruding from his calf.

Bean followed, bowie knife in one hand and suitcase in the other. Brown had made it halfway up the staircase. He stopped and turned, scanning the rafters with a snarl of real fear on his face.

Bean stepped over the fallen man and started up the steps. Rally holstered the pistol, brought up the shotgun, aimed at his skull and shouted as loud as she could.

“Freeze it, both of you! You’re under arrest!” Bean jerked in surprise and started to turn towards her voice. Brown reached under his jacket and around to the small of his back.

Out came a snub-nosed .44 magnum revolver. Rally quickly switched her aim, finger tightening on the shotgun’s trigger, but Brown grabbed the stair railing and vaulted over it, scrambling under the steps and out of view.

Bean instantly took the same vault, landing with a crash beside the stairs. Before he could straighten, the .44 spoke loudly.

Bean flung up an arm to protect his head. Rally could not get a clear shot at Brown from his position under the stairs. She ran along the walkway towards the stairs, trying to find a vantage point. Bean was still in her line of fire.

The .44 crashed again and again, Bean staggering under its hammer blows but not falling. He dropped the suitcase, arms crossed over his face, scraps of leather and Kevlar flying as the heavy slugs battered his armor.

Rally reached the staircase and clattered partway down it, her heart beating like cannon fire. Brown emerged from cover, still shooting. He kicked the case out of Bean’s reach and backed towards it, squeezing off one more round that hit Bean square in the stomach, then took his fifth shot at Rally as she leveled the shotgun at him.

She ducked and the bullet whistled over her head. Bean grabbed the stair railing for support, gasping for breath. Brown fired at him again and missed.

Six shots — his gun was empty! Brown popped the cylinder and let the brass fall, reaching into a pocket for a quickloader.

BOOM! The ten-gauge spoke loudly and Rally shot the revolver out of Brown’s right hand. The gun skidded away in a shower of blood and bits of bone and flesh.

He screamed in pain, several fingers gone, but scooped up the suitcase with his left hand. Rally pumped the shotgun and got him in her sights. He froze, clinging to the handle and half crouched over. The fallen man had curled into a ball and wasn't moving.

“Drop that case, Brown! Hands up!” shouted Rally. A wild smile on her face, her breasts heaving with excitement, she took a step down and reached for her handcuffs.

WHIZZ — SPANNNGG! The stair rail suddenly indented right by her hip. The sniper was back in action!

Rally blasted another shell in his direction, but had to dive under the stairs when she saw the black muzzle up in the rafters pointing directly at her.

Brown grabbed the case and ran for his life, followed by the other man hopping on his good leg. Bean lunged at him.

WHIZZ — WHACK! Concrete fragments leaped high as Bean hit the floor and rolled. He left a trail of blood — he'd been shot!

Rally frantically pumped the shotgun. The sniper had fired three times. Could he be reloading now? She jumped out and looked for him, then shrieked and jumped back under cover just in time.

BKAM BKAM BKAM went the rifle without a breath of hesitation, gouging the floor inches from Bean, who scrambled to get under the stairs. He nearly knocked Rally out of the narrow space.

“Hey! I got here first!” WHIZZ — SPANNNGG!

“How the hell did you get here at all? You miss me when I'm gone?”

“Dream on!”

Brown and the other man scrambled through a side door to the alley where the Diablo had been parked. WHIZZ — SPANNNGG! She peered around the end of one step and tried to draw a bead on the sniper as he continued to fire, bouncing slugs off the steps inches from her face.

That wasn't a hunting rifle — it was a semi-auto assault rifle with a large magazine, and a damnably accurate one. Bean knotted a bandanna tightly around his thigh, his teeth set in an intense grimace as blood spurted under his fingers. “How bad is that?”

“Straight through, pretty clean.” His hands and the leg of his jeans were drenched in blood. “He ain't firin' hollow points — lucky me!”

WHIZZ — WHACK! Rally jerked back. A round zipped between riser and tread, burying itself in the concrete between them. “Damn it! He’s got us pinned like butterflies!”

An engine started in the alley and a car squealed away. Brown was escaping!

“He’s gonna run out of bullets.”

“Not any time soon! Brown’s getting away!”

“Tell me what the hell I can do about it!” Bean finished tying his field dressing, tried to stand, and fell on one knee. WHIZZ — SPANNNGG! “Shit, I shoulda killed him when I had a chance.”

“No chance, Bean. That guy up there had your head in his sights the whole time!”
WHIZZ — WHACK!

“RAALLY!” shouted a girlish voice from the elevated walkway. “EYES!”

“Oh, God, May!” Rally gasped. “Bean, shut your eyes!”

Both of them ducked and covered, knowing full well what was coming. One of May’s special flash grenades!

BOMF! The white-hot light of burning magnesium cast the shadow of her interlaced fingers against her retinas. Rally heard a hoarse shout from above and sprang up with the shotgun trained on the rafters. Where was the sniper? She thought she saw a movement and let fly. BOOM!

Bean rolled out from under the stairs and to his feet, bowie knife held handle-foremost. His arm lashed back and forward. The knife spiraled past her ear and through the latticework of spans. It hit nothing but the far wall.

“Where the hell is he? May?!” May was jumping up and down on the walkway, pointing at the other side of the warehouse and a high open window.

“Shoot, Rally, shoot! He’s — ” BOOM! Rally emptied the shotgun where May pointed, but saw nothing. “Oh, he’s goone!”

“But he was BLIND! Shit, he’s fast!”

Rally felt a rush of wind behind her as Bean took off running towards the front door, his injured leg giving him an ungainly gait. Still, he crossed the warehouse in a few seconds and slammed through the door, still running.

“Bean! Goddammit, I’ve got something to say — ” He was gone as well. Rally sprinted towards the door, May sliding down the staircase behind her.

They ran out into the street in time to see Buff’s door close and Bean gun it so hard the tires skidded on the hot asphalt. He peeled out the way he had come, roared around the corner and vanished. Only a basso growl, rapidly fading, remained of the Roadbuster.

“Come on, May!” They ran to the Cobra and Rally leaped into the driver’s seat. “We can catch — May?”

Her friend wobbled on the sidewalk, put a hand over her rounded midsection, dropped to her knees, and lost one bean burrito and a Mexican soda into the gutter. She smiled weakly at Rally, and collapsed.

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“Goddamn it, Bean! STOP IT!” Rally yelled, though he couldn’t possibly hear her. SQUEEEEEEEAL! sang her tires as she swerved from left lane to centerline to head him off, trying to get between him and the speeding Diablo. “I am NOT going to let you kill him!”

She could see Bean’s set teeth in her side-view mirror, large as life. Rally slewed the wheel right and left, fishtailing her rear end and bashing the driver’s side of the Corvette. “That’s just a warning! I’m going to force him to stop — I don’t want you forcing him to CRASH!”

Bean moved to the right to avoid her, then suddenly hit his brakes and dove in behind her. The three cars, moving at about a hundred and twenty miles per hour, tore past a semitrailer moving at sixty-five. Now they were in single file: the white Diablo in the lead, Rally’s blue Cobra second, Bean taking the rear in his black Corvette.

The right lane looked clear now as far ahead as she could see. Rally stomped on the gas and bumped the Diablo, gesturing to him to pull over. The driver wasn’t visible through the tinted windows; it was impossible even to tell how many people were in the car. A Diablo had only two seats, however, the rear of the passenger compartment taken up by the huge engine, which left only a shelf below the tiny rear window. It couldn’t be Brown at the wheel, not with his injured hand. Perhaps the other man she’d seen at the warehouse was driving and the sniper wasn’t with them.

Whoever it was had a good sense of combat driving. When he’d spotted Rally and Bean coming up on his tail, he’d let them approach, then changed lanes and braked, leaving them ahead of him. They hadn’t stayed there long, but it had been a good try. They were not up against an amateur — that was, *she* was not up

against an amateur, Rally reminded herself. She and Bean both wanted to stop that car. Aside from that, their purposes did not intersect.

The Diablo accelerated again, leaping forward in a white cloud of exhaust to avoid the Cobra. But although a Diablo's speed might top 200 miles per hour on a good day, the driver seemed unable to break away — the long chase had apparently overstressed the engine.

The road began to climb the shoulder of a slight hill that rose above the surrounding fields by about twenty feet. The Corvette tore around the Cobra and slipped into the gap behind the Diablo.

Rally growled in frustration. "Bean, you bastard!" Her adrenaline was pumping, her excitement at fever heat again.

CRASH went the Corvette's front end into the Diablo's rear. The car shuddered, but the driver straightened it out and pulled away from the edge of the embankment.

Now there was a up-slope on the left side of the road where it met the approaching hills. On the right, the embankment grew steeper and steeper. Any vehicle taking a spill down that at the speed they were going wouldn't have much room for survival.

Bean wedged the Corvette to the left side of the Diablo, trying to force it over to the right. Obviously he meant to send it down the embankment. Rally roared up to the right side of the Diablo as a barrier and scraped its side, rear-view mirrors cracking together.

The passenger side window went down and she looked into a face — a masked face protruding sideways. Despite the heat, the man wore a balaclava. The sniper! He must be perched on the shelf behind the passenger seats. She rolled down her own window and shouted above the tremendous rush of wind.

"Pull over! I'll persuade Bean to deal and nobody has to get hurt!"

Her answer was a round black muzzle thrust from the Diablo. Instantly she braked and let the car pull ahead as the rifle cracked.

The round passed over her hood. Bean bashed the Diablo's rear again. She was parallel to him now and saw him glance over at her with the same set-toothed snarl. He made a frustrated gesture, then changed it to a pointing forefinger. Miming a pistol, he jerked the finger at the Diablo while looking at her.

Rally grimaced. Shooting out the tires might be the only way to stop the chase. But at this spot in the road, it would probably be fatal for the occupants. There

was no place to pull over safely with an exploded tire — it was a choice of up the slope and a flip on the roof, or down the embankment with a barrel roll.

Of course that was exactly what he had in mind. But dead, Brown would be no good to the FBI. She shook her head at Bean.

Suddenly the Diablo slewed into the right lane. Another semitrailer in the left lane ahead! Trying to pass a slower flatbed loaded with hay, it wheezed up the hill at about sixty, a brick wall in their path. The hay truck was still ahead of the semi, with a thirty-foot gap slowly closing between the two. Bean accelerated, trying to slip ahead of the Cobra before he had to move to the right. Rally blocked him and he blasted his horn at her.

“Ha!” she yelled. “Make all the noise you want!”

Bean made a feint at her, slewing his nose to the right, but she held firmly parallel to the Corvette. If he got ahead of her while the Diablo was still in the right lane next to the embankment, she could not prevent him from sending it over the edge.

She wasn't going to let him do anything of the kind! If she could hold him where he was for just a moment longer, she could slip between the trucks just before the gap closed and follow the Diablo. Bean was going to have to brake like hell to keep from plowing into the semi! Rally grinned in triumph, foot to the metal. He'd lose so much momentum that she'd be able to leave him a mile behind —

The Corvette veered to the left and leaped forward. Rally gasped in horrified surprise. He couldn't pass the truck on the eighteen-inch-wide shoulder! Was he insane?

But the Corvette lurched with its left-hand wheels on the up-slope, climbed the road cut and threw a storm of gravel. He WAS insane! And he was the best. Rally's thighs twitched, muscles clenching with the sheer thrill of the ride. If he could keep traction on loose rock with his car at a seventy-five degree angle, he would pass the semi and drop to the left side of the Diablo.

The white car was still in the right lane behind the hay truck, the driver obviously not expecting Bean's stunt. Rally gunned her engine to pass the semi on the right, the Corvette out of her line of vision now. Could she cut Bean off? The Diablo braked and held position just ahead of the semi, but still in the right lane, blocking the Cobra.

Rally hit her own brakes. Why wasn't the driver moving through the gap to the relatively safer left lane?

SCRAAAAPE went Bean's undercarriage, and he dropped down to the road in front of the truck just as the Diablo's bunker-slit rear window exploded from an inside blow.

The rifle aimed directly at Rally. To the left side was the semi, to the left ahead was Bean, to the right was the steep drop. Pinned like a target to a wall!

She hit her brakes and fishtailed wildly for a moment. The Cobra shuddered and fell back; Bean slewed to the right to bash the Diablo and the rifle tracked to the left.

The muzzle flashed, clearly visible in the growing gloom. Rally saw Bean's windshield shatter and his head snap back. His right front tire blew out simultaneously with a second muzzle flash. The Corvette skidded and turned broadside to her; she desperately yanked on the parking brake and pulled the wheel to the left.

Her right front hit his right rear, their bumpers locked in a death spiral, and Corvette and Cobra cleared the road together, a moment spent weightless in clear air before they hurtled down the embankment in tumbling, deafening, final embrace.

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"Becky, just put it on the account! I can't send you the cash electronically — I'm in California, for heaven's sake! I'm calling from the hotel."

May retched into the toilet again, and Rally handed her a fresh washcloth.

"A *thousand* bucks? Look, I'm giving you free info here — would you have known Bean Bandit is in Hollywood without my telling you?" Rally grabbed a pad and pen out of her purse. "You did? How? Whaddya mean, that'll cost extra?"

May sat back on the bath mat and held her stomach. Rally gave her a glass of water and flushed the toilet.

"That's May. She's got morning sickness. Yes, I know it's afternoon here! 2:18 P.M., to be precise! Is that gonna cost extra too?" Rally sat on the bathroom counter and looked into the mirror, probing a small cut she had incurred on her forehead during the firefight. "How about six hundred?" She decided the cut was probably from a flying shard of concrete. "So your information about Bean is something I might like to know, huh? Throw that in with what you know about Brown and I'll consider it."

May got up and wobbled out of the bathroom.

“Eight hundred for both, Becky. I don’t know if I can get Brown! I can’t cut percentages here — is there even a bounty on him?” Rally began to strip off her shorts and T-shirt. “May, you gonna be worshiping the porcelain god any more? I want to take a shower!”

“No,” said May faintly.

“OK, it’s a deal. Now tell me everything you have.” Rally listened attentively, jotting notes on the pad. “Wow, that much? Not bad. This is an FBI reward? How did a white guy end up working for an Asian syndicate, anyway? Uh-huh... And the American HQ is where? Hmm. Would he be heading up that way? Driving, probably... he’s armed and he couldn’t take a plane! Let’s see, it’s about six hours to San Francisco from here, if you don’t break the limit by more than ten or fifteen... ha, if I leave now, I could catch up to him! Assuming he’s driving carefully so he won’t be pulled over — no, wait, he won’t be the driver, so he must have his boys along. Never mind why, unless you give me a discount! Now, what’s this about Bean?”

May stuck her head in the bathroom door. “San Francisco? There aren’t any good amusement parks up there! Great America is so podunk!”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh... whoa, that’s interesting! Wonder what he’d say if he knew that! Say, how much of this DOES he know? Hey, I’d say that was included in the price! So give.” Rally listened for a moment, then shot upright and shrieked into the phone. “He DID? WHEN? Five minutes ago? Holy SHIT! I gotta RUN! Thanks, Becky!” She clicked the phone off and jammed it into her purse.

“What’s going on?”

“May, I’m going to San Francisco. There’s a hundred grand riding on it!” She finished stripping and leaped into the shower, turning it on at the same time. “Aaah! That’s COLD!”

“You mean a reward for Brown?”

“Yep! And I didn’t say so to Becky, but that suitcase of cash could be worth a lot too, if I can get my hands on it!”

“You want that half-million? Ooh, Rally, you could get — ”

“I’m going to turn it in to the FBI, if I get it. And if Brown will sing, they are going to love me for it, honey!” Rally stuck her head out from behind the shower curtain. “Wouldja grab me my professional outfit? I have to get out of here as soon as possible — every second is going to count!”

“I’ll get dressed too! You’re going to need my expertise — these guys are dangerous!”

“No way, Minnie-May. You stay right here. I’ll only be gone a day or so.”

“What? I’ve got to come along!”

“May...” Rally stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. “I’ve already exposed you to enough danger for one day. That baby — ” she put her hand on May’s stomach — ”deserves special handling. You can’t do hazardous duty any more.”

May dropped her head. “No... I guess not.”

“Aw, don’t look so down. You can rent a car and go anywhere you want while I’m gone!”

“I don’t want to go anywhere while you’re gone. I want to go with you!”

“I know. I wish you could come. But I’d just worry about you and Junior, honey. Please?” Rally dropped the towel and headed out into the bedroom, grabbing her jacket out of the closet on the way. “I need to get dressed — he’s probably already on the road.”

“Who is? Brown?”

“Bean Bandit.” Rally strapped on her slide-mounted .25 automatic, then put on her bra. “He called Becky five minutes before I did.”

“Bean uses Becky too?”

“Why shouldn’t he? She’s the best information broker in Chicago. I suppose he tried to catch Brown right off, but couldn’t find him. Then he would have had to get treatment for that gunshot wound — he was bleeding like a pig. So he’s not too far ahead of me.” Rally pulled on her panties and hose, then picked up her short black skirt. “Where’s my spare-magazine holster? Oh, there you are, you nifty little thing...”

“If he knows where Brown is heading, you’ll run into him again. Rally...”

“Hmm?” Rally strapped the magazine holster around her thigh and pulled her skirt down over it, then buttoned her blouse.

“Be careful. You know he isn’t a guy you can mess with.”

“I know.” She put on her shoulder holster and snapped the strap over her CZ75 9-millimeter Parabellum automatic. “I’m ready for anything.” Her jacket went on over the holster, and she grabbed her purse and keys.

In the mirror over the dresser, she saw her image: tall, slim, tawny-skinned, her dark-brown hair dancing around her face as she turned. “That’s a girl he’ll have to reckon with.” She made a pistol with forefinger and thumb and sighted on her own nose in the mirror. “Bang, bang.”

“I’ll see you soon?”

“Maybe by this evening! Have a good time.” Rally headed for the door.

“I’ll try.” May sniffled slightly.

“Hey, cheer up! What could happen?” Rally smiled brightly and waved goodbye.

“Almost anything,” said May as the door closed. “Almost anything.”

::: CHAPTER TWO :::

“THAT’S the end of them, then,” said the smallest of the three. He pulled off his balaclava, wiped the sweat-wet rusty hair from his forehead and let his face droop onto his rifle stock for a moment. “Damn, I thought sure I’d miss; it’s such a cramp up here in back.”

“I couldn’t see,” hissed Brown from the passenger seat. “Did you shoot him or her?”

“Him. Blew out his windshield and a tire, but I don’t think I hit the man himself. He lost control for a second and that was all it took for the wee bitch to paste him good.”

“Whatta sight,” said the driver. “Boom! Too bad about the cars, though. I ain’t seen a GT-500 in years, and he sure had some ass-kicking powerplant in that — ”

“Stop! Go back!” Brown shouted. “Tom, get out a grenade. We’ve got to make sure he’s dead!”

“Scuse me, boss, but seeing as this is a public highway, there’s witnesses,” the driver said in a reasonable tone. “We’d better just get the hell out of here, unless you want Tom to start shootin’ families in minivans.”

The smallest man cackled, as if this had struck him as an amusing idea.

“Oh, Christ.” Brown slumped in his seat. He held his bandaged right arm tightly to his chest, his face pale and grey in spite of the heat inside the crowded cabin. “All right. Fine. We’re still screwed from both ends. Let’s get me to a hospital. Can you turn on the damn air now? I’m sweating like a pig.”

The driver grunted, rolling down the windows. “Won’t do any good with the three of us in here, boss. This little number wasn’t designed for a battle wagon, that’s for sure.”

“Got it for the looks, not the combat value,” said Brown faintly. “But I thought we could outrun him in a Diablo... I hit 210 on the way to Vegas once with my wife until she begged me to slow down...”

“Yeah? For a coupla minutes? It’s only been in the shop most of the time you’ve had it,” said the driver affectionately. “Fraid it won’t outrun anyone today.”

He pointed at the temperature gauge on the Diablo’s dash. “I hate to run down Italian engineering, boss, but I think it’s fried. I could barely get a hundred per outta her after the Grapevine. I’m not going over the limit now and I’m still in the red zone. Mr. Lamborghini never had anything like this drive in mind — we shoulda taken the Range Rover.”

“Yeh’ll get no argument from me,” said the smallest man, struggling to arrange himself on the shelf below the tiny rear window, the wind singing loudly through the broken glass in the slit.

“I’m sorry about this, boys...” said Brown, his voice fading. “Sorry.”

“Nothin’ to apologize for,” said the smallest man. “Well, maybe my achin’ back...”

“I may have something to apologize for soon... when he catches up with us.”

“What?” scoffed the driver. “Both of ‘em down that embankment? No one’s gonna be catching up with us!” He adjusted his rear-view mirror. “Lookie that, boss. I think I see smoke!”

“Bean Bandit...” muttered Brown. “You saw how he took four magnum slugs at close range? All that his armor stops is the penetration, not the impact of the bullet. It must have felt like a pile-driver to the belly. He never fell, never even cried out from the pain.” He adjusted his position in the reclined seat, grey face sweating. “So he’s rolled down a rocky slope at sixty miles per hour. I did enough research to know a little setback like this isn’t going to stop him.”

“If you say so, boss,” said the driver.

The smallest man rolled over and popped the magazine from his rifle. “Don’t yeh worry, Mr. Brown. I’ll take care of him, and the wee bitch too.”

“Rally Vincent,” said Brown, his face taking on a slight flush. He hugged his right arm close to himself again. “Tom, if you’ve any of that left, I could use a little more.” The smallest man dug in a pocket of his fatigues and brought out a small packet of white powder.

Brown accepted it and tapped a one-inch streak of the powder out on the back of his left hand. He snorted it quickly and lay back. “Rally Vincent... I called Smith for some more info just before we left. She’s a licensed bounty hunter from Chicago. Age twenty-one though she claims a couple of years more — it’s hard to remember being that young. An expert shot and an excellent driver... though not in Bandit’s league. Perhaps we should be grateful she got in his way...”

“Yeah,” said the smallest man, grinning with yellow teeth. “I got just the way t’ thank ‘er.” He thrust .308 rounds from a cargo pocket of his fatigues into the detached magazine until it was full and replaced it with a solid, greased click of metal on metal.

“Oh, I don’t know, Tom,” said Brown with a reviving smile. “That seems a bit cavalier to me...”

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“God damn you to hell, Bean Bandit,” muttered Rally, one hand to her throbbing head. “If you’re dead, it’s your own stinking fault, you certifiable son of a bitch...” She released her driver’s harness, slid from the battered Cobra and fell into a patch of dry grass and thistles.

Her vision wobbled and swam. The sky seemed dark — of course, it was evening, so perhaps it really was dark.

Rally crawled forward and away from the car, which ticked and crackled as the hot metal cooled. Her hands sank into a damp patch of ground at the edge of a field and she stopped. She couldn’t see any buildings. Nothing but endless straight plowed rows and irrigation equipment, fading into dusky distance and rising ground fog. A dim bluish change at the eastern horizon marked the invisible peaks of the southern Sierra Nevada. A bit of warm light on the highest clouds showed the last evidence of the vanished sun. Talk about the middle of nowhere...

Thistles pricked her knees and she tried to stand up, succeeding after a couple of tries. Her dazed mind couldn’t focus. How had she managed to land upright and with the car relatively intact? Her memory of the last thirty seconds had scattered like shards of a exploded windshield...

She looked up the slope to the road as small rocks pattered down the incline, apparently freshly dislodged. No sign of the Diablo.

“Unngghh...” said someone nearby. Rally looked dazedly around. The black Corvette lay on its roof to her right.

“Not in hell yet, I guess...” she said, then gasped, her thoughts suddenly clarifying. “Oh, God, Bean!” She grabbed a flashlight from the Cobra and ran over to the Corvette, stumbling on clods of clay. “Bean, are you hurt? Were you shot? Are you OK?”

“Ohhh... shit...” moaned Bean.

The Corvette was a disaster. Both axles broken, drive train mangled, windows gone, splintered body panels and glass scattered from the top of the slope to its resting place.

The rear, stripped of fiberglass, sat up on a dislodged boulder at a thirty-degree angle. The top had been crushed down to the doors on the passenger side and only a little less so on the driver's side. Rally crouched in the grass, put her head under the hood and peered through the narrow gap of the vanished windshield into Bean's upside-down face.

He'd lost his sunglasses and his arms hung limply. Expression pained and a little shell-shocked, he had his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth open. "Bean!" she choked out.

His eyes opened slowly, squinting at the flashlight beam, and he gave her a crooked grin. "Hey, girl. How's yer car?"

"Hey!" shouted someone from the road above. "Did that asshole get killed? Christ, he rolled three or four times... !" It was a bearded man in a trucker's cap.

"No, he's alive! Please help me get him out!" Rally jumped up and nearly stepped on Bean's sunglasses where they lay on the ground.

"I called in on my CB," said the trucker, pointing north up the road. "There oughta be somebody here in a while." He started down the slope, skidding on the rocks.

"In a while? Don't they have paramedics around here?"

"Hey, lady, you are a hundred miles from anywhere. This isn't the best spot for causing accidents!" The trucker clambered down the rest of the way and jogged heavily over to the Corvette. "What the fuck were you doing, anyway? This crazy motherfucker passed me on the *road cut!* I about spoiled my drawers when I saw him!"

Bean could be heard chuckling, then coughed. Rally crouched down again and saw a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth, running down into one nostril. "Oh shit... Bean, how bad are you hurt?"

He made a face. "I'm OK. Don't much like hanging upside down, but I'm not dyin'." He spat out some blood and wiped his lips; apparently he had bitten the inside of his cheek when the car had rolled. Bean threw his body to one side and rocked the car slightly.

"That's not going to work! Unfasten your seat belt." Bean laughed and reached up, wrenching at the catch. Like Rally, he had a full race driver's harness that had saved him from ejection.

“Turn off your ignition, mister,” said the trucker urgently. “I smell gas.”

“Oh no — ” Rally sniffed the air. “Bean, hurry up!”

“Yeah, like she said. Lady, your boyfriend here is a goddamn motherfucking idiot, pardon me, but I don’t wanna watch him burn to death any more than the next man.” The trucker got on all fours, then lay on his beer gut and reached his hands out to Bean through the windshield gap. “Got that ignition off? Good. Now get unstrapped and get your arms out here.”

Bean undid the catch and slipped a few inches downwards, stopping himself with his hands.

“Can you get your legs out from under the dash?”

“Kinda jammed,” said Bean, straining. Rally flashed her light at the side of the car and saw gasoline streaming, forming a puddle in the grass.

She scrambled up and ran back to the Cobra. From her glove compartment she grabbed a small fire extinguisher. If a spark exploded the gas tank, the little thing would do no good at all. But it was all she had. She put it down in Bean’s line of vision and piled clods of clay into the growing puddle to soak up gasoline.

“Gonna give a heave now,” said the trucker. “Ready?” He had his hands locked with Bean’s and his feet against the window frame. Rally grabbed him around the waist for more leverage. “Go!”

Bean pushed, the trucker pulled, and Rally threw all her weight backwards. The car dragged forward an inch or so. “Go!”

Again they tried to pull Bean free, and again the car moved slightly. The rear scraped along the rock on which it sat, the exposed steel striking sparks. Tiny orange seeds of fire leaped into the twilight.

Rally stared in horror as the gasoline-soaked dry grass gave them fertile ground. In a bare second, fire bloomed up the side of the ruined Corvette.

“Bean! It’s burning!” She let go of the trucker’s fat belly and seized the little fire extinguisher. It had a pin, which she pulled out, and the trigger depressed easily. A little cloud of CO₂ mist emerged, and the fire shrank back. A moment of relief — and then the little cloud faded away. The fire leaped up, the tire beginning to catch.

Rally kicked up dirt and threw it, burying the flames as quickly as she could. She felt a sense of urgency but her own actions seemed glacially slow. The fire writhed lazily away from her efforts at suppression, reddening the ‘Vette’s glossy black

paint until it resembled blistering skin. In the encroaching darkness, the light grew more and more intense.

“Oh, holy Jesus Christ have mercy...” the trucker muttered. She heard a low growl from the front of the car — Bean’s voice.

“Die!” she ordered the fire. “Die die die...”

The growl repeated, louder. Bean had let go of the trucker’s hands and she could see his arms emerge from the narrow gap of the driver’s window. His palms and forearms flattened against the dirt.

“Gimme a hand, babe,” he said. “You at the rear, Bubba at the front. Get ready to roll her over.”

“*Roll it over?* You are fucking delusional,” said the trucker. “May God have mercy on your miserable motherfucking soul.”

“I’ll count three,” said Bean. “One.” Rally slid her sleeves over her hands and grabbed the rear bumper, which was getting hot. The trucker seized the edge of the engine compartment, shaking his head.

“Two.” The fire lit Bean’s arms on the ground, glinting off the smooth black leather of his armored jacket — he’d changed to a new, unscarred one, Rally noticed irrelevantly. He’d cheated death a few hours ago only to come to this...

“Three!” Rally pushed with all her strength. The trucker let out a shout. Bean’s arms seemed to swell with muscular energy. His elbows began to straighten, the car began to tilt.

Rally’s vision went dark with effort. But it suddenly brightened with a great flash of roaring fire, the gasoline pooled under the car responding to the rush of new oxygen. Heat buffeted her away and she rolled on the ground.

Through the veil of writhing orange she saw the trucker still straining at the front of the car as it slowly rose off the ground. Bean gave voice to a sound like the damned.

Rally shot upright and dodged the flames to run to the trucker’s side and push. She could see Bean’s face through the windshield, his expression unrecognizably twisted with ultimate effort, only his palms still braced on the ground. He was going to lose all leverage when the car rose higher, and then it would surely fall again, fall into flame, and he would fall with it.

She’d consigned him to hell a few minutes before —

Rally screamed in anguish, her wish about to come true before her eyes. “BEEEEAN!”

He gave one last heave, his hands clearing the ground. She felt the gravity shift, knew the car was about to crash on its roof again, and then saw him throw himself violently to the side.

For a moment the car poised in delicate balance, hovering between life and death, and then Bean flung himself forward, hands out the windshield. His elbows hit the ground, his joints flexed, and the car heaved over with a trembling crash, lying on the passenger side.

Bean locked his hands against the car’s crushed ceiling and threw his chest out, popping up the roof almost to its original height. Fire licked hungrily through the now-open back window. He heaved on the dash, wrenched each leg loose in turn, then reached out through the windshield. Rally took one arm and the trucker the other, Bean launched himself through the windshield, and they pulled him clear as flames claimed the interior.

All three of them fell in a heap. The trucker got up on all fours and scrambled. Bean lay half over Rally, his eyes closed and his chest heaving in hard, slow, deep pants. All her muscles had turned to water. She could do nothing but lie there with his face pressed to hers and clods jabbing her in the back, his weight crushing her heart. For some reason, her arms had fallen around his neck.

“Fucking, fucking, fucking miracle, Jesus fucking Christ and all his blessed fucking angels...” said the trucker, sitting up near them with his hands on his knees. “Bastard’s got the strength of Hercules.” He burst into tears.

The Corvette made its own funeral pyre. They watched the fiberglass scorch and finally ignite: Rally sitting in her Cobra, the trucker leaning on her hood, Bean standing fifteen feet from the roaring flames with legs spread and arms crossed, silhouetted in the full darkness. Four or five cars stopped on the shoulder above to sightsee. A fire truck finally arrived when the fire was almost dead and the frame housed only scorched seat springs and the blackened engine.

“Goddammit,” said Bean. “I put forty-eight hundred bucks into that car last year.”

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“Lady, it’s closed. It’s Sunday night, for crying out loud. And this is not Los Angeles, where for all I know they *do* have twenty-four-hour repair shops. It’s Buttonkettle. Buttonkettle, California, which has eight restaurants and two motels and one auto repair shop. You are just gonna have to wait until tomorrow morning. Ten A.M. Or maybe eleven, depending on when Ralph decides to get up and come down to open.”

“Can’t you tow it somewhere I CAN get it fixed? Look, all it really needs is a new oil pan — it can get done in a few hours! Come on.” Rally patted the hood of her Cobra as the tow operator unhitched it from his rig. She bent and soothed the scraped bumper with her hand, then dropped a kiss on the chrome. “Poor baby... Mama will make it all better!”

The tow operator looked at his watch. “Lady, it’s ten-thirty in the P.M. There is no other place that can do an old car like this one nearer than Bakersfield. And I am not towing this heap to Bakersfield, ‘cause it would take me all night and you are not gonna find anything open anyhow and I’m going home. I’m dead beat. Winching this pile of junk up that embankment was the worst job I’ve had in months and I hope I don’t ever have to do that again, ‘specially not in the dark with a crazy broad yelling at me to be careful and not bang it up any more even though it’s gotta be thirty years old and looks ripe for a wrecker, and you owe me two hundred and fifty bucks, payable right now and in cash, no credit cards accepted.” He held out his hand.

“Oh, for...” Rally shot a glare at Bean, who had jumped down out of the tow-truck cab and stood under the harsh security light of the repair shop’s parking lot. He gave no sign of having heard. Rally fumbled with her wallet and came up with a book of traveler’s checks. There were two hundred and eighty dollars left, all in twenty-dollar denominations, and she began to sign them and tear them off the book with steadily increasing force. The tow operator took them with a sigh, folding them up one by one. “That’s \$240. Do you have ten bucks for change?”

“Nope. How about your boyfriend?” The tow operator nodded his head at Bean.

“He is NOT my boyfriend,” said Rally, loudly. “He is — uh...” Bean turned to look at her, insects buzzing in the light beam over his head. Although it was night, he had put his sunglasses back on and his mirrored gaze showed her nothing but a distorted reflection of her own face.

“I don’t have change, lady. Call it a tip.”

Rally signed one more check and handed it over with a growl. “Fine. For ten bucks extra, you can give me a ride across the freeway to the motels. I assume they DO take plastic, because otherwise I guess I’m going to sleep in a booth at the Taco Bell.” She folded up the one remaining twenty-dollar traveler’s check and put it back in her wallet with the three one-dollar bills it already held.

“Sure, get in.” The tow operator climbed into his seat. “What about your boyfriend?”

“He is NOT — ”

Bean got in beside her again and slammed the passenger door. They rode in sullen silence, Bean’s long thigh pressing against hers in the cramped cab. The

tow operator pulled up in the parking lot of a Motel 6 and let them out. After the truck drove off, they stood immobile for a few moments in the chilly night air, staring out at I-5. A *Vacancy* sign blinked over their heads as a steady, if sparse, stream of headlights whisked by going north. Bean put up his jacket collar and folded his arms. Rally gave his profile the evil eye until he turned to look at her.

“What the hell are you hanging around me for, *Bean Bandit*? Haven’t you done enough for one day?”

“Haven’t *I* done enough?”

“You ruined my vacation. You turned up out of a clear blue sky — well, a smoggy blue sky — and now instead of going to an amusement park, having a good dinner with my best friend and sleeping in a nice hotel in Hollywood, I’m standing in a cheap motel parking lot with *you*, in the middle of nowhere, the middle of the night, with a wrecked car and almost no cash. And I’m hungry.”

“So buy something to eat.” He jerked his head at a row of fast-food restaurants and coffee shops across the street. The entire town sat here on a hill above the freeway — about four blocks in extent and consisting of nothing but service businesses for I-5 travelers. No one lived here — they only pumped gas, cleaned rooms, or slung hash. She had the choice of eight different fast-food outlets and greasy spoons. Rally wrinkled her nose.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Make up your mind.”

“Oh, shut up! I don’t answer to you! It’s none of your goddamn business what I do or where I go!”

“But you think it’s your goddamn business what *I* do, don’t ya? You’ve been chasing me all freakin’ day!”

“Excuse me, but the last time I checked, you were a *criminal*! I’ve been trying to stop crimes from being — ”

“So why not call the cops if you’re such a good goddamn citizen? What’s the deal with always getting in my way up close and personal?” He took off his sunglasses and leaned down with an aggressive jut to his jaw.

“Getting in your way?! When you’re trying to KILL a carload full of people?!”

“You mean the ones who tried to shoot me dead? I got a right to self-defense.”

“Murdering them later isn’t self-defense! We could have stopped them! I could have turned them in to — ”

“You could have scored a hundred K for Brown, huh?” Bean snickered.

“And you were chasing half a million in drug money! You’re a fine one to talk about financial incentives!”

Bean gave her a hard stare, unnervingly sharp in the cold light of the parking lot. “Don’t pretend you ain’t fond of money, babe. Anyone says that, I know he’s a liar.”

“What a high opinion of human nature you must have. No one can have better motives than yours, huh?”

“You sayin’ my motives are low? No way, girl. I am not letting Brown off with one cent less than he owes me, and that’s no small amount.”

“Just how do you plan to collect? Your attempt this afternoon wasn’t too successful!”

Bean’s stare flickered and slid away. He ground his jaw for a moment, then smiled reluctantly. “All right, Vincent, I owe you for that. If you hadn’t tailed me in Hollywood, I could be dead right now.”

“Yeah... you would be.” They looked at each other. Rally tried a smile of triumph, but it wobbled off into a sickeningly acute memory: her certainty that Bean would burn in that wrecked Corvette. She had been sure to the depths of torment that she would have to stand witness, powerless to save him from a horrible death. Before her eyes hovered the awful phantom her mind had conjured up — a human face withering in flame, the mouth’s agonized scream not quite drowned out by the ravenous fire.

The helplessness of that moment still roiled her guts as she locked her gaze with Bean’s, his look more open now, less cutting. She knew he irritated her to frenzy and that she had occasionally hated his guts, but somehow he was connected to her — he was right about her penchant for interfering with him. The fact that she had saved his life in the warehouse that afternoon had tied his fate even more tightly to hers.

If she could have blamed her own actions or failure of action, however indirectly, for Bean’s death, she never could have forgiven herself. She would have replayed the scene as a constant nightmare, every sound and smell branded into her memory even if she had been coward enough to cover her eyes. She never would have left him alone while he died.

In a way Bean had saved her as well as himself. He’d extricated himself from that jam, with a little help. She’d felt in control during the firefight in the warehouse,

even when pinned down under the stairs — a sniper zipping high-powered rounds past her head was the kind of situation she knew how to take in hand.

Even the struggle to get Bean out of the car had not panicked her until she had felt her own strength unequal to the task. She was so used to relying on herself that she had not taken Bean's abilities into the equation. He could do a great deal that she couldn't, though she could surpass him in any number of other fields. Not as a driver, she admitted to herself, though she was equal to nearly any situation; there wasn't anyone on the continent who could beat Bean behind the wheel. Like the master swordsman in any number of samurai movies, the only way to vanquish him was with a gun.

"I'm going to get a room," said Rally finally, and turned away. "*You* can go to — oh, geez..." She smacked a hand to her forehead, cursing herself.

"Hey, Vincent." Bean approached as her steps faltered. "Wait up."

"What do you want?"

"I got a proposition for ya."

"Huh?" She spun around, with a fleeting fancy that he was making a pass at her.

His hands were thrust deep in his pockets, his eyes scanning the line of headlights. "You're right. I might have trouble making that collection. They won't drop their guard just 'cause they saw me crash an' burn fifty feet down an embankment. They know me." He gave a lopsided grin. "They don't know *you* so well. After today, they might have some idea. But if we were to go in this thing together and work it from both ends, I think we could do it."

"Do what, exactly? Kill Brown and get you half a million? What the hell makes you think —"

"Hold on." Bean put up one palm. "I'm willing to compromise here. You want Brown alive so you can take him in? Well, I want that money. We can split the benefits — you take that bastard for the reward, and I get my dough, which you know he owes me anyway. How about it?"

"That money is drug profits, Bean. You 'earned' it running heroin. No deal."

"Hey, I didn't know it was smack! That bastard told me —" He cleared his throat.

"Then you thought it was something else illegal, didn't you? Who hires you besides criminals, anyway?"

Bean raised a brow at her, obviously recalling the one or two occasions she'd engaged his services herself. "You'd be surprised."

“I’ll bet.”

“Look, can we at least talk about it? I’ll buy you dinner.” Rally’s stomach chose that moment to growl. “Neither of us is going anywhere anyway, at least not till morning. Sleep on it and you might change your mind.”

Rally groaned. “I ought to be arresting you, not talking about going partners with you! But I’m not a cop, I’m tired and I AM hungry, and frankly I don’t suppose I ought to let you out of my sight, considering what you’re likely to do once you get to San Francisco. Thanks for reminding me! We’ll get a room here and we’ll eat, and I’ll discuss this with you on one condition.”

“What?”

“That you don’t hotwire something and try to ditch me once you know what I know. If this is a trick to get information out of me, you are going to regret it, Bean!”

“OK. It isn’t a trick. I mean it. I won’t steal a car.”

“Or buy one off someone with all that cash you usually haul around! I know you.”

“Fine, I won’t buy one either, and I won’t hitch a ride, and I won’t start hikin’ north through the frickin’ cotton fields! How come you think I’m lyin’ to you? Remember, I suggested a partnership before. I drive, you shoot. I think we kind of fit, you know?” He shrugged, smiling.

“Like cat and dog, maybe,” snorted Rally. “Come with me.”

They walked into the motel office and Rally rang the bell, studying a board with posted room rates. “God, it’s expensive in California! We got a double room for half that in Kansas!”

“Double room?” said Bean with a puzzled air.

“I am keeping my eye on you, mister.” The clerk came out and she put her Visa card on the counter. “A double, please.”

Bean slid the card back into her hand. “I’ll pay.” Rally started to protest, then shut her mouth. It was about time he offered to reimburse her for her trouble!

“That’ll be \$58.50,” said the clerk, scribbling on a form. “What’s your license plate number?”

“Illinois plates, BRD-529... well, I’m parked at the car shop. I had a little accident.”

“Number 269. No smoking in the rooms,” said the clerk, taking two fifties from Bean and handing him his change. “Check-out time’s eleven A.M. Not responsible for lost or stolen articles. Here’s your key, twenty-five dollars replacement fee. Have a nice stay in Buttonkettle.”

“Keeping an eye on me,” said Bean ruminatively as they climbed the stairs to the upper level. “Hope you don’t mind if you happen to see more than you expected to.” He chuckled mildly. “I ain’t accustomed to wear my shorts to bed.”

Rally’s back stiffened. She’d seen him naked before, though he didn’t know it...

“And if I happen to get an eyeful, babe, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Hey, might almost make up for losin’ my car. Heh, heh, heh.”

Rally rolled her eyes and shoved the key in the door of room 269. Bean was obviously highly amused at his own trite wit. But although his comments were easily ignored, something about the situation gave her a sudden premonitory chill.

He stood right behind her, his shoulders blocking the overhead light. As she opened the door, he brushed past her and she caught a whiff of his scent. Smoke, sweat, leather. He scanned the room as if he expected to find gunmen hiding in the closet, then checked the light fixtures and television for transmitters.

Rally watched in some disbelief. How could anyone have miked the place for their benefit? Brown had sped off north to San Francisco and no one else could have known they were here. She hadn’t even gotten hold of May yet. But obviously Bean liked to be careful.

The room was just an anonymous motel room, furnished with two double beds, a round table and three wooden armchairs with vinyl upholstery. Rally sat on a bed, then sighed and flopped down, flinging her arms out straight to the sides and letting them drop. A television sat on the low dresser and a rack attached to the back of the door held several newspapers and creased magazines.

The only object that drew her attention was Bean, stooping and running his hands under the furniture, his quick coordination remarkable for such a tall man. He found nothing out of the ordinary, though he pocketed some loose change he dug out of the upholstered chairs, and when he had finished he looked at Rally with a slight self-deprecating shrug.

When her only response was a weary stare, Bean unwrapped a drinking glass and got some water from the bathroom sink, rinsing a gulp around his mouth and spitting it out blood-tinged. He refilled the glass and threw the contents back like whiskey. After taking off his headband, he parted his sprawling black cockscomb with his fingers, scratching his scalp.

Rally took out her cell phone and dialed the hotel room she was sharing with May in Hollywood.

Bean wet one hand under the faucet and slicked his hair straight back from his forehead to get it out of his eyes. A different look for him, one she'd seen before — sleeker, meaner, his jaw more prominent by contrast. Rally studied his profile while the phone rang, trying to gauge his mood and his motives for dealing with her.

Figuring out Bean was never an easy task. He was one of the least readable people she knew, though also one of the most straightforward. The phone kept ringing and eventually she clicked it off, still gazing at Bean while he washed his dirty, bloodstained face and hands and scrubbed them dry with a towel. He wasn't a dissembler, but he wasn't a conversationalist either. Nearly every clue she had to his thoughts and personality was physical: his armored clothing, his weightlifter's muscles, his tight lips and controlled expressions. Much of the time he wore a scowl.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, Bean turned his head and smirked at her. He'd caught her staring. Rally felt her face warm slightly, but she held the look until it became a contest.

Bean seemed to be sizing her up too, his smile growing broader by the moment until it broke out into a grin like the sun. It suited him — she'd seen him with an easy smile only rarely and had forgotten he could seem so attractive, in an overscale way. Or had she? Handsome was not the word, but Bean possessed an almost elegant clarity of face and limb, a purposeful definition that had a far more profound effect than mere prettiness; a queer feeling crept up the back of Rally's scalp, something between warmth and uncomfortable burn.

He dropped the stare first, shutting the bathroom door with a wink, and she let out the breath she had been holding.

Rally thrust her phone back into her purse, got up from the bed and drew her CZ75. Standing in the middle of the room, she popped out the full magazine, rolled its weight in her hand, then ejected the chambered cartridge, put her forefinger through the trigger guard and spun the weapon out of her grip and back again, movements so natural and unconscious that she barely thought about them. The heavy, soothing touch of steel helped her organize her thoughts. Tossing the gun in the air, she caught it in her left hand and repeated the spin, forwards and backwards and over again.

With nothing more than this object, properly loaded and ready, she was anyone's equal, no matter how determined, no matter how powerful. Did that mean Brown and his goons, or was she thinking of Bean? Rally reloaded the gun, put it away and folded her arms, tapping her foot. It was a sense of unusual danger that

emerged in her mind, though to whom she couldn't say. The door opened and Bean came out, brushing past her to sit in one of the chairs. With a casual glance at her, he yawned and leaned back against the wall.

“Guess you want to freshen up before we eat, huh? Don't take all night, girl.”

“Just stay here and don't get impatient!” she snapped at him. “It's been a rough day!” Rally went into the bathroom and shut the door, keeping her ears open. She used the toilet and washed her face, noting some signs of strain in the mirror. What was Bean seeing when he looked at her? She had paid far too much attention to him since they had arrived at the motel and not enough to herself.

Rally examined her expression — eyes a little too wide, cheeks a little too flushed under her caramel-colored skin. Far from its usual bouncy waves, her hair hung in dusty elf-locks around her face. Too excited, too discombobulated; too easy for him to think he could take advantage of her.

With a comb and cosmetic kit from her purse, she tidied up for a couple of minutes, then changed her torn hose for a fresh pair. That was all the luggage she had. No change of clothes except for panties, no pajamas. She was just going to have to make do for a few days. Rally checked the mirror again.

There. She looked more put-together, calm and in negotiating trim. Where Bean was concerned, she needed every advantage and all the self-confidence she could muster. She had plenty of faith in herself, but Bean was a master at putting her off-balance, deliberately or not. Theirs was a tense, adversarial relationship even when they were cooperating. It had always been easy for her to get angry with him. No one else had that influence on her, except May.

Bean never seemed to get very angry at her, however — she'd seen him berserk with rage in a fight, but he'd never aimed that at her, even when she'd aimed a gun at his head. Why was that always her first impulse? He hadn't ever threatened her.

Maybe it was his overweening size, his casual ferocity of manner, his infuriating air of amused neutrality. She wanted to get his attention, and a bullet to his skull was about the only thing he needed to fear. But he always walked away from her even when she had the drop on him with a ten-gauge. Her guns didn't impress him. She'd never had any real reason to shoot him, and he knew she never fired a gun without reason.

There had been no sound from outside except the rustle of newspapers — apparently Bean was going through the reading material. When she came out of the bathroom, he was standing over the table and shuffling a short pile of old magazines.

Bean looked up at her, then smiled, his eyes making a quick scan up and down.

Rally firmly folded her arms and returned his look. “So what about dinner?”

Bean crossed the room and peered out between the curtains at the line of glowing franchise signs. With a deep breath, Rally tore her gaze away from the hip pockets of his very well-fitting blue jeans. He left the curtains closed and came back to her. “How about the Mickey D’s?”

“Ugh. OK, there isn’t anything in this little burg I like better than that. We’d better get take-out and talk here. It’s not the kind of conversation I want to have in public.”

“Figured that.” Bean grinned. “We operate better in the dark.”

“Speak for yourself, Bean,” muttered Rally.

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They returned to the room in a quarter of an hour, Bean carrying a fast-food bag. Throwing it on the table, he shouldered out of his flak jacket after putting his sunglasses in the breast pocket and stripping off his driving gloves. His olive-drab T-shirt was dark with perspiration under the arms and down the spine. They sat and ate hamburgers silently.

Rally examined Bean’s massive arms as he unwrapped a Quarter Pounder. Somehow he seemed even bigger out of the jacket. She kept her eyes lowered, not wanting to look Bean in the face again until she was ready to start the negotiation. Not having his facial control, she feared she would show her thoughts too clearly — she had been physically conscious of Bean all day long, since the moment she had seen him step from his car outside the warehouse.

Maybe longer than that. In a way, she had always felt this prickling mixture of agitation and fascination in his presence, but she’d rarely had leisure to contemplate it and feed it the way she was doing now. Usually Bean was an adversary, a wild card in a dangerous game.

He was also a man who was going to sleep in the same room with her tonight. A shudder rippled through her.

Perhaps she could amend those troublesome thoughts at the source. Bean was an arrogant jerk... who had several times put himself at life-threatening risk for her. He was a violent criminal... who had saved May from gang-rape and from murder. He wasn’t that good-looking close up; the scar over his nose didn’t do a thing for her, and his jaw was truly enormous; he resembled a double-bitted axblade with eyes... adding up somehow to the most compelling masculine face she knew.

Rally grimaced. She wished for a moment that she had brought May along after all, though taking Junior for a ride like that afternoon's would have been out of the question. At least she would have had an ally... or a chaperon? She took out her phone and tried calling the hotel again, and again got no answer. A quarter past eleven — May was staying out late! Rally had been nagging her about her diet and sleeping habits ever since the pregnancy test had showed a blue line, and she was probably enjoying a night of unbridled license.

“You gonna eat those fries?” Bean took her untouched boxful and unwrapped another Quarter Pounder. Rally watched him dispose of the burger in two bites, her appetite for fast food diminishing by the moment. He had a great set of teeth — hungry as a wolf with the canines to match.

She picked up her squashy, greasy Filet O' Fish, trying to concentrate on the task at hand. What could she propose to Bean about this temporary alliance?

She could certainly use some muscle against Brown and his crew. The man was built like a gorilla, stronger than she had ever realized. Rolling a car over, mostly by himself? Of course, he had been about to burn in it. Extremity could give anyone a gorilla's muscles, though he seemed perfectly calm now — on the surface. She could not say the same for herself, experiencing an intense sensation of having bit off more than she could chew.

Bean ate half her fries in one fistful and reached for another burger. He ate like a gorilla too. Did he do everything like that? She had a sudden mental image of Bean in bed with a woman, and all her abdominal muscles clenched.

She could have kicked herself. Rally jiggled her feet under the table and abruptly crossed her legs to keep her pelvis from moving against her seat. Her right foot bumped Bean's and he glanced up.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

He grunted and continued to eat. Ketchup squirted on his thumb and he turned his head to lick it off, then put the thumb in his mouth and slid it slowly out through his lips. Rally choked on her last bite of food, grabbed for her drink and washed the constriction from her throat. To her overheating imagination everything Bean did was taking on an indecent frisson.

This would never do. They had a complicated question to settle between them, and she was putting herself at a significant disadvantage. Of course her sexual thoughts had nothing to do with him anyway!

She felt sure that the day's excitement had much more to do with it. The shots she'd fired in the warehouse seemed still to reverberate through her. Gunfire evoked her most intense physical reactions as nothing else did — certainly not a man, certainly not one she didn't even like. There wasn't any man she liked

enough for THAT! She had her work, her car, her guns — that was her kind of excitement! The firefight had felt like foreplay to the violent back-and-forth of the road duel, but her aroused energies hadn't found a release yet. She would have to live with it for a while and hope it didn't get her into trouble.

Bean didn't betray any sign of having noticed her state of mind when she sneaked a peek at him. He tossed the last of his second extra-large Coke down his throat, the ice sloshing in the cup. Crunching a few cubes between his teeth, he put the cup down and looked at her.

"Had enough?" he asked.

"Uhh... plenty."

Bean crumpled up his six empty burger wrappers and her single one and stuffed them in the bag. "We gonna talk or what?"

He tossed the bag across the room and hit the wastebasket dead center. Out of his jacket, which hung on his chair, he produced a pack of Marlboros and put one between his lips. Rally raised a brow.

"You mind if I... ?"

"They said, no smoking." Bean rolled his eyes and slid the cigarette back in the pack. "OK. You want the money."

"Yep."

"I want Brown. But I also want that money turned in to the FBI. That's almost as important as seizing drugs!"

"Uh-uh. What's in it for me if I don't get the dough?"

"Bringing a criminal — bringing a whole syndicate to justice! You don't like drugs any more than I do, Bean. Admit it! You went after Brown for more reason than that he'd tricked you into breaking that promise you made to me."

"Maybe." Bean shifted in his seat. "I'm willing to see him arrested and put away instead of dead. But believe me, babe, half a million dollars is all the reason I need. Promise me that, and I'll work with you till this deal is up. Maybe if you think it works out we can make it more perm — "

"What if we don't get the money? What if Brown is all we can track down?"

"That's the breaks. As long as you agree that suitcase is mine wherever it falls. No turning it over to the Feds if you get your hands on it. That is MY money."

“Which you don’t have! And which you will never have unless you get some help. This isn’t your turf, Bean. It’s not mine, either. But the law is the same all over the country.” Rally felt cool and focused now, believing she held the better hand. The wild card wouldn’t beat queens high! “Remember, I can always call the FBI. They may not catch you, but if I have to sic the Bureau on this case, you can kiss *all* of that money goodbye!”

Bean glowered at her, his brows low over his eyes. “What’s your deal?”

Rally took a deep breath. “Half of it. I’ll promise you a quarter million. The other \$250,000 goes with Brown to the FBI.”

“Shit.” Bean showed his teeth.

“I’ll give you some information I got, too. Important stuff. And I will do everything I can to keep you from getting caught and your share confiscated. If you do get arrested... I’ll speak up for you.”

“Thanks a heap. But I don’t plan on getting arrested. What information?”

“This organization Brown works for. It’s called the Eight Dragon Triad and it seems to be based in Macau. They’re moving out into the Americas since Macau goes back to Communist China at the end of the year.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know that.”

“How about this? They told him to get you for the job, all right. But it wasn’t just because they needed the dope in Chicago in twenty-four hours. It was to find out why you’d quit running drugs, and to get you back into the business. Not as a freelancer. They want you to keep working — exclusively for them.”

“You’re kidding. Some big Asian syndicate wants me on their payroll? They can kiss my ass.”

“I thought you’d think of it that way...” murmured Rally.

“No shit. Hey... this makes sense.” Bean pulled a thoughtful face. “I was wondering what the hell he was yakking about — during the job. He didn’t pop the question to me, but now that I think about it he must’ve been working on an angle. Guess he knew I would turn him down flat if he just came out and said it.”

“Couldn’t get up the nerve? Gosh, I wonder why.” Rally rolled her eyes as Bean grinned. “So, obviously, Brown blew it big time and I think he’s in deep trouble. I doubt his bosses will look kindly on his attempt to kill you. Those two men with him — the driver and the sharpshooter — must be loyal to him. But right now, aside from them, I bet he’s all alone. I wouldn’t touch this any other way, you

understand. I'm not dumb enough to go butting heads with the Triads all by myself, or even with you."

"Hey, if they want me so bad, you're better off working with me, ain'tcha?" Bean leaned back and put his hands behind his head.

"Maybe. A quick arrest is one thing. A longer-term operation is another. I can handle either; I suppose you can too, as long as you don't get too many surprises along the way."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've noticed you get angriest and most reckless when you think someone is trying to trick you. That's why you went after Brown in the first place, right?"

"Damn straight. That skanky, sweet-talkin' sonofabitch — "

"OK, OK, I have the picture. I saw him give the order to shoot you. He's a rat's ass, but you are going to have to keep your cool if we're going to reel him in. Not exactly easy pickings, two against three, but yes, we can probably do it."

"Good. I want that money."

"I'm offering you half."

Bean shook his head slowly, lips tight. "Not a chance, babe."

"I gave you the information up front. You said you were willing to compromise!"

"On Brown, sure. I ain't in the killing business. But money is money."

"I'm compromising a lot more than you are! You say you won't commit a murder you don't really want to do anyway? I'm offering to condone a felony and make you a present of \$250,000 in the bargain!"

"Ain't yours to give!"

"My help IS mine to give or withhold, Bean!" Rally hit the table in frustration. "Remember, you're the one who proposed this." The greedy son of a bitch! "I think I had better just call the Feds and forget the whole thing!"

"Ahh, *shit!*" Bean leaped up and kicked his chair halfway across the room. "Goddammit, I *want that cash!*" He gritted his teeth and slammed a fist on the table. Rally stared him straight in the eye. "I've been driving cross-country four straight days with a mean mad on. I don't like driving mad. Takes all the fun out of it! My butt aches and this gunshot in my leg aches and I just watched my favorite 'Vette go up in smoke. You know how long it took me to find an LS-7? I

deserve every last *motherfucking* bill in that suitcase!” He punctuated his tirade with a stabbing forefinger.

Oooh, not so calm after all! “Poor baby.” Rally’s head was beginning to ache, not quite in sympathy.

Bean let out a huff, then a short laugh. “Hey, I picked the frickin’ job. I only like to get paid what I’m owed!”

“So do I. I’ve named my price. Take it or leave it.”

He glared at her while she folded her arms and coolly returned his stare. “I don’t want to leave it, but I can’t take it either. I just can’t say *sayonara* to that much dough.” They kept their eyes locked for another few moments, then Bean picked up his chair and flopped down in it again. “I’d like to work with ya, babe. You’re good. Just too damn expensive.”

Rally tapped her fingers wearily. Bean seemed immovable, but she couldn’t let him have what he wanted — her offer was too generous already, considering the legal trouble she courted. “I don’t think we’re going to figure this one out tonight. Better put it off to tomorrow.”

“OK. But are we partners?”

“Yes. Temporarily.”

Bean smiled. “You keep your promises, I keep mine. Shake on it, Vincent.”

He put out his right hand, and she took it.

All her regained calm disintegrated at one touch. According to their shared rules of engagement, a handshake was a binding contract, the physical signature on their mutual enterprise. She was taking a significant risk embarking on a partnership with a criminal, but she already knew that. The shock that sizzled through her had a different origin — Bean himself. A man? She’d never wanted a man — she’d never wanted *anyone* that way, much less Bean Bandit! She must be going nuts!

Rally’ hand quivered in his and her palm began to sweat. She ended the handshake as quickly as she decently could, but Bean’s brows had already gone up.

“That’s it, then. We work together until we find what we’re looking for.” Even her voice shook. She yawned to cover it. “God, it’s late. What a day.”

“So sleep.” He sat down on one of the beds and pulled off his boots.

“And have you run off while I’m snoozing?” Rally noted how the mattress sagged under his weight, her imagination on overdrive again. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten how you gave me the slip in New York!”

“Didja hear what I said about that?”

“You won’t steal a car.” Rally chewed her lower lip, then nodded. “OK. I’ll sleep. You stay in the room, though — I promise you I’ll wake up if you even touch that doorknob.” Something told her he was making some sort of mental reservation to his assurances.

“You trust anybody, Vincent?”

“Only when I have to, Bean.”

“Have it your way. I’m gonna take a shower. Unless you want it first.” He examined her with his head on one side and a finger flicking his long chin.

If she had experienced a twinge at the thought of sleeping next to him, the idea of stripping naked with only a flimsy door between them gave her a sensation like icy water. “No, I’m not going — ” But she was sweaty and dirty from scrambling up the embankment and the dampness between her thighs had grown insidiously fragrant. “Uh... I’m probably going to spend quite a while, so go ahead. You take quicker showers than — ”

His bemused smile brought her up short. “Good guess.” Rally flushed. “I don’t waste my time in the wash.”

Of course he didn’t know how she knew that. She’d never told him how she’d broken into his apartment in her successful attempt to stop his last drug run. She never would tell him, because he would realize she’d seen him strip for a shower and walk out again in a scant seven or eight minutes, naked and dripping.

He might even recall that he had opened his closet to answer the cell phone he’d left in his jacket and had held an unclad conversation with his contact. There he’d stood, directly in front of her hiding place, his crotch inches from her nose. That moment still loomed large in her memory as an eye-opening education in the upper limits of the male anatomy, one she would gladly have forgone.

Her eyes involuntarily dropped to the fly of his jeans as he stood up. It — that *thing* — was in there, tucked away like her CZ75 in its concealed holster, an alien weapon of whose workings she had no instinctive knowledge.

Bean went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Rally sat down to take off her shoes. This whole situation felt odd. Uncomfortable, but weirdly domestic — eating with him, preparing to sleep in a

bed next to his; hearing his belt buckle hit the tile and the water turn on behind the bathroom door. Playing house with Bean Bandit? What a peculiar idea, but it had been her idea to get a double room, after all. An honest precaution, wasn't it? If Bean split town and got to Brown before she did, that hundred-thousand dollar reward might go up in smoke just like the black Corvette.

She slowly shed her jacket, but left her shoulder holster in place. Although Bean didn't use firearms, she certainly wasn't going to strew her weapons around where he could get his hands on them.

His jacket still hung unattended on the back of his chair. Rally cast a quick glance at the bathroom door, the sound of water continuing. She had a few minutes in the clear. With a mild sense of guilt, she knelt behind the chair and began to go through his pockets.

The jacket, made of thick leather and Kevlar, lined with metal mesh and reinforced at the vital points with ceramic plates, weighed a good fifty pounds — an instant slipped disk to anyone but Bean. It had a snap-flap breast pocket, two handwarmers, and a suite of inner compartments.

Rally emptied them as quickly as she could, memorizing the location of the contents. Sunglasses, wallet, driving gloves, cell phone, a crumpled bandanna, his bullet-resistant headband. A folding multi-tool equipped with standard and Phillips screwdrivers, pliers, wrench and wire cutter. A tube of Loctite. A strip of wrapped condoms, marked 'XXXtra Large'.

Rally blushed deeply and thrust them back into the jacket, then replaced everything but the wallet and checked further.

An eight-inch bowie knife with the sheath snapped to the interior of the left-hand inner breast pocket for a quick draw. A heavy-duty penlight. Six throwing spikes in the waistband. A slender switchblade with a wicked razor edge lurking in the lining of the right sleeve. All right, he went around armed — she knew that. Rally flipped the wallet open.

Driver's license with the usual terrible picture, not even recognizably Bean except for the coloring and the jaw. It wasn't an Illinois document, but a California forgery with a false name. She turned the wallet's insert pages. Social Security card with the same false name. A few business cards for car-related firms — a storage garage in Los Angeles, a machine shop and a transport company in downtown Chicago, a wrecker on the South Side, a mail-order parts discounter in Florida. An almost-expired coupon for an extra topping on a large deep-dish pizza. She looked in the cash compartment. A fat wad of hundred-dollar bills and another of fifties — about three thousand dollars in all.

That didn't seem like long green for Bean, so she felt the jacket carefully and discovered that the lining of the entire back held an additional cache, again in

fifties and hundreds. There was no time to count it, but he had at least ten thousand in there. Bean carried no credit cards, no automatic teller cards, nothing with a link to his real identity. He probably memorized all his account numbers and did everything financial by phone.

In the back of the wallet he'd stuffed a few bits of folded paper with penciled addresses — all in Hollywood, all in the same large, scrawling hand: the traces of his search for Brown, apparently. Underneath, one three-by-five photograph, folded roughly in half. Rally began to remove it.

In the bathroom, the water shut off. Her alert ears caught the sound of Bean unlatching the shower door. She had maybe thirty seconds.

With a fingernail, she pried up the edge of the photograph and took a quick look. A woman, stylish, blonde and beautiful, holding a dark-eyed little girl.

Rally stared at the picture for a moment; something drained through her, a hot and startling emotion. Bean's hand on the knob — Rally slapped the wallet shut and thrust it back into the jacket. She got up and seized one of the old magazines from the table. One arm of the jacket was still swinging, and she bumped it with her knee to stop the motion as the door opened.

Bean walked out, rubbing his head with a towel. Rally crossed to the bed and tossed the magazine down as if she had just finished with it, then picked up her purse to take into the bathroom with her.

When she turned, Bean was leaning on his chair, hips on his jacket and the towel slung around his neck. His wet hair lay slicked against his skull, long, heavy, dead-black. He had his jeans on and his steel tank watch strapped around his wrist, but wore no shirt. Dark bruises mottled his pectorals and stomach, the effect of Brown's slugs. No chest hair to speak of — he looked like he might be part Asian, though Asian men didn't usually come so large. Rally wondered just what his background was.

"All yours." Bean pointed his chin at the bathroom and cleared water from his ears with an index finger. Rally nodded and stepped in. An extra-large olive drab T-shirt, a couple of socks and a pair of briefs dangled from one of the towel bars, dripping slowly on the floor. "Pardon my laundry," said Bean as she curled her lip. "My duffel went up in the damn car."

"No problem," muttered Rally, and closed the door behind her. Maybe she should wash her skivvies too, and leave bra and panties draped all over the furniture! That would serve the big slob right!

She kept her eyes averted from Bean's underwear while she stripped and folded her clothes neatly on the tiny vanity. Her handguns she laid carefully on top of the pile, except for the holstered CZ, which she hung on the hook on the back of

the door. At least he wasn't likely to run off with nothing dry to wear besides jeans and jacket. But she cut her shower as short as she could, using up the tiny bottle of shampoo Bean had opened and scrubbing herself with the bar of motel soap he'd left in the dish.

His possessions hadn't told her a thing she didn't already know or could have deduced. He carried no gun, he had no firm legal identity, he armored himself in money, he had sex at least once in a while. Nothing unexpected, except for that photograph in his wallet.

Who was that woman? Very pretty, and very happy to be a mother judging from the way she looked at that baby. That couldn't be anything to do with Bean... of course. Why should she care if he had a girlfriend somewhere? But the woman hadn't struck her as the trailer-trash type — her hair wasn't frizzy or teased and she wore understated makeup. She had to be something to do with Brown. The chatty drug dealer had mentioned a wife and daughter, but she'd assumed he was embroidering for Bean's benefit.

Maybe he hadn't been. His whole manner had seemed like an act, but fragments of truth could reinforce the most flagrant lies. She couldn't very well ask Bean about the photo, so she mentally filed the information away and concentrated on her shower.

A long, coarse black hair swirled in the water at her feet and inveigled its way between her toes. "Oh, gross," she moaned, kicking it free and watching it slither down the drain. He'd been shedding right where she stood! At least it wasn't short and curly... *Damn, I wish I were a thousand miles from here! Anywhere but this room! Anyone but BEAN!*

Might he be feeling the same way about her?

Rally took special care to wash the sticky spots from between her thighs before she got out and dried off. The shower hadn't eased her tension. The whole place smelled of *him* by now and even with the door locked she couldn't get away from her intense consciousness of his presence. Goose bumps prickled her skin, only partly from cold. On the floor where Bean had dropped it lay a damp towel, and she picked it up between finger and thumb with exaggerated distaste, flinging it over the towel bar next to his soggy underwear. Then she noticed that the toilet seat stood insolently upright, and her blood pressure went through the ceiling.

"Ooooh! That... that MAN!" Rally hissed. She needed some kind of outlet before she popped off at such trivia, like a good run from one end of town to the other — that wouldn't take five minutes! But she couldn't leave the room. She settled for a few stretches and toe-touches on the bath mat, then towed her hair vigorously until it was nearly dry. Blowing up at Bean wouldn't help her negotiate with him — she'd have to keep a rein on her temper, no matter how sloppy a housekeeper her roommate was. He was making some effort to be pleasant and so could she.

Perhaps she should try May one more time. She took out her cell phone from her purse, shut the toilet lid and sat down to call. The line rang thirteen times before she clicked off. It was nearly midnight. Rally sighed, looking at the bathroom door and hooking her bra.

Outside, silence. Was he still with her? A car engine started in the parking lot and she shot upright, flung the door open and stuck her head out to check.

Bean turned to look at her from his seat at the table and did a double-take at the sight of her bra straps. Rally retreated with a tiny squeak of embarrassment.

“Oh, good going, sweetheart!” she growled to herself, yanking on her blouse and skirt. “Give a free show and get everyone in a *real* friendly mood!”

Rally combed her hair and fluffed it as best she could without a blow-dryer. Now if only she was getting ready to go out, instead of to go to bed! She didn’t have a dressing gown or even a sleep shirt. Maybe Bean was prepared to sleep in the nude, but she was not.

Rally groaned. Why the hell hadn’t she thought of this? How was she going to sleep at all? She stared at the locked bathroom door while putting on her panties and her hose for good measure. She could sleep in here wrapped around the toilet, if she wanted to look like a pretzel in the morning.

No, that would look timid, to put it mildly. *OK, girl, don’t tell me you’re actually afraid of the man!* Bean had a strict sense of honor, if not of legality. Why would he try to take advantage of the situation? He’d never seemed particularly interested in her that way, anyhow, beyond a few routine masculine cracks. In point of fact, if he really wanted to go into business with her, he had excellent reason not to offend her. She was practically as safe as if she were with May.

Of course, May was the most sexually insatiable person she knew... poor Ken Taki probably had a rough time keeping up with the ‘Living Kama Sutra’! Maybe May’s pregnancy had thrown a cramp into their style, but somehow Rally doubted that. She giggled and opened the door.

At that moment, she realized she had put all her weapons on again with her clothes — wrist slide and .25, ankle holster and Duo, elastic garter with extra magazines and her CZ75. Feeling paranoid, was she? Not wanting to retreat into the bathroom again as soon as she had emerged, Rally walked boldly into the bedroom just as Bean’s wristwatch chimed midnight.

With his feet on the table, Bean flipped through one of the magazines. Oval scars like knotholes in oak scattered down his left arm and the side of his chest. She’d watched him take those bullets, and watched them pried out again by a doctor’s forceps as he ground his teeth in unanesthetized pain. Bean wasn’t invulnerable.

He was mortal flesh and bone, no matter how formidable he might seem. Anyone else would probably have died from the injuries he'd incurred that day two years before, but he was still only a man. Rally tried to concentrate on that thought, but it was difficult to convince herself of its truth.

“Good night,” she said. He glanced up and met her eyes for a moment, then returned to the magazine.

Neither of the beds had been turned down yet, so she had her choice, and took the one nearest the door. Without thinking about it, she lay down without removing one garment or weapon. If Brown had wind of where they were, or if Bean did try to sneak off during the night, she might need to move quickly. She hadn't decided yet if she trusted her temporary partner or not. At the moment she leaned towards giving him some credit for dependability, though none at all for morality. Her own abilities and equipment she had no doubts about — those were what kept her secure every day of her life. She could sleep like a child with three loaded handguns on her body.

So go to sleep! Rally pulled the covers over herself and snuggled her face into the pillow. Bean turned a page with a quiet rustle. She could hear the dim roar of I-5 over the hum of the air conditioner. Under other circumstances, the sound might have been soothing white noise. Right now, it was sandpaper on tender nerves.

Witching hour, the time of night that made daylight seem a distant memory. The only light in the room was the one over the table that Bean read by. Apparently he was going to unwind for a while before turning in, and maybe she should have done the same.

Her legs kicked restlessly under the covers and her skirt rode up into a hard wrinkle around her waist. She was tired, her head felt heavy and muzzy, but rest seemed impossible. Lack of sleep always lowered her resistance to her own impulses...

Rally woke with her pelvis undulating in a sensual rhythm, the bed jiggling slightly to the sound of worn springs. It seemed to her that she must have had a dream, something erotic that had woken her, but she couldn't have been asleep for more than ten or fifteen minutes. She turned over with a little groan, her shoulder holster twisting under her, and opened her eyes.

Bean had lowered his magazine and she caught him looking directly at her. He gave no guilty start; returning her gaze for a moment, he redirected his eyes to the page.

With surprised amusement she noticed he was reading a tattered issue of 'Better Homes and Gardens'. He must have been hard up for something to do — she'd assumed he'd never glance at anything except 'Sports Illustrated' or 'Car & Driver'. He'd combed his hair and draped his jacket over his unshirted shoulders,

but his enormous feet were bare. All of a sudden he seemed less alien, more commonplace: only a big man with bare feet.

“Good read?” she asked.

He lifted a brow, but didn’t reply.

She realized she felt silly, not to mention uncomfortable, lying there fully dressed except for shoes and jacket. And armed, for heaven’s sake! She should just put her .25 under the pillow and take the rest of her weapons off for the night.

Rally rolled up to sit on the bed, smoothing her hair out of her face with one hand. Bean kept his eyes on his magazine. Stretching elaborately and arching her back, she let out a long sigh. She reached up to unbuckle her shoulder holster.

When it was off, she hung it on the chair with her jacket and plucked open a button at the neck of her blouse, then undid the cuffs. The .25 on its arm-mounted slide unstrapped easily and went on the chair with the CZ75 in the holster, as did the Duo.

Now how to get the garter magazine holster off without displaying anything under her short skirt? She should have left all this off in the bathroom. Rally turned her back to Bean and hitched the skirt up on one side to unsnap the garter. She worked the elastic strap from under her thigh and draped it on the chair as well, then glanced up.

Bean was pretending to read, but his eyes weren’t moving across the page; they flickered up and down from magazine to her.

On impulse, Rally pushed another blouse-front button through its hole. What the hell was she doing? Testing him? That wasn’t fair of her. She felt like laughing when his eyes locked to the hint of lacy bra showing in the vee of her neckline.

Rally twisted away and slipped one hand under her skirt, hooking a thumb in the waistband of her pantyhose. She wriggled them to her thighs while holding her skirt modestly down with the other hand, then half-reclined and peeled them off the rest of the way.

Bean wasn’t even pretending to read now, the magazine draped protectively over his lap. His armored jacket had slipped off his shoulders and hung precariously from the tilted chair. She halfway realized she was speeding on dangerous curves, that she didn’t have a map for this road, but the accelerator was stuck. She’d never gotten such a reaction from him, the cold-blooded bastard!

But then she’d never taken this route before; had never had an opportunity or even the inclination to do so. If she’d known the effect it would have! It felt like power, a different kind from firepower or speed, a new kind whose potential

upper limit she'd barely glimpsed. Her body trembled with both trepidation and suppressed giggles. Just a man!

Rally lay down again and looked at the ceiling, letting her knees loll open for a moment, and had the perverse satisfaction of hearing Bean's strangled cough. With a surge of relaxing self-congratulation, she decided that giving in to impulse hadn't been such a bad idea after all. She'd tease him a little longer, then pretend to go to sleep, and perhaps he'd be less stubborn about the money in the morning!

She threw her arms above her head and wriggled her body into a curve across the bedspread, then ran her fingers through her hair to spread it out over the pillow.

The magazine crumpled loudly in Bean's fist. Looking along her body at him, she saw his chair leaning perilously against the wall and one hand pressed over his lower face. His sharp eyes met hers and held their gaze.

Suddenly his chair slid down the wall, but he leaped up in a swift motion that made her jump. The chair fell to the carpet.

For a moment he seemed just as startled as she; he stood over her, slashing his gaze back and forth over the bed and her body. Then he wheeled and headed into the bathroom, slamming the door. In a minute she heard the toilet flush and the water turn on. The sound continued for some time, as if he were leaning on the sink to mull things over, or perhaps to run cold water over the back of his neck. The overturned chair lay awkwardly where it had fallen; Bean hadn't set it upright this time.

She had just made it impossible for them to sit quietly in this room together, she realized — the fragile truce was gone. And it was going to be a long night. Rally's smugness evaporated.

When Bean emerged from the bathroom, now wearing his damp T-shirt, she sat up again and buttoned her blouse all the way to her neck. Maybe if she stripped her CZ75 for cleaning, she could change the subject.

Bean took a few steps into the room and stopped. He watched her for a moment while she tried to behave casually, but she found herself gripping the throat of her blouse as if her fist could become a padlock.

"Second thoughts, babe?" There was more than a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

"Hmm?" She reached for her holster.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talkin' about, Vincent."

She hefted the CZ75 with a significant breath of relief at its cold, familiar touch. "OK, talk. I'll pretend to listen."

He let out a short snort, eyeing the pistol. "I didn't think you were that kind of woman. Reckoned ya knew your own mind."

"I generally do."

"Good," said Bean with heavier sarcasm. "You want to *fuck* me?"

Rally could not reply, fingers convulsing around the pistol.

"Heh," said Bean after a few moments' silence. "Eyes bigger'n yer stomach, huh?" He stepped closer, put a hand on the arm of the bedside chair and leaned down. Rally brought the pistol up at point blank distance from his chin, her finger hovering over the trigger.

Bean scowled, but didn't move away, leveling his own finger at her. "Let me tell you one thing, babe. If you're trying to get me rattled, it ain't gonna happen. I don't let my work slide for any woman born."

He paused for emphasis. "You say the word, I'll screw you till yer eyes change color." Rally's eyes widened, her heart beating at high RPMs. Bean grinned like an animal and spoke through his teeth. "But it won't make one cent's worth of difference to the deal if I do!" He straightened and grabbed his jacket, then took a long stride across the room and reached for the doorknob.

"Get the hell back in here, Bean!" She half-rose and flipped off the safety, and he stopped.

"Make up your damn mind. I asked you a question, babe. What's the answer?" Bean turned around, expression washing oddly clean of anger, though challenge remained. He put one hand on the wall, dropped his jacket with a thud and hooked the other thumb in his belt loop.

Six foot seven inches tall, with his deeply-cut muscles outlined by his damp shirt: broad-chested and narrow-waisted, his legs long and slim and taut. If she'd been displaying herself a few minutes ago, he was keeping pace. Bean cocked a hip at her and gave her a slow, lascivious grin. Even with that big scar and big jaw, his face was striking. When he smiled with such blatant sensual intention, her heartbeat began to knock and ping.

Rally sat down on the bed again, her legs briefly unable to hold her upright. He couldn't be serious!

"I reckon you know damn well what kinda state you just put me in." Bean lazily adjusted the straining crotch of his jeans and watched her stunned expression.

“This has been one helluva shitty day and you are about the prettiest sight I’ve seen even on a good one. I’ve been thinking about makin’ it with you since the first look I ever got at you, and here you are getting comfy for bedtime right in front of me.”

Good God, he *was* serious. His anger she’d understood and could deflect, but it had gone. Rally felt as if the floor had fallen from under her, as if she’d gone off a cliff and were pendent in air for a thrilling moment, soaring, simultaneously helpless and flailing for solid ground.

Bean’s voice dropped to a smoky murmur. “But what *I’m* cravin’ ain’t the question, Rally. I thought I was getting signals tonight, but I figured I was just dreamin’. Maybe you want a piece of me. If I’d ever known you gave a damn, lady, I’d’ve come callin’. Want to do it?”

Her lips moved silently for a moment, almost trembling. “Yes,” she heard herself say, without thought.

Bean took a long deep breath. “I’m here, babe. Any way you want it.”

Rally put one leg up on the bed and turned to face him. Bean had a look of controlled avidity, his pupils dilated. That gaze, as sharp as the knives he carried in his jacket. She’d been on the receiving end of it before and hadn’t quailed — why the hell did it scare her speechless now?

When she remained silent, he took a step towards her. Rally raised her chin, her chest heaving. She didn’t feel so much willing as paralyzed — how could she actually want him, and how could she have admitted it? She’d just told him the simple truth, though... She laid the CZ75 on the bedside chair.

Bean bent down and put his hands on her shoulders, then knelt beside the bed. His face came down to the same level as hers and their eyes met. Not thinking about her next move, or his either, Rally gasped when Bean leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the mouth.

Quick, light, it lasted only an instant until she turned her face away, breathing rapidly. Bean drew back until she looked at him, then kissed her again, more deliberately this time.

Hand cupped around her jaw, he kept her from turning her head. His mouth pressed hard and twisted against hers, opening her lips to his tongue.

“Man,” he murmured indistinctly, “you are one sweet lady.”

Bean settled on the bed with Rally and embraced her. Lifting her halfway onto his lap, he plunged his tongue into her mouth. His lips felt hot and moist, his scent

rising up to blend with the salty taste of his kiss. He smelled of motel soap, fresh sweat and hamburgers, with a faint undertone of scorched rubber.

Rally's defensive reflexes slowly woke and she struggled for a moment, pushing against his immovable chest, trapped in the crush of his giant arms. Bean began to pull her down to the mattress and she resisted his relaxing weight.

This didn't feel right. This felt much too fast and too far out of her control, but a throbbing, pounding pulse between her legs threatened to take over her entire body. Rally's heart beat in time with it, making it difficult to catch her breath in the fleeting moments when Bean's lips left hers. He clasped her knee, then ran a hand up her bare thigh. Her legs parted and he thrust one thigh between them, trying to roll on top of her while he continued to kiss her with impatient hunger.

The gush of arousal mixed with fear overwhelmed her; the pit of Rally's stomach ground like a bad clutch as she felt her mind going into a spinning skid. There would be no recovery if she surrendered him the initiative now. If she did nothing, said nothing, if she lay back and melted in the heat of his body, Bean would fuck her — his raw word suited the act as it formed itself in her mind, some brief sequence of thrusting and heaving and indelicate grunting until he deposited his sperm in a rubber and rolled off and went to smoke a cigarette.

He wasn't just trying to seduce her — he was attempting to assert dominance over her in a way she might find difficult to break. He'd see her as an appendage after that, she felt sure, not as an equal partner: something he could use for his satisfaction whenever he liked; and if she tried to back out of his inevitable assumptions, tell him she hadn't ceded her body to him in perpetuity with one moment of insanity, he would consider himself cheated. Bean didn't like to be cheated.

She couldn't let this happen! Rally twisted from side to side and tried not to return his kisses while her vision blurred.

Bean paused for a moment, his lips touching her face, and stroked her back reassuringly. "I'll take good care of ya, Rally," he whispered into her throat as he kissed his way down her neck and over her ears. "Just tell me how you want it."

One of his hands cupped her breast, thumb flicking at the tight placket of her blouse. One button released its hold, then another.

"I... don't know," Rally gasped. "I... no..." Bean's huge erection nudged into her thigh through his jeans, and she nearly screamed at him. "Let me go, dammit!"

"C'mon, babe, I won't hurt ya." He loosened his embrace, but held her shoulders. Rally knocked Bean's hands aside and got off the bed. He scowled, his eyes narrowing. "Thought you said 'yes'."

“I’m a bounty hunter — you’re a *crook*, dammit!” God, that had barely occurred to her until now! “Kind of a conflict of interest — ”

“You weren’t thinking about that when you started foolin’ around, girl. Or when you shook hands with me!”

Rally made a warding gesture, retreating to the window. What had she done? She’d stared so hard at an obstacle in the road that she’d steered straight into it! Bean got up and loomed over her.

“Look, I am *not* in the habit of makin’ ladies do what they don’t want to do. But I don’t mind telling you I ain’t givin’ up that easy. I believed ya better the first time.”

Rally tried to walk past him, with some idea of making it out the door, and he put out his arm and caught her around the waist. She began to struggle; Bean relaxed his grip with an exasperated sigh and put his hands up in the air, as if to demonstrate that he had no intention of using force.

Rally stopped struggling, utterly confused, and they stood still for a few moments with her hand on his chest and her chin resting on his biceps, neither of them moving except to breathe.

Then Bean’s grasp came down on her right shoulder, his hand large enough to cover her from the collarbone to the bottom of the deltoid. She trembled, but couldn’t step away. His touch made her want to run, and it also made her want to feel his hands everywhere on her body. Her nipples hardened and tingled.

Bean’s other hand followed on her left shoulder and he moved over to face her; she stared straight at his chest, heart thumping. Slowly he drew her in until her nose nearly touched his shirt and the smell of damp cotton mixed with the warm scent of his body. His arms circled her, one hand wrapping around her hip and the other grasping her opposite shoulder.

“Rally, babe, you want to tell me what’s botherin’ ya, that’s yer choice. But I’m gonna kiss you anyway.”

Rally started and looked up. His face lowered towards her, his sharp gaze holding hers. She remained still until Bean’s lips touched her mouth and his eyes half-closed.

The scent of him, the warm moisture of his mouth, the leisurely calculation of his lips sliding across the softest inward swell of hers. Dry, her lips caught on Bean’s, and she licked them wet, the tip of her tongue touching his. An unsettling surge of excitement made her spine prickle, put a sharp taste into the corners of her mouth.

He really wasn't that bad a kisser. Rally let him tangle his tongue with hers. Bean was surprisingly gentle, if persistent. Impossible to break away from his caresses — she'd tried. She had to stop this, but she wanted to melt into his arms. No, more than that. She wanted to kiss him breathless, tear her hands through his hair, rip off his clothes until he was as naked as she felt, make him shake the way she shook.

So, speaking tactically, she had to take the initiative away from him. Make the decision. She couldn't just let him, or her body, make it for her. If she could summon the will, she could turn the situation around and make the act hers instead of his.

But something, a writhing dread she couldn't define, held her back with cold hands. Something that whispered about the implications of sex, its power to arouse emotions and intentions she'd never dealt with and knew very little about.

Rally stiffened, fists clenched, as her breasts flattened against Bean's chest, his embrace pulling her inexorably closer. Bean moved slowly and sensuously, running his hands over her back and buttocks, pressing her hips up into his as he kissed her. That monster erection swelled against her stomach, hard and prominent, and Rally shrank away from it, but her back bumped the windowsill behind her and she halted, trapped.

Bean's body came up against hers and for a moment he leaned into her. "What the hell are you afraid of, girl? Me?" He chuckled with his lips next to her ear. "Never thought I'd see the day!"

"I am NOT afraid of you!"

"Your heart's going like a Top Fuel engine. I ain't gonna flatter myself that you like it that much. If you did, you'd be all over me." He moved back a step, still holding her. "A woman like you, who knows her own mind an' all that. Heh, heh."

"I do know my own mind, you — !"

"Yeah, sure. You lost your nerve as soon as I got up a little steam. You're the one who wanted the double room, babe, and I reckon I know why — " Bean brushed his crotch against her thigh — "but I guess you never thought ol' Bean would tell you to put yer money where yer mouth is." He grinned with more triumph than seductiveness. "Rally Vincent's scared of me... hot damn!"

"D-don't be silly!"

If he thought he could intimidate her, she'd never get her way about the money. She couldn't back out now — not under an accusation of cowardice! She had to finish what she'd started or lose all influence over him and all control over the deal. What if she told him she wasn't experienced? No, he'd laugh at her for

getting in over her head. Only a novice could have been so unaware of the complications she invited with an undone button, and one by one they slammed into her like a traffic pileup.

“You think I’m scared because I’m not crawling all over you? I.. I’m just not too impressed yet!”

Bean gave her a skewed look, halfway between indignation and amusement. “OK, lady. Show me what you want, if you can’t tell me.”

Rally’s head flung back in defensive anticipation, and Bean paused for an instant, face angled for another kiss. The one light over the table illuminated his eyes as he scanned her face.

Then he let her go and stepped back. “Impress me.”

Something boiled up inside her, anger and late-night energy and physical reflex combined. Thought or rationality constituted very little part of it. This was what she felt in the middle of a firefight, cornered and under siege, everything at stake and only one weapon in her hand. How had she survived so many close calls? With decisive action to save herself from disaster.

Weariness gone, Rally thrust away ideas of risk or emotional novelty — what had that been? — and put her hands on the buttons of her blouse. She wasn’t afraid of any man ever born. She’d show him!

Bean raised a brow.

With some ancient instinct guiding her, Rally didn’t immediately undo her clothing. Instead, she dragged a finger down the placket and up again, circling lightly over her breasts. Bean’s eyes followed. Rally stroked the exposed skin of her throat and raised her chin. Down into her cleavage she trailed her fingertips, slowly opening buttons to the bottom of the breastbone. Tucking her nails under the peeping lace, she pushed back the edges of her blouse to reveal part of her bra and show him how she touched herself under the semi-transparent fabric.

Bean shifted his stance and wet his lips. The very light in the room seemed to change as the dynamic shifted: warmer, more sensual, dimmer and mysterious. She seemed to be discovering something about herself she had barely known existed, a eroticism entirely hers though Bean coaxed it out and witnessed its display. It had its own logic, its own momentum. Her body undulated gently in its throb while she cupped her hands around her breasts and rotated her hips to an unheard rhythm.

This felt right, this felt better — Bean stood mesmerized, his eyes dilated and his mouth hanging slightly open as she moved forward. She had some control over this, and the sense of power over him returned, the same feeling she’d had when

displaying herself on the bed, watching his hands shake and his control shred as it never had before in her sight.

He leaned down and their lips brushed so gently Rally could barely feel him. When Bean tried to deepen the kiss, she evaded him and saw his nostrils flare with an intense breath.

He kept his eyes open and locked to hers, and she noticed that his irises were not dark brown as she'd thought — they had an unusual deep green-hazel tint. A mysterious mixture, something more than the sum of the parts... She let him approach, still dodging all but the lightest of touches. His kisses fell on her cheeks, her hairline, the edge of her jaw. Finally she met his lips, rising on tiptoe to press the kiss more firmly, and Bean's mouth came down so hard on hers she moaned aloud.

Heavy crush of his lips, the hungriest kiss they'd shared so far. Rally gave it back to him and felt him sigh deep in his chest.

Her hands crept up Bean's back, round his neck, into his hair. His scalp felt damp and his thick locks resisted her fingers. Rally stroked his hair for a moment and touched the rims of his ears. Mind going dark, she could hardly think through the hot beat of her blood — her body wrapped itself around his, her lips softened and her breath came in long sighs.

Bean held her casually, his hands on her hips as she twined her arms around his neck, but his heartbeat pounded against the base of her throat and he shook slightly. His kisses grew ardent and sloppy, her lips numbing from the slippery pressure of his, his hard breaths rasping along her cheek, sharply audible in her ear. He felt so good, so big and warm and sexy... was this what May meant? But she loved Ken.

Rally pulled Bean's head down and pressed her breasts into his chest, kissing him in a sudden fury of desire. She didn't love Bean. God, no! She just wanted to know what it was like...

Bean groaned and his arms tightened around Rally's body. Suddenly he swept her up, whirled around and dumped her on his bed. She landed on her back with her legs sprawled out.

Rally gasped, the wind partly knocked out of her. Bean landed on top of her, momentarily a smothering weight on her lungs, but immediately pushed up on his hands to let her breathe.

His hips kept hers pinned to the bed, her knees up in the air on each side of his body. Keeping his elbows flexed, Bean leaned down and captured her lips again. Kissing her, he rolled his pelvis up into hers, rotating his butt to grind his clothed

erection between her legs. The pressure against her crotch sent jolts through her nerves, her nipples tingling in response.

When Rally pushed her pelvis back at him, almost involuntarily, Bean buried his face in her throat and thrust again and again, setting up a powerful sexual rhythm that made her head spin.

Rally moaned out loud, both in pleasure and in surprise at the passion accelerating between them. As soon as she'd let out the brake on her own desire, they'd both gone full throttle. Where had this racing power come from? She knew nothing could stop it now. Bean pulled at her blouse with one hand and worked it out from between their chests, sliding his fingers under her bra to touch her breasts. Pinching one nipple, he kissed her neck with soft bites and flickering tongue. He kept dry-humping her with long heavy strokes, rolling her pelvis up and back with each thrust. Rally could almost feel him inside her. In a few minutes, he would be...

“God damn, you feel sweet,” muttered Bean into her ear. “I’m gonna fuck you so good...”

Rally moaned in profound arousal, knowing she must be getting dripping wet — he could probably smell it right through her panties. Bean stopped moving and looked her in the face with a slight smile. Digging his hands under her body, he embraced her and rolled over, pulling her on top of him with her legs spread. One hand he kept on her back, pressing her down on his chest, while the other swept over her bottom and under her skirt.

Rally jerked and wriggled, but Bean’s fingers found the crotch of her panties and stroked her through the damp cotton. “Feels tasty, babe.” He grinned at her. “Nice and juicy.” He slipped one finger under the elastic and touched her slick flesh.

Rally squealed, but Bean’s fingers only stroked deeper. He slid his free hand down to her waist and held her while he unmercifully attacked her most sensitive spots. She screamed, she kicked, she pounded his chest with her fists, and all the while she bucked her hips against his tormenting hand, her excitement growing and growing. Soon she was panting, her hips rocking back and forth with Bean’s index finger sliding along her cleft and tickling her clit. She felt the tightness of approaching orgasm and tossed her head, throwing her hair in his face.

“Come for me, sexy lady.” Bean spoke in a lascivious whisper. “I know ya wanna come hard...” Rally’s face heated and her voice spiraled to higher and higher pitch, the tension vibrating like a supercharged engine, faster and faster. A hundred miles an hour... a hundred and twenty... a hundred and fifty... how much harder could she drive herself? Rally wailed, arching and writhing on top of Bean as his fingers goaded her on and on.

Her eyes snapped open and she stared into his, intently focused on her face. Suddenly the tension grew thicker, inevitably rhythmic; her voice dropped to a deeper groan, and she screamed long and loud in release.

“... Hey, babe,” murmured Bean. “OK, I’m impressed.” He rolled over halfway and deposited her on the bed. Rally relaxed limp and gasping, barely able to move, and watched Bean strip off his clothes.

Grabbing his T-shirt with one hand, he peeled it off over his head, then unbuttoned his jeans. But before he took them off, he threw a leg over Rally and finished unbuttoning her blouse. His hands moved so swiftly that the blouse went over the side of the bed before she could muster a word. Then he unzipped her skirt and pulled it down her legs, leaving her in her underwear. Her bra he pushed up without unfastening, and he instantly cupped her bared breasts in his palms, squeezing and massaging.

“Beautiful set, baby.” Bean lowered his head and his hot breath brushed her skin. “Man, it’s great to get ‘em in my hands at last...” Rally let out a whimper when he kissed her nipples and licked them, grabbing two handfuls of his hair to keep his head pressed against her breasts.

Bean slid a hand between her legs and stroked her through her panties, chuckling at her moans. With the tip of his tongue, he teased her left nipple, then licked a swirl around it while she ground her crotch against his hand. His fingers moved up over her panties, down again under the band and into her pubic hair. Rally cried out and arched her entire body while Bean stripped off her panties, clasping her sex in his hot palm.

“You want it, baby?” he said, muffled in the soft flesh of her breasts. “You want me to fuck you now?”

“Oh... God... yes...”

“Sure thing, pretty lady.” He paused to look at her, gaze stroking the length of her near-naked body. “I’ve been waitin’ a long time to hear you say that to me!” Breathing hard through an avid smile, he rose to his knees and kicked his jeans off.

There it was. That weapon — hard, purple-headed, and huge to her inexperienced eyes. Rally froze at the sight. Bean glanced around for his jacket, got up from the bed, retrieved his condoms, hurriedly tore one packet open with his teeth and unrolled it down his length.

Entirely nude, his huge upper body shining with sweat, he looked like a scarified god of battle. His right thigh bore a large tape-strapped bandage over the gunshot wound. Old white marks and slashes punctuated his tan skin and the long, swerving, knotted lines of his muscles. Bean returned to the bed where she lay,

rolled on top of her, parted her legs and lodged the bulky head of his penis against her sopping vulva.

He saw Rally's transfixed gaze and grinned. "Don't worry, baby — this'll fit just fine." He took a deep breath, and pushed.

Nothing happened. He looked impatient, and pushed again. This time he moved forward a little, and a sharp pain jolted Rally out of her trance. "OUCH!" she yelled, and Bean jumped.

"What's the matter?" he asked, resting on his hands, his penis still lodged against her. "Wrong angle?"

"I... I wouldn't know! I've never done this before!"

"Huh?"

"I'm a virgin, you idiot!"

Now she had really shocked him. Bean's eyes went wide. He tried to say something and choked on it, then cleared his throat and tried again. "You're a what?"

"Virgin! You even know the meaning of the word?"

"Course I do! Why the hell didn't ya tell me that before?"

"Up till now, it wasn't any of your business!"

Bean got off her and sat down heavily on the bed. "Shit." He looked angry, frustrated and dishevelled, his hair sticking up at crazy angles. "How the hell old are you?"

"Um... twenty-three."

"Horseshit." His jaw tightened. "Jailbait, huh?"

"No!"

He looked slightly relieved. "Not a hell of a lot older, though."

"Uhh... I lied about my age to get my gun dealer's license."

"Well... shit," said Bean again.

A brief silence simmered as he sat there nude, looking at her face. Rally grabbed a fold of the bedspread and tried to cover herself, suddenly blushing.

Something had passed behind that hard stare, something that cut her deeper than anger or aggression. She might have seen flashes of it once or twice before when he'd caught sight of her after a long hiatus, recognition leaping into his eyes along with that sidewise smile. A peculiar veiled warmth that had never made sense to her, least of all now.

"OK. At least now I got an idea why you couldn't make up yer mind." Rally gulped hard. "But don't try that kinda thing with some guy that don't give a damn. You could get yourself into *real* trouble." He grinned faintly and reached for his jeans.

"Hey!" said Rally. "What are you doing?" Bean looked at her with his eyebrows raised. "I... didn't tell you to stop."

"No, you didn't. I'm doing that all on my lonesome." He stood and pulled his jeans up, rebuttoning them with his back to her. "Scuse me, babe. I'm gonna go take another shower. A *really* cold one!"

"But... but..." Rally threw the bedspread off and sat up, naked except for her displaced bra. "Goddammit, Bean! I just got all set to cross the finish line, and you're going to run out of gas NOW?!"

Bean looked at her and shook his head, smiling crookedly. "I don't mess with kids."

"I am NOT a kid!" Rally gritted her teeth at him.

"You sure about that? Let's see — first she gets all jumpy sitting next to me. Then she's got a problem shaking hands. She ain't sure she wants to get on a bed with me in the room, and she's really got to get up the courage for a shower. Oh, but she ain't goosey 'cause she thinks I'm gonna drop my pants in front of her or something. Naw."

Rally's face burned hot — she'd hadn't felt so transparent since her father had found her out in childhood mischief.

"She's got somethin' else in mind and I'm wondering if I know why. She flashes a little skin just to get me thinkin', then she starts wrigglin' around and undoing buttons till I don't know which end is up. When I start going in the direction she's aiming me at, she gets all nervous and starts messing with her hardware." He threw a sour glance to the CZ75 on the chair. "I'm thinking I'm gettin' played for a fool, but damn, sometimes it's hard to resist no matter what the game is. When I ask her a direct question, she gives a direct answer... but she don't even stick to that."

"I meant it. Really!"

Bean rolled his eyes. “Maybe you did. Pardon me all to hell for lackin’ the patience for figuring out virgins.” He stalked into the bathroom and locked the door.

Rally sat stricken for a few moments. “Well... shit,” she echoed. What the hell was the matter with him? He wouldn’t touch a virgin? That seemed unlikely, to put it mildly! It made no more sense than that peculiar look in his eyes.

But as her arousal cooled, she began to realize that she might have gotten off easy. They’d been doing ninety miles an hour down a dead-end road. Stopping short was better than piling up against a brick wall, which surely would have been the ultimate result. Maybe he’d finally realized that, a few minutes before she had. She collected her clothes and slowly dressed.

By the time Bean emerged, his skin prune-wrinkled from an hour under the spray, Rally was sitting demurely by the table reading ‘Better Homes and Gardens’.

::: END OF VOLUME ONE :::

CONTINUED IN VOLUME TWO