

CHASING THE DRAGON

: A *GUNSMITH CATS*
FAN FICTION STORY :



BY MADAME MANGA

..: VOLUME TWO :..
CHAPTERS 3, 4, 5

::: 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 THREE :::

NEAR dawn. Rally opened one eye with her head still aching from sleeplessness. Out in the parking lot a big vehicle rumbled to a stop, its brakes screeching. Probably a trucker ending an all-night run. She pulled her pillow over her head to shut out the morning light and tried to go back to sleep.

She'd had a few hours of rest, disturbed by dreams, but it hadn't been a pleasant night. Bean had slept in all his clothes and Rally had removed hers in the dark for comfort's sake, huddling under the thin spread. She'd heard every sound he'd made during the night, from breathing to snoring to scratching. Every once in a while, he had let out a long grumbling sigh or growl, followed by restless tossing as if he were mentally kicking himself.

Maybe he was. He must have thought his prospects of partnership with her had just gone completely limp. But she had no intention of abrogating their temporary agreement over one embarrassing incident. She'd started it, after all. He'd reacted far more strongly than she had expected him to — but then so had she.

Rally's body twitched at the thought of Bean's kisses. If she had just pretended it didn't hurt or not admitted she was inexperienced, would he have gone ahead and pushed through the barrier? Would she have liked it? Would she be sleeping in the same bed with him now? Did she really give a damn about that? It was too early in the morning to know.

In the other bed, Bean turned over, then sat up. He got up, springs creaking, and padded over to the window, where he drew back the curtains with a stealthy rattle of brass rings. Then he closed them with another rattle.

For a moment, there was no sound. She had the feeling that he was looking at her, evaluating. Rally pretended to be fast asleep. Maybe he would go back to bed, or maybe he would go get some breakfast, and she could catch a few more winks.

Bean sat down with a thump in one of the chairs and shook out his socks with a *fwap fwap*, then put them on and pulled on his boots. He stepped quietly into the bathroom, urinated into the toilet, and didn't flush it. Then he moved to the door, picked up his armored jacket from the floor where he had left it the previous

night and put it on with a sound of slick lining, the creak of heavy leather and a cautious zipper.

Rally gritted her teeth in annoyance, hoping he would spend some time in one of the coffee shops before he came back. If the auto shop didn't open until ten or eleven, there was no point in her getting up. It couldn't be later than six now. Bean quietly opened the door, paused, stepped out and shut it. She heard his footsteps down the walkway and on the stairs, and then there was silence.

For a few minutes she tried to slip back into sleep, but her mind refused to throttle down. Apparently she was going to have to settle for three or four hours and make the best of it. And her bladder was full. Rally got up, naked except for underwear, and went into the bathroom. Wrinkling her nose, she flushed the toilet, flushed it again after relieving herself, then stripped and got into the shower.

Her body smelled of Bean, though not in an unpleasant way — his aura of leather and smoke combined with her own sweat made an insidiously sexy mixture. Rally felt another twinge in her groin, and reached down to test it. Yes, she was wet. Maybe Bean had felt frustrated last night at the sudden interruption, but so had she, and it hadn't been her choice.

She had thought she knew better than to try a stunt like that. In the light of morning, she fully realized that sex with Bean Bandit would have been a dangerous detour from her main direction of travel. She had better stick to the well-paved business route and avoid the bumpy back roads!

Though strictly speaking, she had already taken that detour. Just because he hadn't had intercourse with her didn't mean they hadn't had sex. Certainly the act had been cut short and left symbolically incomplete — her hymen was still intact, she was still technically a virgin — but Bean didn't have a politician's turn of mind. He wouldn't easily dismiss or reason away what they had done.

Neither could she. Rally let her fingers linger, tucked between the firm, slick folds, and thought about Bean's hands on her body. His black head against her breasts, his tongue lapping at her hard nipples, and his fingers stroking up and down between her legs... Rally caressed herself, seizing one breast with her free hand. The warmth of the shower was nothing like the warmth of Bean's body, but it would have to do.

How would he have made love to her — no, fucked her — and how would she have liked it? More than she liked what she was doing to herself now? The hot unpredictability of sex with another person was entirely different from the self-focus of masturbation. Trying to imagine how Bean's penis would feel inside her, Rally pushed her middle finger into herself as far as it would go and thrust it in and out. That left something to be desired, so she pulled the juicy finger out and

concentrated on her clit, rubbing it fast and biting her lips. Bean wouldn't be back for a little while, probably, so she could make as much noise as she liked.

Strumming her nipples with one hand and thrusting her pelvis against the other, Rally built up a good throbbing momentum towards orgasm. A little fantasy scenario began to form in her head: Bean would come back from the coffee shop and step into the bathroom, pulling the shower door open and jumping in with her, heedless of the cascading water. She would unbutton his jeans and let him take her standing, wet leather rubbing her breasts as he lifted her to twine her legs around his waist. He was easily strong enough to hold her up while his hot, wet cock impaled her, his hands supporting her bottom and pulling her back and forth.

She would throw her arms around his thick neck and kiss that big jaw, murmuring... murmuring what? 'You know this doesn't mean I'm going to let you take that \$500,000, don't you?' Probably something like that...

Rally came with a long sharp cry and slid down the plastic shower stall wall to sit on the drain. Her own panting breaths and the pattering water were all she could hear.

Kkhhkk... BBRRUUMMMM... kkhhkk... mmBBBRRMMmmm, said an engine starting up outside. Rally straightened up. That was an unusual sound. Far deeper, far stronger than an average car's, even than her Cobra's.

mmmMMBBRUUUUUUMMMM. The voice of horsepower, speed — and armor. Rally launched out of the shower, banged the door against the wall and snagged a towel on the way out of the bathroom. She flung the window curtains wide and got a flash of early sunlight from a well-waxed red car with a spoiler.

"BUFF!" she yelled. "BEAN! I'm going to KILL you!" Dashing through the door dressed only in a skimpy motel towel, Rally grabbed her shoulder holster off the bedside chair and yanked out the CZ75 on the run. It was cocked and locked, and she thumbed the safety off.

A panel truck was pulling out of the lot and she saw the logo on the side as she slid down the stairs: "Motor Muscle Movers — Classic Cars and Race Transport Our Specialty. Not a Ding In a Decade."

How could she have been so stupid? Of course, he had shipped Buff to San Francisco, just as he must have shipped it from Chicago to Hollywood. He must have called the moving company the previous night and asked them to tell the driver to turn around and bring his car to Buttonkettle instead. Where he could ditch her!

Rally sprinted around the building and came face to face with Buff, which was coming towards her at about fifteen miles an hour, following the panel truck out

of the parking lot. She ran directly at the car, which swerved to avoid her, but she put a hand on the hood and vaulted up to land sprawled on the windshield.

The driver's window was rolled down. She grabbed the side-view mirror to brace herself and jammed the CZ75 into Bean's face. He hit the brakes and screeched to a stop.

"Shit, girl! You trying to get yourself — "

"Get out of the car, Bean," said Rally in as deadly a tone as she could muster, considering that she was dressed in only a towel. "Hands over your head! Now!"

The cigarette in his mouth angled sharply downwards. "Hey, let me ex — "

"Shut up, you lying bastard! I've got you dead to rights. Turn off the ignition and give me those keys!" She rolled off the hood and leaned into the car, denting Bean's temple with the pistol just below his headband.

Bean complied, dropped the keys into her palm and sat still with his gloved hands outstretched on the wheel. Rally nudged him with the pistol and his face twitched. "You mind putting that thing away? I don't want to have to hurt — "

"Oh, of course not! Give me a break! Get out!" Bean moved slowly, keeping his hands in sight, and opened the door. Rally did a fast snap around the door frame to keep the CZ trained on him. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he slid out and stood upright, dropping the cigarette on the asphalt. No one else seemed to be around — the truck had disappeared down the northbound on-ramp to the freeway and the motel was quiet.

"Take that jacket off and put it in the car. Keep your hands away from your cutlery unless you want some fingers shot off!"

Bean unzipped his jacket and let it drop down his arms, keeping an intense watch on the CZ75. He tossed the jacket onto the driver's seat and bumped the door with his hip to close it.

A little blast of wind from the slam blew Rally's towel awry. "Eeeek!" She grabbed at the towel when she felt it untuck itself, but it dropped away and left her standing there stark naked. Bean jerked forward when she momentarily looked at the little wet pile of terrycloth on the pavement, but halted when the muzzle of the pistol jabbed him in the middle of the forehead. He froze in a crouch, his eyes level with her breasts. A faint arch of one brow was the only reaction he gave.

Rally took a deep breath and moved back a pace. "Back to the room!" She marched him up the stairs with the pistol pressed firmly to the base of his skull. Once they were inside, she made him drop prone and spread-legged on the carpet with his hands crossed in the small of his back. She handcuffed him and stood up.

“I’m going to get dressed,” said Rally, “and you are going to lie there quietly if you know what’s good for you!” Bean muttered something into the carpet. “What was that?”

“Nothin’,” said Bean a little more distinctly. “Just never expected to get mine from a naked woman.”

“You think I’m going to shoot you execution-style in a motel room because you imposed on me last night?” She let out a snort. No wonder he’d been so jumpy! “Get real, Bean. If I felt that way about it, you’d’ve been dead before you ever touched me!”

Rally put on her blouse, omitting her bra, since it would take two hands to fasten. Bean could probably snap those cuffs with one yank. “I’m only insuring that you don’t make another break for it. *Partners*, huh?”

“Thought I’d blown that already. But I hadn’t decided to ditch you.”

Rally wriggled into her skirt and zipped it. Her pantyhose would have to wait — she stuffed them into her purse and slipped her feet into her shoes. “Oh, really? Care to explain not telling me about the car? And sneaking out of the room and trying to drive away?”

“You gonna listen to me now?” He seemed calmer, but his tone was edged.

Rally found her clean panties and put them on. “Go ahead.”

“Sorry about the car. I wanted to have an ace up my sleeve, I guess. I was only going to drive up to where we crashed and see if I could salvage any engine parts out of my Corvette now that it’s daylight.”

“There’s nothing left you’d want to bother with, and you know it. I don’t care if it IS a super-rare, super-horsepower LS-7 — the heads must have been ruined. Even the block wouldn’t come out of that fire in any kind of shape!”

“Aw, you’d be surprised what survives sometimes.” He took a deep breath. “I needed to get out of the room, OK? I had to take a drive somewhere to think and that was as good a direction as any. Thought you were going to sleep in and wouldn’t even notice I’d been gone.”

She put her wrist slide and .25 automatic into her purse as well. “And once you got there, you were going to consider whether to keep heading north on your own.”

Bean didn’t reply for a minute. “OK, guilty,” he said finally with a ghost of a laugh. “Didn’t think you’d be all that sorry to see the last of me.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be. Last night, you promised me you wouldn’t skip out. What’s your word worth now?”

“Hey, Vincent, I said I wouldn’t steal a car.” Bean twisted his head up and grinned at her. “Buff’s all mine. Don’t even have a loan on it.”

“You goddamn hair-splitter.” Rally sighed in exasperation, but it turned into a laugh. “Want some breakfast?”

“You gonna spoon-feed me ham and eggs, or can I get up?”

“You can get up.” Rally produced her keys, knelt beside him and unlocked the cuffs. Bean pushed up on his hands. “Now listen to me, Bean, and listen good. No more hair-splitting. No fuzzy definitions. No more aces up the sleeve. You come clean with me, and I’ll come clean with you. There is no way we can succeed at getting Brown if we aren’t honest with each other. Keeping information back could get both of us killed.”

She stood and looped the cuffs into the back of her waistband as Bean sat up and scratched his head. “I’m used to working with May. *We* trust each other. We don’t spring surprises on each other. I’ve known her a lot longer than I’ve known you, of course. I can’t expect that the two of us will work together as well as the Gunsmith Cats do. But either you give it your best goddamn shot, or you can get in your car and leave right now.” She dropped his keys in front of him.

Bean looked at her with an odd light in his face, like dawn breaking into a dark room. He smiled, widely and genuinely, and stood up in a quick, coordinated motion, scooping the keys into the air and catching them again. “My best shot,” he said, nodding. “You got the word, girl. Lead the way.”

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“Oh, for God’s sake, May! Don’t be such a baby! This is IMPORTANT!” Rally crouched down in the passenger seat of Bean’s car, reddening with chagrin as she hissed into her cell phone. “I need you to come up to this place called Buttonkettle and take charge of the repairs to my car! It won’t take long, and I’m going to need it soon!”

“Why didn’t you stick around, then?” asked May peevishly. “You could have driven it to San Francisco yourself!”

“We decided we had better get moving, since we’d already lost ten hours!” Rally glanced over at Bean, who kept his eyes on the road, but snickered quietly with every appearance of profound amusement. “I left the valet key at the Motel 6 desk — just tell them you’re Minnie-May, and they’ll give it to you. There’s a big wad of

cash in the envelope, too, which ought to pay for the work. Don't let them charge you more than eighteen hu — ”

“I don't know diddly-squat about that kind of car! And what's this WE stuff, white man?”

“Um... that's me and uh, Bean. I'm riding in Buff right now.” Rally cringed as Bean grinned, still with eyes on the road.

“Buff? Bean? WHAT?!”

“We formed a temporary alliance. We're still thrashing out the details, but we're going to work on Brown and his suitcase together. Better odds!”

“Oh, goody. You two get all the fun, while I fly Greyhound to some dump called *Buttonkettle?*”

“It's not such a bad place,” said Rally lamely. Bean wheezed with laughter, his shoulders shaking.

“Oh, fine. OK. I will spend my vacation barfing in Buttonkettle. You and your personal chauffeur go punch holes in every crook in San Francisco. Just tell me all about it later, and I'll be PERFECTLY HAPPY!!”

“Oh, shit!” said Rally, slumping forward against Buff's dash. “I left my arsenal in the trunk!”

Bean finally glanced over. “What?”

“My rifle and shotgun. Damn! The rifle's illegal in this state — it's got too big a magazine! I locked them in there before the tow came, and then I just... uhh, forgot to go get them out this morning.” She shot an evil look at Bean, who shrugged. “Too many distractions, dammit... but I've got all my handguns.”

“Well, I just won't unlock the trunk!” said May. “I couldn't with the valet key anyway.”

“You're going to have to hurry up there, May. Bring all the luggage! And call me as soon as you arrive, and drive it north the moment it comes off the blocks! Please! I'm counting on you.”

“Yeah...” said May with a long sigh. “Fine, I'd better get going.” She hung up.

“You want to go back for 'em?” said Bean.

“When we've driven a hundred miles already? No, better keep going. I can buy a shotgun without a waiting period, at least, if I really need it. Can't get a decent

rifle in California, though, which is why I brought my own!" Rally tucked her phone away and looked out the window.

Still flat, still brown, still dull. They had another hour or so before the turn off of I-5 to cross the coastal mountains and approach the Bay Area from the south on 101. Bean wasn't pushing the car; they were cruising at ninety-five, twenty-five miles per hour above the speed limit. "I haven't seen any Highway Patrol cars out here. But I'll bet they're more common on the commute routes."

Bean smiled and pointed at the dash.

"Is that a radar jammer? Wow, looks like a nice gadget... and completely illegal! What else does this incredibly expensive mode of transportation carry? I don't even want to know how much you ended up spending on this car. I'll probably shoot you out of envy." She ran her hands over the leather seats and leaned back to enjoy the monster engine's deep vibration.

"Hey, it took a long time to save up for! Emptied out my investments by the time I got the final engine mods installed. And it costs a bundle to maintain. That's why I don't drive it long distance if I can help it."

"Your investments? You into petroleum futures or something?"

"Something, yeah." Bean chuckled. "I sure can use that five hundred grand."

"That two hundred and fifty grand, you mean."

"We gotta thrash this one out," said Bean after a pause. "No better time than the present."

"Oh, hell," said Rally, knuckling her eyes. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night — my brain's not working right. How could I have forgotten my guns?"

"Hey, I didn't sleep too well either..." Bean's voice trailed off. The silence grew awkward, a chill settling over the atmosphere that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. In contrast with the last few minutes of easy banter, Rally felt her body shrink away from Bean's. Paradoxically, she was suddenly far more aware of him, something like what she had felt the night before. The night before, when he had almost taken her virginity...

Bean took out his pack of Marlboros, glanced at her, and put them back in his jacket.

"Umm... thank you for the loan," said Rally to break the silence. "Two grand would have busted my credit limit."

“Sure thing.” Bean reached for his radio dial. A burst of static exploded into the quiet car, and Bean hit the auto-search. A faint Spanish-language broadcast came through, and he hit it again. This time he got a strong signal and a singer with a twang.

*‘Cause I like it! I love it! I want some more of it!
I tried so hard, I can’t rise above it,
Don’t know what it is ‘bout that little gal’s lovin’,
But I like it! I love it! I want some more —*

Bean hit the auto-search one more time.

*I ain’t Goldfinger and I ain’t Joe Fashion...
And you can’t buy much with the checks I’m cashin’,
But if you’re wonderin’ why I’m ridin’ with a smile,
It’s ‘cause my little baby loves me — Cadillac style!
Every night at ten-thirty she puts me in drive,
Turns all the lights out and man alive!
All eight cylinders are firin’ in line,
I’m never out of gas and I’m always on time —*

“Goddamn country-western stations,” said Bean, and turned the radio off.

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“Visiting hours are over, yeh slant-eye poof,” said the small man with the large assault rifle. “Ye and yer bumboys can take a hike!”

“I am Number 426,” said the black-clad Chinese man at the door of the hospital room, his eyes glittering in the early morning sun. He spoke in a British-tinged Chinese accent. “You will admit me, O’Toole.” He gestured to the two large men behind him, both of whom stepped forward. O’Toole raised the rifle.

“Don’t resist, Tom,” said Brown from his bed. The driver paused in the act of rising from his chair, and Brown waved him back into it. “It’s all right, Manny. I’ve been expecting this visit since we arrived.”

“What remarkable foresight,” said 426. “Take their weapons.” The two large men moved into the room and collared O’Toole. They spread-eagled him against the wall and patted him down. Besides the assault rifle, they stripped him of an ankle-holstered knife, a grenade belt with three frag shells, a blued-steel .45 caliber combat model 1911 with two spare magazines, a half-used roll of duct tape, a pair of handcuffs, a leather-covered sap, a torn knee-high nylon stocking, and four boxes of .308 rifle shells.

“Getcher dirty hands off my property, yeh sodomites!” ranted O’Toole as one of the the large men twirled the duct tape roll on a forefinger, smirking.

“And Mr. Manichetti,” said 426, pointing to the driver. “He is usually armed.” The large men pulled him to his feet and frisked him.

“Jesus Christ, Tom,” said Manichetti, yielding up his shoulder holster and nine-millimeter Beretta. “You still carrying your kit? Thought you swore off women.”

A nurse began to enter the room and shrieked at the sight of the guns. “Mr. Brown! There’s only so much of this kind of activity we can — ”

“Put it on my bill,” said Brown, gesturing for the door to be closed behind her. “Welcome, 426.” He sat up and bowed. “Pardon my inability to rise.” The two men frisked him, pulling his embroidered silk pajamas askew, and found nothing. “I’m still groggy from the anesthetic, you see... I had surgery only last night.” He held up his maimed right hand, now encased in a plastic cast with only little finger and thumb protruding.

“That is unfortunate,” said 426, taking a chair. “I would prefer you fully aware of your fate.”

Next to Brown, he looked monkish — his slightly grizzled black hair close-cropped, his clothing plain though finely cut. Although he was well over forty, his face showed few lines, as if he seldom smiled.

Brown straightened his pajamas and smoothed back his highlighted blonde hair. “You’ve come to tell me what that is, I see.”

“I have been assigned,” said 426, “to kill you, Sylvester Brown.”

“Yeh Chink queer!” howled O’Toole. “I’ll focking kill YOU — ”

“Be quiet, Tom!” hissed Brown, and O’Toole subsided.

“Your men will follow you in death. In this one’s case, it will be long overdue.” He slitted his dark eyes at O’Toole.

“Don’t blame them for my actions,” said Brown quickly, glancing at Manichetti’s stricken face. “There’s no reason to throw the baby out with — ”

“Man or child, it makes no difference to the Eight Dragons.”

“Oh,” said Manichetti, “you’re the one who whacked a nine-year-old boy for his life insurance.”

426 threw him a look. “I am the Red Pole, Number 426. An American will have little grasp of the meaning behind the symbol and the number. Suffice it to say that it means I am the chief of assassins for the Eight Dragon Triad.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” said Brown.

“I have been waiting to receive this assignment for some time. It is inexplicable to me that a white man should have been given such latitude in our organization. I warned 459 about the problems that would arise from working with non-Asians who understand nothing of filial duty and of our values. Your decadent Western style of life is spreading among the leadership — ”

“I don’t think I’m the only new influence on such an ancient fraternity,” said Brown soothingly. “The Eight Dragons have been in the United States for over ten years now. You give me far too much credit.”

“I dislike you personally, and I dislike your lack of self-regulation, no matter how well you conceal it. But your deviant sexual activities are not truly my concern.”

“Now, really, that’s a little harsh — ”

“How many child brothels did you visit the last time you were in Thailand? My observer lost count after Chiang Mai,” spat 426. “You are incontinent, in every sense of the word.”

Manichetti looked nauseated, his face turning pale and his brown eyes widening, but he remained silent. O’Toole gestured dismissively.

“You are an vainglorious blunderer whose mistakes have multiplied themselves until you must sink under their weight. How you have ingratiated yourself among the senior members of the Triad passes belief. I suppose in the same way that you established your cocaine business — the shallow inhabitants of Hollywood must easily swallow your unwholesome flattery. But when you poison the Triad, you poison my entire world.”

“Obviously you’re dedicated to the organization — ”

“You have no conception of my idea of duty, Brown, so keep your serpent tongue off of it. Some have called you a magician, but Americans do not practice magic. Some of my superiors are at fault here — I say this only because you will not be able to repeat it to them. Not everyone voted to send me here today. Apparently some of them are willing to forgive your clumsiness. I am not.”

“The others haven’t heard the whole story. I made my report just before I went under the knife.”

“Oh, yes, I would enjoy listening to your attempt at explanation. Including why you have killed the man you were sent to recruit.”

“I didn’t say he was dead,” said Brown with a glazed smile.

“You ordered your bodyguard to shoot at Mr. Bandit on the road, by your own admission. You saw him last rolling his car down a slope. That driver was projected as the cornerstone of Midwest distribution, you bungling fool.”

“I know that,” said Brown. “It’s... it’s all part of the plan I have, you see — ”

“Ludicrous.”

“Listen to me, 426. Bean Bandit is not dead. You never met him, so that sounds ridiculous, huh? But it’s true. I didn’t see him get up and walk away after that crash, no, but I’m as sure of it as I am of my wife’s sweet love. Say, did I ever show you — ” He made a left-handed gesture towards his billfold on the nightstand. One of the large men seized his wrist. “Look, it’s only a photograph,” said Brown softly. “I was going to get out a picture of my wife, huh? Can we all just calm down here?”

“If you can remain calm while I strangle you, Brown, I may gain some respect for you after all,” said the assassin, spooling a length of wire from his right sleeve. “Secure him, 189.”

“Don’t you want the explanation?” Brown gestured and the other large man caught the injured hand. He suppressed a yelp of pain. “I’m telling you, he’s alive. I know more about him than he knows about himself, and I swear before Christ that he’s not dead.”

“Even if he still lives, he has been permanently turned against us.”

“Against me!” 189 pulled Brown’s hands behind him and tied them to the bed rail. “Only me! He doesn’t even know who I work for.”

“I find that unlikely. He has sources of information on you just as you have on him. Your vicious, self-serving foolishness has infected the entire Triad, and it will be a pleasure to make an end of you.” He rose and pulled on a pair of black leather gloves.

“Call *me* vicious, will you...?” muttered Brown to himself. Aloud he said, “I accept my fate, 426. But shouldn’t my death serve more purpose than five minutes of pleasure?”

“Five minutes?” said the assassin with a chuckle, his first smile since he had entered the room. “Three quarters of an hour at least!”

Brown’s face twitched. “The point being, that you are throwing away the best resource you have in this matter. It isn’t a lost cause by any means. If the Eight Dragons want Bandit, they can have him, but only if they act wisely. Executing me isn’t wise.”

“Prove it.”

“With pleasure.” He took a deep breath. “First point. He’s after me for five hundred thousand dollars, and that’s as much as he makes in a very good year. Ergo, he will follow me wherever I go. Second point. He wants to kill me. If someone else does that for him, he will give up the chase and go home. Conclusion. Keep me alive if you want to draw him in or have anything that he will bargain for. If the whole idea was to gain the benefit of his skills, I am still essential even if you discount my information or my intellect. Naturally I don’t wish to do that — ”

“Your own failure — ”

“I defy anyone to have made friends with that man through conversation alone,” said Brown through his teeth. “He’s utterly uninterested in other people. I’m beginning to think he’s made of the same steel and fiberglass as his cars. I should have approached him as a machine, not as a human being. I feel like Linda Hamilton with Arnold Schwarzenegger following me, or if you’ve ever seen ‘Black Magic M-66’ — ”

“This is an excuse for giving an explicit order to shoot him?”

“No. No, of course not.” Brown swallowed hard. “I admit my fault. That’s the Chinese way, isn’t it? I confess my failure and submit myself to the merciful judgment of my superiors. I am a pitiful, spineless American bungler. I am unworthy to lick the mud from your shoe, 426. I offer my worthless self as bait for Bean Bandit in any way that the leadership may choose. Though it makes much more sense to let me devise the plan myself, I am a faithful servant of the Eight Dragons.” He bowed his head.

The assassin thwacked the length of wire thoughtfully against his palm. “I am not a strategist. I have my orders.”

“Of course you have. But examine the intent behind the orders. What harm can it do if I use a brief reprieve to carry out the job I was supposed to accomplish in the first place? You can always execute me later if I fail again.”

“True,” said the assassin, and took out a cell phone, pressing a program button. He spoke into it in Cantonese, listened for a moment, and made an affirmative noise.

“Give me a little time,” said Brown softly. “A week or two, huh? Then evaluate the situation again. You can only gain.”

“I have asked to speak to Red Mountain 531 and Red Gourd 492. They will make the decision, not I.”

“Of course,” murmured Brown. 426 straightened up suddenly and began to speak in Cantonese again. His eyes flicked to Brown as he answered questions, then spoke at greater length. Eventually he nodded his head, bowed deeply, and put down the phone.

“It seems that you are correct about Bandit’s invulnerability. Our agent has made his inquiries and reported in. Apparently Bandit rented a room in a small town in the Central Valley several hours after the accident, accompanied by a young woman — her identity is not certain, but apparently she is aiding him in some way. Do you know who she is?”

“I’ll have to check my information,” said Brown blandly. “He doesn’t usually work with a partner. Where are they?”

“Buttonkettle. Her car is in a repair shop there, and he has had his armored vehicle delivered to him. They started north soon afterwards, and so may arrive in San Francisco before noon.”

“That’s perfect,” said Brown sincerely. “They’re looking for me. You don’t want to disappoint them, do you?”

426 gave a deprecatory snort. “Your request has been granted. You have one week to convince Bean Bandit to work for us.”

Brown, O’Toole and Manichetti let out a quiet, simultaneous sigh.

“It is Monday morning. If you have not succeeded by midnight on Sunday, I will carry out my original orders. You and your men will die. Your family’s fate has yet to be determined.”

“My... family?”

“Your wife and child are now under the protection of the Eight Dragon Triad.”

“If... you’ve... *touched*... my... daughter...”

“She is with her mother, in her own home,” said the assassin, smiling blandly. “I have simply placed guards around the perimeter of the grounds. Each is armed and well concealed. Your wife has been requested not to leave, for her own safety and that of her child. I need not point out that if you or either of your men attempts to escape, I will take all necessary measures.”

Brown’s handsome face resembled a grinning skull. “You have any children, 426?”

“No.”

“That’s too bad. Some things about life... and death... never really hit you in the face until you do.”

“Perhaps,” said the assassin, taking off his gloves. He stepped up to Brown and slapped him across the left cheek. “I hold all your lives in my hands, Brown. Remember that as this week wears on.” He snapped his fingers at his men and left the room. The men took up stations in the hallway on each side of the door, 426 striding down the corridor alone, and O’Toole closed the door with a bang. Manichetti picked up O’Toole’s knife and cut the cord holding Brown’s hands to the bed rail.

“I think you are going to remember that better than I will,” said Brown, meaning it for 426. He reached under his pillow and took out his .44 magnum revolver, laying it on the covers. “I can’t fire this any more, Tom. I’m going to be counting on you. You too, Manny.”

“Sure, boss,” said the driver.

O’Toole retrieved his weapons and paraphenilia, putting them back into the cargo pockets of his fatigues. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I wasn’t sure that Chink poof was goin’ ta listen.” Dropping to his knees beside Brown’s bed, he crossed himself and briefly put his forehead on his clasped hands.

“If it’s a religious moment for you, Tom, you must have faith,” said Brown, putting his left hand on O’Toole’s rusty hair. “I’ll get us out of this, huh?”

“I know yeh will, sir.” He smiled up at Brown, his sharp face lit with something more than optimism.

“But what about Miss Tiffany?” said Manichetti, sitting heavily in his chair. “God, if they’re serious...”

“Have no doubt about it; they are. You recall correctly. 426 masterminded a plot to befriend a wealthy Hong Kong immigrant, take out life insurance on her son, and kill him for the payout. The police found the little boy in Golden Gate Park, strangled. The actual murderers are in jail. 426, obviously, is not.”

Brown reached for his billfold and took out a set of photo inserts, looking at a picture of a beautiful blonde woman holding a dark-eyed girl on her lap. “We can’t simply fulfill the terms of the reprieve, of course. The elements in the Dragons that hate me will hate me even more if I escape their revenge. This just grew larger than a dispute about how best to recruit a man who despises taking orders.”

“How much larger?” said Manichetti.

“Hand me the phone,” said Brown. “I’m going to call the FBI.”

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“Careful,” said Rally, nonchalantly pulling back her jacket and fingering the butt of her CZ75. “If I don’t hear an answer in about ten seconds, I’m going to take the leash off.” She batted her lashes over her shoulder at Bean, who cracked his knuckles and showed his teeth. The bartender’s defiance began to slip. He cast a frightened eye around the room; the two or three patrons put their money down on their tables and slipped out. “See, your cronies can figure it out without too much trouble. They’d rather not have to try to pick my friend here out of a photo lineup.”

“Who the hell are you people, anyway?” the bartender demanded, shakily. “I never saw either of you before. Why do you want to know about Sly Brown?”

“OK, your way now,” said Rally to Bean. She stepped back from the bar to give him room. Bean grinned, then picked the bartender up by the necktie. The man dangled for a moment, gasping and clawing. Bean let him down, then gave him a casual shove that sent him crashing into the liquor display behind the bar. Bottles fell and broke, a pungent smell rising from the floor. The bartender bounced off the shelves and darted a hand under the cash register. He came up brandishing a little black Glock. Rally drew her pistol, shot it out of his hand and leaped up and over the bar. Bean grabbed the man’s necktie again and slammed his head to the bar. Rally put the CZ75 under the bartender’s jaw.

“Look, it doesn’t matter why we want to know. We do. So tell us.”

“He... he got back in town last night,” gasped the bartender.

“And went where?”

“He was in the hospital this morning. Got surgery on his hand after a fight.”

“Who’s with him? Careful, we know something about them.”

“Manichetti drove him in, but he had to have some stitches for a cut in the leg. And O’Toole is guarding him with a bullet in his wrist. Said it wasn’t bothering him enough to have it taken out yet.”

“Guess they went up against an army, hmm?” Rally smiled at Bean.

“I don’t know what happened. I went to the hospital to get instructions, since he’s been gone for a week. Usually he shuttles between here and L.A. This time he flew out to Chicago and back for some kinda big shipment. He told me it was going to take his personal handling.”

“Did he say what he’s doing next?”

“No. He looked pretty shitty. Something went wrong in Chicago, that I gathered. And worse in L.A. But I’m just a middleman. I keep stuff in the back room for a few hours, it gets picked up and I get paid. I mostly see the couriers. But he’s a nice guy, you know? He likes to drop by sometimes when he’s in town and get acquainted, have a few drinks. Even met his wife once when he brought her up from L.A. for their anniversary.”

“What a sweetheart,” said Rally with a laugh.

“You’re not going to kill him, are you?”

“He’s got something that belongs to us. Which hospital?”

“No way.” Rally ground the muzzle of her pistol harder under the bartender’s chin. “Ow! Alexian Brothers! But he’s probably checked out by now. You won’t find him there. He said it was a red-alert security watch. O’Toole even frisked me before he let me in the room. He’ll be at a safe house. I don’t know any of those!”

“You know who he’s watching out for?”

“No. O’Toole and Manichetti always stick with him. There were some other wiseguys there, though — some Chinese muscle outside the door. Never saw them before.”

“You know who he works for?”

“I don’t ask questions like that!”

“What do you distribute for him? Coke or heroin?”

“Coke. He doesn’t deal in smack.”

Rally cocked a brow at Bean. “I’m getting a funny feeling about this.” She returned her attention to the bartender. “Thanks for the info. If I find out you’ve called Brown about us, I’m going to send the SFPD in with a search warrant. So keep your mouth shut.”

“The cops?” The bartender rubbed his throat when Bean let go of his necktie and Rally holstered her pistol. “You’re Chicago mob, aren’t you? What’s the big — ”

“Sorry, honey. Bounty hunter.” She flashed her ID at him, not long enough for him to read the name. “I play on the other side of the tracks.”

“Coulda fooled me...” the man muttered, shuffling in broken liquor bottles.

“Hey, I asked nicely. And my friend was standing right here, too. Tch, tch! He’s hard to miss!” She waggled her fingers goodbye as Bean pushed the door open to leave. Outside, the brilliant light of noon struck off the street and the sparkling bay, the skies blue and fresh. Rally blinked and put on her sunglasses. Bean followed suit. They crossed the street quickly and rounded the corner. Buff stood in the mouth of an alley, facing towards the street. They got in and Bean started the car. “We’ll have to thank your contact for giving us that address. But we’re going to need to know a little more than what this guy could tell us.”

Bean shot the car out of the alley and took a hard right, gunning it up a steep hill. “He didn’t know much about Brown’s plans.”

“Probably no one outside his inner circle does. Manichetti and O’Toole, huh?” She got out her pad and jotted some notes. “Italian driver — I remember he was dark — and the other one’s a sharpshooter and bodyguard. Sure was a fast mover.”

“I didn’t see the shooter. But the guy I hit with the throwing knife was a New York wop, all right. He didn’t say much, but it stuck out all over. He don’t dress like a wiseguy, though. I saw him in Chicago, too.”

“Hey, we haven’t really discussed that yet! Tell me about the original deal.” They crested the top of the hill and looked down on the ocean over descending rows of white and pastel buildings that cascaded down the slopes like out-of-season snowbanks in the summer sunshine. The ocean shone blue-green and smooth, crisscrossed with an occasional sailboat wake.

To their right she could glimpse the northern end of the Golden Gate Bridge as it joined high headlands across from the city. Behind the sharp peaks of a group of islands about thirty miles offshore, a low grey cloud bank hunkered far off the coast. “Wow, this is a pretty city. I think I like it here. Better than L.A., anyway! Look, there’s the famous San Francisco fog!”

“Heeeyyy, nice view,” said Bean. “I think this is where they shot part of the car chase in ‘Bullitt’.”

“You philistine... hey, I think you’re right. Isn’t that the corner where the first hubcap comes off the — oh, geez!” Rally laughed and swatted at Bean, who dodged her, snickering. “The deal?”

“Yeah. I got a call from Brown last Tuesday evening. He said he’d gotten the number from a regular client of mine. Might have been telling the truth, might not. Plenty of people know that number. Including you.” He grinned at her.

“He said he was a Chicago art dealer. He had a shipment coming in to New York and he needed the stuff for a gallery opening the next day, plus he wanted to ride along with it. I told him to call U-Haul. Then he said, all confidential-like, that

these paintings didn't have the right export papers. He pussyfooted around for a while — you heard how he likes to jaw — and he never came right out and said it, but I got the idea that he had a bunch of stuff from a museum heist in Europe. That was more up my alley. Since it was short notice and it's riskier when I ain't got some time to plan, I told him I'd do it for a hundred grand. That's about twice what I'd charge a few days ahead of time."

"And he didn't object."

"I didn't get no argument. He said he'd meet me with the money in twenty minutes. I drove out to a bar in the Loop, pretty ritzy joint, and he was there. All dolled up in his Armani suit and his blonde highlights. I could tell he wasn't no Chicagoan — he stunk of L.A. No flunkies with him except one red-head guy with an accent."

"What kind of accent?"

"Dunno. Maybe English — or he was a Mick. Yeah, he sounded like the St. Paddy's Day parade. He was packing under his jacket and kept an eye on me."

"That might have been O'Toole. I saw the sharpshooter, but he was wearing a balaclava both times — sort of like — whoa!"

"What?"

"Like the Provisional I.R.A. Or any number of violent splinter groups. The name would fit, too... there were a number of them that fled to the USA in the '80s and went into the Irish underground. In San Francisco and New York and Boston. Some of them petitioned for asylum and mostly ended up deported back to Northern Ireland. But not all. Some of them never got caught."

"So this guy's got terrorist training? Rockin'." Bean dug into a bag of walnuts in the shell and offered her one.

Rally bit her lips and shook her head at the walnut. "He's done this for real, all right, if that's who he really is." She looked out the car window at the view again, but they had descended from the heights and now cruised the lower streets, passing ornate Edwardian apartment buildings and blocks of shops and restaurants. "I wonder how many policemen and British soldiers he's sniped. We are going to have to watch out for him. Manichetti isn't much of a fighter, from what we saw."

"Naw, he's a wimp. One poke let all the air out of him." Bean cracked a walnut in his teeth.

"Still, he's a factor. Go on."

“I gave him my conditions — no drugs, no double-crosses, no discounts. He gave me the dough and a map, and never blinked an eye. I cut back home, got my Boss 302 juiced up, went back to pick him up and hit the road. He jabbered the whole way, ‘till I was about ready to pitch him out the window. We met the boat in New York early the next morning and they loaded me up with the stuff. It looked like canvas rolls — like they’d cut the paintings off the frames and rolled them inside out. They unrolled one to show me. Some pile of weird-colored crap he said was supposed to be a broad combin’ her hair.”

“Abstract art?”

“Whatever.” Bean ate the walnut and tossed the shell out the window, hitting a stoplight left-handed. “I never touched the things. He’d told me his guys would do all the handling since these were so valuable. That was fine with me, though I couldn’t see what was so great about ‘em. I didn’t smell anything wrong. I’m a driver, not a critic. I made good time ‘cause Brown fell asleep on the way back, which probably saved his life, and I delivered him and the load to a garage on the South Side that afternoon.”

“You drove eighteen hundred miles in less than twenty-four hours?”

“No sweat, babe. Driving’s my favorite thing to do in this universe. Gettin’ paid for it gives me everything I’ll ever need.”

“Really.” Money and machine... the sum of his attachments!

“That guy Manichetti was there, and some other flunkies — just errand boys. Brown kept talking me up while they were unloadin’ me. Asked me all kinds of personal questions, like he’s trying to be my friend or something. Goddamn touchy-feely Californian.”

“Did he ask why you didn’t run drugs any more?”

“Yep, in a roundabout kind of way. I didn’t give him much of an answer — I said I’d lost a bet, but I didn’t give any details. I mean, what was I gonna tell him? This little gal asked me not to? And then queered a big deal to make me keep my promise?” Bean shook his head, chuckling. “I don’t care if *you* know I can get blindsided. Nothing I can do about it anyway. But that’s not the kind of thing I want gettin’ around, huh?”

“I suppose not. But Goldie told me once that she knew...”

“Yeah, she figured that out on her own. I didn’t tell no one.”

“Oh... How’d you realize what was really in the load?”

“Well, all that personal relating rubbed me wrong. I started paying attention to the unloading. It was hard to see, but Manichetti was poking at the rolls with something. Like a long fat needle. I thought I saw him putting holes in a couple of them. That struck me pretty funny. Why poke holes in valuable paintings? So after they left, I came back and checked the floor with a flashlight. I dabbed up a few grains of smack. Didn’t have to test it or nothing. I know that shit blindfolded.”

“I’m not sure I want to ask how. What’d you do then?”

“Blew my goddamn top, that’s what. If Brown’d still been there, I’d have killed him barehanded. You want to know how mad I was? I kicked a dent in my own car door! My Boss Mustang!” Bean shook his head as if astounded at his own capacity for violence. “Then I went home, called a guy I know to ship Buff to L.A., ‘cause I knew the bastard must be high-tailing it home, and got in my black ‘Vette. I crossed the damn country in three days and chased him to ground. You know the rest.”

“Do I? How’d you find him at all?”

“Made a lot of phone calls on the way and then started circulating on the street. I got lucky and cornered him pretty quick.”

“Lucky? When they’d put O’Toole up in the rafters to be ready for you?”

Bean gave her a glance. “OK, I got blindsided. Too damn mad to think it through. Sure, when they heard I was comin’, they set it up so I’d find them on their own turf.”

“Brown’s not a dummy. Not entirely cool-headed — he gave that order to shoot you on the spur of the moment — but perfectly intelligent.”

“I don’t do so bad, babe.” He made a face. “If I got time to plan, that is. Don’t like charging in without thinking it over.”

“Of course. You’ve put together some brilliant... operations. But I’ve noticed you expect things to go according to plan once you’ve worked out the steps. You won’t change your course in midstream.”

“There ain’t too many that can make me change my course.”

“No, you’re practically a force of nature. I guess you can rely on that most of the time.”

“Fuckin’ A,” said Bean with a nasty grin. “Uhh... ‘scuse my language,” he said a moment later.

“Umm... so, did Becky have any good leads when you called her?”

“Heh. Becky tell you that?”

“She sold me the info. Along with the background on Brown and that tidbit about his trying to recruit you.”

“I think she offered it to me, but all I wanted was their heading. I wasn’t going to pay extra for anything else.”

“I’d love to hear the two of *you* negotiating over money!”

“She’s a pro, like me. Yeah, she told me to go to Frisco and she gave me a quick rundown on the Dragons. I’d figured Brown was an independent, since he had a mix of people. You don’t see a wop and a Mick working together like that — ‘cept in California, I guess.”

“So we paid twice for mostly the same information. At least we don’t have to do that now.” Bean’s uncouth vocabulary rubbed her the wrong way — she’d had slurs applied to her more than once because of her tawny Indic complexion. She could tell he meant nothing by it, so she decided not to comment.

“Yep, share and share alike. Though I don’t have anything else to tell ya. I got some addresses from some other contacts, but that’s all L.A. stuff.”

“How about that photograph?”

“What photograph?”

“The one in your wallet. The woman and the little girl.” He stared at her. “I confess, Bean. I went through your jacket while you were in the shower.”

“Fair enough, since I left it there. I knew you weren’t shy.” Bean shook his head with a smile. “Nope. I got that picture from Brown himself.”

“Huh?”

“He gave it to me on the way while he was gabbing. I guess he passes ‘em out everywhere, because he had a stack of ‘em in his billfold. I dropped it between the seats and dug it out later. I thought it might come in handy, if that really is his old lady.” Bean got his wallet out and tossed it to her.

“I have the feeling she probably is. Funny.” Rally extracted the photo and flattened it on the dash. A lovely smile on the mother’s face, and a happy laugh on the little girl’s. “I guess he’s proud of having such a beautiful wife.”

“Beautiful?” Bean turned to look and shrugged. “Aaah, I go for brunettes.” His eyes flicked to Rally’s hair.

She let that pass with no more than a skipped breath. Since he’d left her in his bed, he couldn’t have wanted to have sex with her very badly after all — she could take a stray comment knowing that the matter would probably subside in a little while. “He seems to be very attached to his family, for a murderous drug dealer... or at least he wants people to think so.”

“Yeah, he’s a pussycat. Cuddles up to ya like you were the love of his life, all friendly and purring, then turns around and sinks his teeth into your ass. I hate his frickin’ guts.”

“I got that impression. You’re going to a lot of trouble to get him.”

“No, you get him. I get the money.”

“Half the money.”

“Aw, shit. I didn’t drive all this way — ”

“Why didn’t you fly out and get Buff at the airport?”

“Fly? In an *airplane*? You gotta be kidding me.” Bean looked at her as if she had suddenly sprouted feathers. “I drive. I don’t sit in a damn cargo compartment and wait for some asshole in a uniform to crash his tin bird into a mountain. ‘Sides, I don’t fit in the damn seats. Tried it once. Never again.”

“Hey, I think I finally found something Bean Bandit is afraid of!” Rally whooped and clapped her hands while Bean looked mildly embarrassed.

“Well, shit, I took it kinda hard when Stevie Ray Vaughan got killed. It’s my tribute to his memory. Why didn’t you fly out here, instead of putting five thousand miles on the Cobra for your round trip?”

“Hey, I’m a driver too! Don’t really like going along for the ride.”

Bean twitched his mouth. “What about now? You not enjoyin’ ridin’ around town?”

Rally sat up straight. Now that he had called it to her attention, it did seem strange that she had never even felt the urge to comment on his driving. She’d only been observing his expertise with a half-conscious connoisseur’s eye, admiring the perfect acquaintance with his machine that had to come from endless practice, but also from a natural affinity with chassis and wheel and suspension.

Of course in extremity he could jump his car over obstacles or hold firm to the wheel while executing a violent slalom at high speed. In town driving, the finer aspects of his absolute control showed. This car functioned as an extension of his body; he wore it like a custom-tailored jacket and carried her as softly as if she nestled in his arms.

Rally herself was a skilled and fearless driver, but she had to admit that her passengers sometimes took a beating. Bean seemed to know exactly how far he could push the acceleration on a curve without rolling her around in her seat, exactly how to negotiate the hills without slipping backwards in stop-and-go or jolting her with quick starts. Some of the most spectacular San Francisco streets gave her pause at their extraordinary steepness, but she and Bean climbed and descended them with the smoothness of a gondola on a cable. Buff itself was a superb piece of engineering, but its driver might have been the most impressive feature of a near-perfect system for forward motion. Traffic seemed to part for him as if the cars themselves paid homage.

“Something the matter?” said Bean, returning her preoccupied stare.

“I... I guess since I know how you drive, it never seemed like a problem. Not exactly a lack of risk, but that comes with the operation. But no, it hasn't bothered me.”

Bean smiled out the window. “Guess I'll have to take that as a compliment.”

“Oh, I've got one more question about that delivery. I called a contact on the Chicago PD after I got wind of you in Hollywood. He told me about a heroin shipment rumor, but also that they hadn't tracked it down. How did the Chicago cops hear about it?”

Bean shrugged.

“Come clean with me, Bean. Remember, your best shot?”

“Yeah, OK. It's kinda embarrassing.”

“Really?”

“I was so mad, I called 911. Damn fool thing to do, considerin' I was the courier, but that's what I did. Gave a description of the car they left in. Aaah, it was a long shot.”

Rally shook her head in smiling wonder. “Bean Bandit called 911 on some drug traffickers. Truth is stranger than fiction.”

“Where the hell we going, anyway? This cruisin' around the sights is kinda fun, but we got work to do.”

“I’m hungry. Let’s get some lunch, and I’ll do some more calling around. I need to put some things together to make two and two...”

“There’s a Mickey D’s.” Bean started to slow.

“No!” Rally shouted a little louder than she had meant to, and Bean looked at her strangely. “I... I mean, let’s look for something better. The restaurants in San Francisco are famous! How about Chinese, or Thai?”

“You like that slop? Little bits a’ green stuff on rice? Shee-it.”

“Humor me! We’re dealing with a Chinese syndicate here — maybe the food will get me thinking along the right lines!” They approached a red and white sign on a storefront, grouped with other Chinese businesses. “Hey! That says Eight Dragon Delight — what a name! That’s where I want to eat.”

Bean made a boyish face of disgust. “I ain’t eatin’ broccoli, or that raw fish crap.”

“Order whatever the hell you want! And sushi is Japanese, by the way. There’s a spot — so park.”

“I think I oughtta have a meter chargin’ by the quarter mile...” muttered Bean. He pulled Buff into the just-vacated space, cutting off a black Lexus by millimeters. The other car screeched to a halt and the driver jumped out, shaking his fist. Bean unfolded himself from Buff’s driver’s seat and stood up, barely glancing around at the Lexus.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going, white boy!” the driver shouted in a California accent. Another man got out of the car. Both were Chinese and both wore flashy suits, accessorized with large gold watches. A gold stud shone in the driver’s earlobe. The second man had a gold tooth in front and a bad perm.

“What’d you call me?” asked Bean mildly.

“White trash cocksucka,” said Gold Tooth. In contrast with the first, he had a heavy Chinese accent. “You get you big ass out of ma parking spot.”

“And what if I don’t?” said Bean, just as mildly. Rally took a better look at the men. Both were armed, their indifferently cut suits not hiding the outlines of shoulder holsters. Gangsters. She stood up and unbuttoned her jacket.

“We stomp that ugly car, that’s what,” said Gold Stud. “Where did you get that piece of shit?”

Rally saw Bean’s face change. Slowly, he turned around, cracking his knuckles.

“Think he have ugly cah built just to fit his big white ass? How tall you, cocksucka?” said Gold Tooth.

Bean looked down at the two men, neither of whom was over five foot six. “At least when I fart, I don’t blow sand in my shoes.”

“Hey, white boy! You don’t talk to me like that!” The altercation was drawing an audience. Rally looked into the window of the Eight Dragon Delight and saw a handsome young Chinese man peering out with concern in his face. He stepped behind the host desk and picked up a cordless phone, beginning to dial.

“You got bad eyesight, short stuff. My car ain’t ugly, and callin’ me white is painting at least half of me the wrong color.” Bean stepped closer to Gold Tooth. “Want a better look, ‘fore I knock you blind?”

Gold Tooth pulled a cheap automatic and began to wave it around. The crowd gasped. Rally drew her CZ75. She took aim at Gold Tooth’s trigger finger, but the retreating crowd was too dense for a safe shot. “Shit! His ho’s got a gun!” yelled Gold Stud. He reached for his own weapon. This was about to get hideous. The young Chinese man in the restaurant was talking urgently on the cordless phone.

“Drop those guns!” shouted Rally. She flashed her ID. “No one has to get hurt here! Drop ‘em, I said!”

“Drop it yourself, bitch!” shouted Gold Stud, brandishing another cheap automatic. He drew back one shoe and gave Buff a resounding kick. “We’re gonna stomp this car into scrap, and then we’re gonna kick the shit outta Too Tall here, and then we’re gonna make *you* kneel down and take it from both — ”

“Feet off the car,” said Bean. “Now.”

“Fuck you, white-eyes! What ‘cha gonna do about it, big man?” He hit the driver’s window with the butt of his automatic, looking surprised when the glass didn’t break.

“Nothin’ much,” said Bean, and took Gold Stud by the collar and belt. He lifted and threw him bodily into Gold Tooth, who went down, his pistol firing wildly. The crowd parted and some people ran.

Rally vaulted over Buff’s hood and landed face to face with Gold Stud, who rolled up to his knees and swung his pistol around to aim at her. She shot his right forefinger off from six feet away as his shot bounced off Buff and her bullet lodged in his shoulder. He screamed, his hand spurting blood, and dropped the gun.

Gold Tooth rolled over and fired up at Bean, who put up one elbow to shield his jaw and kicked the man between the legs with an enormous steel-toed boot. Rally

could hear the sickening crunch; the firing ceased and Gold Tooth doubled up on the sidewalk, whining. Bean shook the 9mm slugs out of his jacket and straightened up.

“Ya want some lunch?” he said to Rally, then smiled wolfishly and lit a cigarette.

Rally scooped up the guns and frisked both the men, then handcuffed them together to a bike rack. “Did anyone else get hit?” Rally stood up and scanned the crowd, but no one seemed to have been injured besides the two gangsters. “Has anyone called the cops?” she yelled.

“Yeah,” said the young Chinese man, poking his head out of the restaurant. “They should be here soon. Lady, I’ll speak up for you, but they are probably going to arrest everyone involved. Sorry.”

“It’s OK. Happens to me a lot.” She sat down on Buff’s hood. “I’m just glad no one else got hurt, the way those two were blasting away. Sheer luck.”

“Luck’s my stock in trade,” said the young Chinese man. “Eight dragons for good fortune.” He bobbed his head up at his sign and smiled. “You’re not a cop, obviously, and I doubt you’re another gangster — so what are you?” A teenaged Chinese girl peeked out the front door, wearing an apron and a wide-eyed expression.

“I’m a bounty hunter.” Rally showed him her ID. “Irene Vincent, from Chicago. I go by ‘Rally’. Sorry about the mess in front of your place.”

“There’s no one in this neighborhood who more richly deserved to be messed up,” he replied. “They’re just cheap punks, but they can make life hard for upstanding pillars of the business community like me.” He smiled, his smooth tan face set off by very white teeth. “I’m Larry Sam.” They shook hands. “This is Mengleng Wu — she’s my lone employee.” The teenaged girl smiled shyly. Bean spat on Buff’s door and rubbed it with his bandanna, then ambled over. “Who’s your powerful friend?”

“His name’s Bean.”

“Really,” said Larry, craning back to look into Bean’s face as he shook hands with him. “He sure doesn’t look like he grew up on tofu.” He laughed, and Rally laughed with him.

“Huh?” said Bean.

“You know — tofu, bean curd — get it?” Rally made little circles in the air with one hand. “It’s sort of like cheese?”

“No,” said Bean, looking suspicious and dropping ashes on the sidewalk. “I don’t eat that crap.”

Rally sighed. “He’s not what you’d call culturally literate,” she said to Larry, who smiled and nodded at the door of the restaurant.

“Come on inside to wait for the cops. After going to all that trouble for a parking space, you should take advantage of it.”

“I’m not real fond of getting arrested, kid. C’mon, Vincent.” Bean dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, returned to Buff and unlocked the door again. Two black and whites turned the corner two blocks east, sirens sounding.

“Too late! Bean, we have to talk to them.”

“Do we?”

“Yes! Look, we didn’t do anything wrong. Mr. Sam saw it all and he said he’ll vouch for our actions. If you run, they’ll only chase you!”

“And the problem with that is...?” Bean grinned. The black and whites pulled up, blocking the street exit.

“Let me handle this one, Bean! We don’t have time to fight the cops, too!” Four uniformed officers got out of the black and whites, and Rally stood up to greet them.

“Hi there!” she said brightly. “Irene Vincent, from Chicago. Licensed bounty hunter – I go by ‘Rally’. Here’s my ID!”

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“Man, you sure charmed the pants off those guys,” said Bean, poking skeptically at Rally’s platter of garlic-fried eggplant. “Wish I could just bat my baby blues and get ‘em off *my* case.”

“Oh, Bean, you don’t have to be so grumpy about it!” said Rally through a mouthful of cashew chicken. “Would you rather they had heard of YOU and not of me? Or that Larry hadn’t been there to confirm we weren’t the aggressors? We’d be down at the station now instead of eating this delicious lunch!”

Mengleng Wu waited on a few tables across the room and kept casting covert glances their way. Larry Sam came out of the kitchen with another plate and set it on the table with a flourish. “Tea-smoked duck for our butt-kicking carnivore. I guarantee, it’s almost like barbecue... and my dad’s deep-frying those pork ribs now.”

Bean picked up a duck leg and sniffed it. “Smells OK.” He took a cautious bite. “I dunno. I’m just not used to standin’ there scratching my ass while a skirt sweet-talks her way around a bunch of fuzz.” He took a larger bite, then crunched down on the bone. “Hey, this ain’t bad.”

“I’m deeply honored,” said Larry, bowing. “More tea, Ms. Vincent?” He refilled her cup.

Rally smiled at him, then growled at Bean. “You sound as if it were cheating to have some social skills! Geez, I know I needed you to get that bartender softened up, but most people will see reason without the use of force!”

“Yeah, yeah. And you shot the guy’s finger off to make him see reason.” Bean ate a wing in one bite.

“I wish I hadn’t had to draw on the street like that, with so many bystanders. Some situations just get worse and worse when the guns come out. They are not the simple solution to any conflict — sometimes they are the major reason a conflict escalates. Using a gun wrongly is one of the most reprehensible things a person can do!” She knew she was pontificating, but Larry’s attentive gaze egged her on even as Bean rolled his eyes. “That’s what I hate worst about that kind of gangster! But even with them, I’m always going to try talking first and shooting last.”

“You two sound like you’re in an interesting line of work,” said Larry. He ducked into the kitchen and came out with a sizzling platter of ribs. “Enjoy, Mr. Bean.” Bean’s mouth was full, but he nodded.

“Well, yes, we are... but we don’t always agree on how to do it! Such as what our next move should be.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Um... it’s a long story...”

“I’ve got big ears,” said Larry, tweaking the lobes. “And... maybe I can help you.” Bean looked up at him askance, his jaws working away on pork ribs. Rally noticed that there was nothing left of the duck, not even bones.

“Pull up a chair, Larry. I’ll fill you in.”

“Hey,” said Bean, with a loud crunch between his teeth. “What’s the idea? You just met this guy an hour ago.”

“Is he eating the *bones*?” said Larry, his eyes widening. “You can do that with the duck, because it’s so well cooked... but RIBS?” Bean picked up another one and bit it in half like a snapping dog. “Unbelievable.”

“Pay no attention to him. He’s showing off. He rolls cars over for a light workout before dinner.”

“No kidding? But you’ve got some skills, too... Rally.” Larry smiled at her, chin resting on fingers. He really was a good-looking man, and not too much older than she was — maybe twenty-four. Bean pulverized bones between his teeth and downed half a bottle of Tsingtao beer in a swig.

“Oh, I get along,” said Rally with an airy wave. She helped herself to garlic-fried eggplant. “Well, this all started when someone in Hollywood complimented my car yesterday, around this time...”

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“That her?”

“That’s her.” Brown lay back in his recliner and passed the photograph across the desk to O’Toole. “I got the best look at her — you were a little far away, Tom.”

“I saw her through the scope. Looks colored or something.” O’Toole examined the eight-by-ten, a shot of Rally arresting a man just outside the Chicago Tribune newspaper offices. She had a wide smile, her hair flying as she turned with her CZ75 in her hand. Manichetti looked over his shoulder, raising his brows.

“She’s part Pakistani, according to the information.” Brown shuffled through a folder, reading documents. The three men sat or stood in a palatial office inside a pier warehouse, the room suspended on steel beams forty feet above the warehouse floor. One wall entirely made of glass let Brown observe the activity among the crates and pallets stacked below, but he was paying no attention to the workers and forklifts.

Instead, the ample surface of his rosewood desk held one thick black folder and a thinner tan one, marked ‘Vincent’. The thin folder’s contents passed from hand to hand around the room or lay on the desk in untidy piles.

“Please study everything I have here. I’m looking for ideas, suggestions... anything, really. And memorize that pretty face, too. She’s been known to employ disguises.”

“Oh, lovely. A stinkin’ Paki,” hissed O’Toole. “And that big Jap mongrel — it’s the fockin’ United Nations of late, innit?” He laughed. “Course I’m a Derry lad and Manny hails from Cosa Nostra. Dragons only like their own kind, but yeh got the talent to get along with everybody.”

“I do seem to pick up the rainbow coalition, don’t I?” Brown laughed with hollow mirth. “If only I had picked up Bandit the way I wanted to...” He hefted the thick black folder and dropped it on the desk again.

“Well,” said Manichetti in a low voice, “comin’ clean with him mighta helped.” No one seemed to hear him.

“I don’t get it. I mean, sir, I thought I was a hard case back in ‘89.” O’Toole smiled at Brown. “First time I saw yeh, I thought yeh were a pansy-ass who couldn’t wipe his own bum. An hour later, I was tossin’ back Bushmills with yeh and tellin’ yeh my life story. I thought sure yeh’d have him on a plate by the time yeh got back from Gotham. What’s the big bastard’s problem? Just the unfriendly type?”

“I don’t think he got past the pansy-ass stage,” said Brown with a sigh.

“Ah, shite. He just don’t appreciate the finer things in life.”

“Thank you, Tom,” Brown laughed. “When you described how you’d blown the eyes out of that soldier in Shankshill, I knew I’d found a soul mate.”

“That’s a hell of a story,” said Manichetti, grinning. “One bullet through both sockets! The juice runnin’ down his cheeks and he’s yelling for his mama — fuckin’ priceless.”

“Yeah,” said O’Toole with a nostalgic sigh. “Too bad I had to finish ‘im off so quick. But it was a tidy bit of shootin’ if I do say so. I hope I’m not losin’ my touch.” He rubbed his bandaged wrist.

“Let’s hope I haven’t lost mine.”

“Never, sir. Even if I don’t aim so true as I did once, I can still hit a target the size of Bandit.”

“Certainly, Tom. But I don’t think he’s the most direct threat to us now. Ms. Vincent... now, there’s a hazard for you. She’s better with firearms than anyone that young has a right to be. She can’t be bought off as far as I can tell. She’s dead set against drug dealing, and she seems to pop up where Bandit is operating, working both with him and against him. Apparently she’s on better terms with him than we are, though their relationship might be a tad volatile.” He tossed all the documents on the desk and lit a cigarette. “That suggests a certain approach to my mind.”

“To do what? Waste the big bugger?”

“No, no.” Brown’s eyes flicked towards the glass wall of his office. “That would be premature. The higher numbers are unanimous; he’s to be won over. I’m going to

carry out the terms of the reprieve — for now, assuming I get some cooperation with the rescue in L.A. If at all possible, we've got to find the key to him..."

Manichetti ventured a remark. "She may be a Paki, but she's a nice bit o' tail." O'Toole snorted, but Brown nodded.

"Exactly. Bandit's not an easy man to reach, but he's tolerated her interference in his affairs for years. Now they're actually traveling and operating together. If Mr. Bandit doesn't have some special regard for Ms. Vincent, I'd be very much surprised."

"And she hates drugs?" said Manichetti. All three men looked at each other.

Brown had a dawning smile. "He told me he lost a bet. I got the impression it was with a woman. I thought he might have been pulling my leg, considering his lack of social life."

"Any other woman it could have been?" said Manichetti.

"It's doubtful. He has no steady girlfriend and hasn't in years. I'm not sure how often he manages to talk to fellow humans outside of work. Ms. Vincent is one of the few females in the entire city of Chicago who can give him a run for his money... at least since Iron Goldie checked out. It has to be her."

"Lovely," said O'Toole. "I waste her, the bet's off, and we've got no problems."

"You aren't going to touch her, Tom. Sorry."

"Why the fuck not?"

"That's not Bandit's way. If he made her a promise, he'll keep it to his own grave. We don't even know the details of this bet, and he'll never tell us, of course. If she dies now, so do all our chances."

"As long as he thinks she's the kinda woman he ought to keep his promises to," said Manichetti.

"Manny, you're batting a thousand today..." Brown wagged the remaining fingers on his right hand, grimacing in both pain and thought. "What would offend this man the most? What does he value over all else? For the sake of what ideal or commodity would he willingly discard his well-nigh bulletproof sense of professional honor, not to mention the only woman he's cared about in years?"

"Christ, that's an easy one," said Manichetti.

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“You want green tea ice cream or fortune cookies? Dad does a mean deep-fried banana fritter, but you’re probably too full for that...”

“Oogh, you’re right... though I’ll have to try it some other time! Fortune cookies, please. I always liked breaking them open when I was a kid.” Rally surveyed the table, strewn with sauce-streaked platters and particles of rice. “Give your dad my compliments, and Bean’s too.”

“I think the sheer quantity might have tipped him off already. You think you might be back my way while you’re in San Francisco? Sounds like you’re going to be... busy.”

“That’s putting it mildly. Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything,” said Larry, toying with an extra set of paper-wrapped chopsticks while Mengleng began to clear the table. Rally glanced at the girl and Larry hesitated a moment, then pointed his chin at the kitchen. Mengleng looked puzzled, but wiped her hands on her apron and retreated. The swinging doors shut behind her to show a poster supporting Wen Ho Lee.

“What do you know about the local organized crime syndicates?” Rally began. “Specifically... the Asian ones.”

Larry let out a long quiet breath, and dropped the chopsticks into an empty teacup. “That’s a delicate question.”

“I know. That’s why I left it this long, and that’s why I told you all I did about what I’m doing in San Francisco. I didn’t give you the whole story, of course. I’m not at liberty to do that.” She had given him a bare outline of her adventures, naming no names and emphasizing the excitement of the chase. About Bean’s history and financial interests in the deal she had scrupulously said nothing.

Rally had a good instinct for people, and in the course of the conversation she had evaluated Larry very thoroughly. He was an observant man, keenly intelligent under a light-hearted, affable manner. She knew crooks, and if he was a crook, she was very mistaken. But if anyone was in a position to give her information about Asian gangsters in San Francisco, it was a Chinese businessman whose restaurant shared its name with a Triad. Perhaps some good fortune, or Rally’s unexplainable instincts, had first steered them to the Eight Dragon Delight. Larry himself had kept her here and highly interested, in far more ways than one.

“You mean... your friend Bean?” Larry nodded at the closed door of the restroom.

“Yes, mostly. He’s got some interests in this deal that aren’t quite the same as mine. That’s all I can say.”

“Can I ask you a question?” said Larry.

“Shoot.”

“What’s his interest... in you?”

“You mean, is he my boyfriend?” Rally gave her dry lips a quick lick. “No, he’s not.”

Larry furrowed his brow. “It was hard to tell. He’s older than you are — maybe thirty? But that doesn’t mean too much. I kept thinking I was seeing signals from one or the other of you, and then I wasn’t sure.” Rally smiled queasily. “He sure clammed up when you started telling me your saga. I kept waiting for him to fill in something, but he never did. God, that man can eat.” He looked at a stack of seven or eight greasy platters next to three crumpled napkins and four empty beer bottles.

“For the things he likes, he’s voracious.”

“Yeah, I can see he would be.” Larry scanned her face, his clear dark eyes lingering on her hair. “But he’s not your boyfriend.” His brows implied a question — he obviously didn’t miss much.

“No.”

“Good. I’d hate to get on the down side of a guy like that.” He smiled softly, and Rally felt a mild, pleasant stirring in her middle. “But you asked me your question first. Shall I wait until your partner joins us again?”

“Thank you, Larry. I can see I came to the right place.”

“Rally, I’m a working man. I’m running this restaurant while my dad does the cooking and my mom does the food buying and my sisters finish their educations. When Vanessa graduates from Berkeley and can take over here for a while, I’m going to go for an MBA. I’ve been admitted to Stanford Business School.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” He leaned forward. “You know, I am glad to be an American. My parents came here from Guangzhou in 1972. They had a rough time in China, and they had a rough time here for a while — but here they could work hard and improve their lives.”

Bean came out of the restroom and sat at the table again, glancing at Rally and putting his feet up on a vacant chair.

“Mengleng came here last year, for the same reason. In China, the government takes what you earn. The officials take their cut, and the gangsters feed on what’s left. If you want to get anywhere, you have to pay bribes to everyone, official and otherwise. Wherever Chinese have gone, the gangsters have followed.”

His voice was low and passionate; obviously he felt strongly about this, and Rally grew more and more confident that here was a priceless resource — possibly for free! “Mengleng almost fell into the hands of a Taiwanese pimp down in Burlingame right after she got here, and my sister Emerald — she’s going to go to law school — brought her over from the women’s shelter and I gave her a job. In this country, you can do something about those scumbags. They aren’t a centuries-old tradition. The mold isn’t hardened yet. They are here, and there are more coming, but they aren’t invincible. If you’re going after them, I want to give you all the luck you can handle.”

“The Eight Dragon Triad, from Macau,” said Rally. “That’s the one we want.”

“Shit,” said Larry, his handsome face twisting. “Sorry. But it was just yesterday that two of their thugs came in here, right here in my nice place, and threatened to take it all out into the street in small pieces if I didn’t start paying ten percent of my receipts to them, effective immediately. I told them to go fuck themselves. They didn’t speak English too well, so I told them in Cantonese too. It’s even more insulting that way.” His eyes flicked down and up again. “The two you took out today were probably the next level of muscle.”

“If giving information to us is going to get you in trouble — ” Rally began.

“Let him talk, babe,” said Bean, picking his teeth. His eyes met Larry’s. “Sounds like a point of honor to me.”

“Damn straight,” said Larry. “I decided I’m not ever going to behave as if they have a claim on us. I’m proud of our restaurant and of its name. Eight’s a lucky number. Every Chinese knows that. And the place opened in the Year of the Dragon. I have nothing to do with gangsters no matter what they call themselves. They’re a perversion of everything my family is about. If you can help put them in jail, I’ll help you, and I don’t care what kind of threats they make. I could cringe and pay up. But why the hell did my parents slave to come to America, then? This isn’t just for me. It’s for their grandchildren, when they come.”

“So what did you tell the cops?” said Bean, rolling his eyes again.

“Just what I told you. Extortion attempt, threats, all that. I doubt it will come to anything unless some solid crime gets committed. I don’t blame the police for that. They have to chase the worst first. But I knew the bastards were going to try to horn in on me sooner or later, so I’ve been arming myself. Not your way.” He smiled at Rally. “That’s not my style. I’ve been getting information on who they are and what they’re doing. What do you want to know?”

“We’re after a man named Sly Brown. He’s from Los Angeles, but he operates here as well. He’s a drug dealer who’s just gotten into heroin after sticking strictly to coke. The FBI’s linked him to the Eight Dragon Triad, even though he’s not Chinese. Why would he associate with them, and why heroin?”

“Heroin? That’s easy. They control the sources for it, because the best sources are Asian. Coke’s South American. Opium’s cultivated in China, the Indian subcontinent plus Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia. Mexico’s producing low-quality black tar heroin, but it’s not China White and it sometimes causes fatal infections. If they recruited this guy, or took him over, which is more likely, they would want to use his distribution channels for their own stuff.”

“Makes sense. Took him over, huh?” Rally raised a brow.

“Yeah. They move into a new territory, and they give the existing syndicates a choice. Fight it out, move out, or work for them. They don’t have much compunction about murder and everyone knows it, so threats are pretty effective. Macau is an open city, practically. It’s a lot less tidy than Hong Kong even though it’s smaller — there are dozens of Triads with international ties. The Commies will clean it up in 2000, in their inimitable fashion, of course. They’ll leave some room for the syndicates, depending on how much squeeze the gangsters pay to the Party officials, but it’s going to be a big shakeup. The Dragons know they have to build an overseas base fast and they’ve been doing it for eight or ten years.”

“Wow, that long?”

“They are patient. You may know something about Japanese gangsters — the yakuza?”

“Yes, I know the name. We don’t get many of them out in Chicago yet!”

“They are mixed up with legitimate businesses to a great extent, but compared to the Chinese Triads, they have a short attention span, and a much more disreputable image. Triad members don’t advertise their wealth any more than average Chinese do. None of this gold jewelry and flashy clothing stuff — they sock it away in mutual funds.” Larry grinned. “I’m talking about the higher-ups, of course, not the cheap thugs you took out. No one gets to the top in a Triad organization without a sense of restraint and decorum.”

“Gee, that doesn’t sound much like Brown,” said Rally. “But then he started out as a Hollywood cocaine pusher, I guess. The Dragons wanted his distribution system?”

“Probably. Using existing syndicates is more efficient, at least at first. The Dragons are more flexible, and therefore more dangerous, than many of the Hong Kong Triads. Natives of Macau tend to have mixed blood — Portugese, Malay —

and are tolerant of racial differences, to some extent. They aren't as Chinese-chauvinist as mainlanders — as my parents.”

Larry shrugged with a faint smile. “When the Dragons know the ropes in the US, they will probably get rid of the Americans and replace them with their own people. Though they'll use anyone they think will get the job done, they're still fundamentally Chinese. Anyone who isn't at least part Asian is not ever going to be a part of the brotherhood.”

“So Brown's position could be precarious?”

“Sure. They might use him for dirty jobs for a while. If he does well, he'll last longer. If he doesn't, as he might if they are pushing him into areas he's not familiar with, he could be shrimp toast in no time.”

“That all fits with what we'd found out.”

“Yep,” said Bean, chuckling. “I'm a dirty job if there ever was one.”

“I guess he decided he didn't want to recruit you after all. Too scared of you.”

“Recruit him?” said Larry, his brows drawing down. “What the hell do you do that they want?”

“Drive,” said Bean. “I just drive.”

Larry looked hard at him, then at Rally. His eyes didn't hold fear or anger, but they did size her up with a new perspective. “Something you're not telling me, Ms. Vincent?”

“Yes. Plenty. But I promise you, I'm on the side of the law. I've got enough to put Brown away for life, if I can catch him. And the FBI wants to talk to him very badly. He may be able to bring down the whole American enterprise, or at least a big chunk of it. That's what I'm after, and that's why I asked you for information.”

“I believe you,” said Larry after a pause. “Excuse me for a moment.” He got up and went into the kitchen.

“OK, you get to pick the restaurants from now on,” said Bean. He smiled and belched loudly. “This kid is a freakin' encyclopedia.”

“It's important to him. To a lot of people. That's why we have to do the best we can...”

“That and five hundred grand. That's what I'm countin' on, babe.”

Rally felt her skin crawl. The contrast between the two men seemed like night and day at that moment. “Two hundred and fifty grand, you son of a bitch. There is no way I am going to let you waltz off with all that filthy money!”

“Hey!” Bean’s boots hit the floor with a loud thud. “What’s with the dirty names?”

She looked him in the face, his forehead wrinkling with a scowl. The X over his nose stood out whitely against his tanned skin. Someone had cut that on him for a reason...

“I don’t know.” She rubbed her temples. “It just slipped out.”

“I don’t get you, girl. You get all hifalutin’ with your talk about higher motives, and then you practically cream for Pretty Larry here — ” Rally hissed in furious surprise, but Bean went on, jabbing a finger at the kitchen door. “You think he’s the kind can get you what you want? That college boy? He may have the facts, babe, but I’ve got the fists.” He slammed one of them down on the table, rattling the dishes. “Don’t forget that. You ain’t moving one inch in this town without me, unless you want to walk!”

“What the hell just got into *you*?”

“I’m goin’ out to the car. Here’s to the family enterprise.” He dropped a fifty on the table. “In case you ain’t noticed, babe, it’s Brown’s money you’ve been eatin’ off of. And it’s two grand out of the five grand he gave me that’s waiting at Buttonkettle to fix your Cobra. Money is money. It washes itself clean.” He got up and walked out.

“Not in a thousand years, Bean,” said Rally softly. “Never.” She turned to see Larry Sam looking after Bean.

“You two have a slight disagreement?”

“We have them a lot. Boy, I need my car...”

“I can see how that might happen. How did a woman like you get mixed up with a man like that?”

“Just ran into each other,” said Rally with a groan. “A car wreck; that’s the only way to put it.”

“I’ve got something else for you.” He rummaged in the host desk. “Mama gets around town more than Dad and I do. She goes to the produce mart and the meat distributors. And she loves to gossip with the vendors. I just went upstairs to ask her if she’d heard where the Dragons hang their hats these days. She gave me some leads you might be able to use.”

He brought a map to the table and spread it out in the sunlight. “This is the waterfront from Hunter’s Point to the Golden Gate. San Francisco’s got a lot of piers on the bay side. Some of them are still working cargo warehouses, some are tourist attractions, and some are derelict. This one here.” He drew a finger along a Y-forked tongue that pointed roughly east. “That, according to the best market gossip in Chinatown, is the Dragons’ lair.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Larry. You’re a lucky charm.” She put out her hand. He took it in one, then in both of his own.

“Let’s hope that luck holds. Come back for dinner.”

“As soon as I can, I promise.” She dropped a light kiss on his cheek.

“Now that just paid for your meal,” said Larry. “What’s that money doing on the table?” He picked up the fifty and started to hand it to her.

“No, keep it. It’s Bean’s.” A loud honk sounded from outside. “Gee, I think my taxi is getting impatient. Guess I’ll have to go... if I don’t want to walk.”

“Fortune cookies!” said Larry, and gave her a small paper bag. “Take your pick of fates — there are four in here. Unfortunately, I don’t stock the X-rated ones.” She giggled and took it, moving to the door.

“Rally... if you need somewhere to come to... I mean, if you get into too much of a disagreement with him...” She looked up to see concern on his face, much the same expression he’d had when he’d looked out at a developing fight on his sidewalk. “I’ve got an apartment upstairs, next to my parents’. I’ll go sleep on their hide-a-bed and you can have my bedroom. Any time, day or night. I’m always here.” He leaned one hand on the door as he opened it for her. Bean had pulled out of the parking space and Buff stood idling aggressively in the street. He raced the engine when she emerged from the restaurant.

“Thank you.” She smiled at him. “I don’t think I’ll need to. But that’s a sweet offer.” She felt a sexual stir, a small one. He returned her smile, his lips closed.

“I know you can take care of yourself. But watch your back. Here’s my number.” He slipped a card into her hand and went back into the Eight Dragon Delight. Rally got into Buff’s passenger seat and Bean peeled out with an emphatic squeal of tires. He had left his city map on the floor of the car, and Rally picked it up and circled the Y-shaped pier with a pencil from her purse.

“Here,” she said, and handed the map to Bean. He glanced at it and let it fall, then took a left turn. Rally reached into her bag of fortune cookies and broke one open. The crisp vanilla scent made her smile nostalgically. The paper slip inside was pink and the printing was uneven.

“You are personable and make friends with ease. Lottery numbers: 5 12 36 44 51 60.” She ate the cookie and broke another one. “Do not discount the lure of wealth. Lottery numbers: 1 9 18 24 29 47.” She glanced over at Bean, who was staring stonily out the windshield, and broke the third one. “A long journey will end in happiness. Lottery numbers: 3 14 19 22 49 59.”

“Yeah, right,” muttered Rally, and broke the final one. The paper was white, and the printing clearer. “The sere leaf falls in autumn; who is to say precisely when?” There were no lottery numbers. Rally stuffed all the cookie fragments and fortunes back into the bag and put them under her seat. Bean took a right turn and cleared his throat.

“So what’s the pier?”

“It’s owned by the Dragons, apparently, or at least they use it. Want to check it out?”

“Sure. Though we oughta wait until dark.”

“Yes. I suppose we need to find a hotel.”

“Oh, you ain’t got a date after all? College boy that slow on the draw?”

“What is your problem, Bean?! He gave us a hell of a lot of help, at risk to himself! You think the only reason he told us all that was because he wanted something from me? What the hell does that say about YOU?”

He slid a narrowed gaze over to her, one burning with something intense that she at first took for anger. “I think you’ve got a better answer to that than mine, lady. I ain’t forgot you unbuttonin’ your blouse and I ain’t forgot the way you kissed me. And I ain’t forgot you moanin’ and wigglin’ like — shit, I got a blue steel hard-on right now just thinkin’ about fingering your sweet slick — ”

“Stop it!” Rally felt a deep panicked throb in her stomach and chest, her face flushing hot. “You... you...”

“Don’t look so friggin’ shocked, babe. Trying to fuck Rally Vincent might not be the smartest thing I ever did in my life, but I got an invite, didn’t I?”

“Ohh!”

“I ain’t touchin’ you again, never fear! I don’t know what the hell you thought you were doing, or me either! I’m not the kind of guy you think is good for anything but bustin’ heads, but for a little while there, you didn’t give a damn. Don’t suppose I’ll ever know why.” He changed lanes and broke eye contact.

Rally sat shaking, the Eight Dragon Delight card in her hand. She tucked it into her jacket pocket and clasped her hands together to stop their tremors. Why had she not given a damn about what he was? A violent felon of ravenous appetites! He was the worst possible choice she could have made. Wasn't he? But his words had brought back all the heat of that motel bed, focused into something that cut her like a wrecker's blowtorch. This matter wasn't subsiding. Who could explain the random spark, the flashing ignition of sexual passion? She'd never thought Bean was the kind to set her ablaze. Not a nice man. Not a man other people approved of or got along with. He wasn't ever going to earn an MBA or put himself on the line for the sake of his children yet unborn. Though he did have that goofy soft spot for kids...

Her cell phone rang and she quickly fished it out of her purse. "That must be May! She should have made it to Buttonkettle by now." Rally clicked the button and put the phone to her ear. "Hello! Rally Vincent here."

"Hello, Rally," said a smooth, California-accented voice. "I briefly made your acquaintance yesterday, under trying circumstances. I wasn't able to introduce myself at the time. My name's Sylvester Brown."

::: CHAPTER FOUR :::

“IS this a good time to talk?” Brown sounded relaxed and confident, but friendly. “I have a great deal to discuss with you, Rally, as I’m sure you realize.”

Rally felt a slow cold wave go through her, every hair on her body erecting. It was the same man she’d seen in that warehouse in Hollywood the day before. The man she’d shot and maimed. She’d listened to him long enough to know the voice. But he had dropped something from his manner — the falseness, the edge of panic, the loose diction. When before he had sounded like a nervous Valley Boy imitating an inner-city punk, now he spoke like an earnest corporate manager. Either he was a superb actor, or he came across better when he didn’t have a large, angry man waving a knife in his face.

“I know you’re a reasonable person. Certainly we’ve had a few differences up to this point. But I’m willing to set that aside. How about you?”

“I... I’m listening.” Bean didn’t seem to be paying attention. But she’d learned the hard way that he picked up nearly everything that happened around him. “Go on.”

“Ah. Is Mr. Bandit there?”

She glanced over at Bean, his eyes concealed behind his sunglasses. “Why?”

“I’ve gathered that you two are now traveling together. I’m curious — did he contact you before he visited me in Hollywood?”

“No comment.”

“That’s unfortunate. I was hoping to work something out with you, Rally. Obviously if you’ve made some sort of deal with that fellow, it’s going to be more difficult to achieve. As I’m sure you realize, he’s not the easiest man to negotiate with. And yet there’s a great deal to be gained by going that route, huh?”

Rally didn’t answer, her mind racing. What did he want? What did he think she wanted? Was this the break they needed?

“If Bandit is listening and you don’t want him to hear the conversation, I can call you again in a few minutes. Would that be better?”

“Just a sec,” said Rally. “Stay on, I’ll be right back.” She put the call on hold. “Bean.”

Bean turned slightly towards her as they stopped at a red light. “You gonna tell me who’s on the line?”

“Yes. No secrets. It’s Brown.”

“No shit.” He smiled, not pleasantly.

“He says he wants to negotiate. With me. I think he’s trying to pry me away from you.” She swallowed hard. “I’m going to pretend I’m buying it and that you are not listening. Remember that, all right?”

“OK, I got it. You want me to pull over somewhere?”

“That’s a good idea.” Bean pulled ahead when the light changed, and then swerved into a small shopping strip’s parking lot. He cut the engine, reclined his seat and put his hands behind his head. The car’s interior was utterly quiet — the armor plating eliminated nearly all outside sound.

Rally took the call off hold. “You still there, Brown?”

“Right here. Everything settled now?”

“Yes. I can talk. You say you want to work something out with me?”

“I do, Rally. I believe you’ll treat me fairly. I’ve done a little background check on you, and I know you’re a woman of principle, in contrast with that fellow Bandit. What a name — it fits him perfectly, though of course it’s not his real one.” He paused, apparently waiting for a comment from her, but Rally said nothing. “I’ll be willing to put myself in your hands, as long as we can agree on certain conditions, huh?”

“Put yourself into my hands? You mean in terms of negotiating with Bean, or...?”

“I meant it literally, Rally. I want to give myself up to you.”

“Whaaat?”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Rally. I am not in a good position. With my employers, I mean — I’m sure you know what I’m driving at, huh? You must have done your own background check on me.” Brown chuckled softly. “You know who I work for, and something of their methods. I have nearly reached the end of my rope with them. If I don’t give myself up to the FBI in the next week or less, I will be dead.”

“They’re going to execute you?” Bean sat up straight and took off his sunglasses. Rally met his eyes. “And so you want... asylum?”

“I failed to recruit the Roadbuster. He was supposed to serve as the linchpin for a new distribution system covering the Midwest and the northern seaboard. My superiors take their expansion plans very seriously. They prefer to make use of people who already know the territory and have proven track records — that’s how I came to work for them, by the way. They settled on Mr. Bandit months ago as the best candidate, by far, and they will not take no for an answer. But they’ve never met the man. They assume that he is persuadable by ordinary means and is no more resistant to direction than the average self-made entrepreneur. They know he values money and that he is reliable, and therefore they presume he is the sort of man who is open to a well-paid permanent position with, ahem, certain benefits that come from working for a mid-size international organization.”

“Heh, heh...” She couldn’t help laughing, and Bean raised a brow at her.

“I see you appreciate the absurdity of the notion.” Brown chuckled with her. “Unfortunately, my superiors do not. Explanations don’t avail; I did my best. This isn’t a profession that downsizes you when you blow a big assignment. It just puts you down. No golden parachutes — just a halo. Huh?”

Rally snorted quietly.

“Yes, I know.” Brown laughed self-deprecatingly. “I’m not a saint, huh? But I did think I was a people person. Honestly, that’s always been a strength of mine. They gave me a profile on him and a list of his accomplishments, and I did a great deal of research on my own before I approached him. I had some inkling he would be a tough nut to crack, but of course I had no idea just how tough. I even tracked down a woman who used to be his — aheh, heh.” Again he waited for comment and again Rally said nothing.

“Well, at any rate, I did my homework. All to no avail. The moment I met him I knew I had very little chance of finding common ground with such an... elemental man, but I had to try. He has a positively Nietzschean aspect. Do you know I spent hours in a car with him, just attempting to get a conversation started? Incredible how impervious he is to any kind of human interaction. My heart sank lower with every mile. I might have been trying to talk to his car. As I’m sure you know... huh?”

She had the sense again that he was fishing. Why mention a woman and imply she had been his lover? Did he know something about her misadventure with Bean, or was that a guess? “Aaahh... why did you trick him, if you wanted to win him over?”

“Oh, he’s told you about that, has he?” Brown let out a long sigh. “I was ordered to move that shipment quickly, and I was ordered to get the Roadbuster working for my employers. I tried to combine the two efforts, to my regret. Frankly, I was being set up to fail.”

“Someone meant you to get into trouble?”

“Oh, yes. But I intend to give a full account to the FBI. Jail would be preferable to the kind of execution methods used in Macau. But I don’t anticipate jail, of course. I intend to tell everything I know and go into the witness protection program. I have a family, you see...”

Rally felt her left fist clench. Bingo! The biggest catch of her life! “And you want to give yourself up to me?” She could not keep the eagerness out of her voice. “Why me?”

“I surmise you have some influence over Bean Bandit. Is that true?”

“Yes! Uhm, I mean... we do have an agreement at the moment.”

“Can you keep him from killing me? I don’t doubt he’d track me down anywhere I might go.”

“I think I can guarantee that. If...”

“Yes?”

“If he gets his money.” There was a long pause. Bean looked at her, a smile spreading over his face. With both hands, he gave her a thumbs-up.

“Mmm,” said Brown. “That half-million. Of course, you saw that.”

“I did. And I saw you try to have him shot.”

Brown let out a long breath. “I suppose you think that was foolish. I’ll be honest, huh? He scares the daylights out of me, Rally. I’m no innocent, of course. I’ve been around dangerous men most of my life. I’ve never worked it from the physical end myself, but I’ve certainly made use of such people when I had to. You must know what I mean... you’re doing the same yourself at the moment, huh? But I have to say I panicked in Hollywood. I’m not proud of that.”

“Why didn’t you let him have the money? He’d have kept his word.” *Of course, you’d still have had to deal with me*, she thought. *I wasn’t going to let either of you get away!*

“It’s not my money, you see. It belongs to my employers. I gathered it just to defend myself with in case he caught up with me. There was no question of

actually giving it to him. If he had walked off with that suitcase, I wouldn't have lasted even this long."

"Do you still have it?"

"In point of fact... yes. I haven't been asked for an accounting yet. I suppose they think that's superfluous, since I'm not going to hold my position much longer. That's one thing that tipped me off to my imminent... termination."

"Then all we have to do is arrange a meeting place. I'll take care of the FBI end — I've got police contacts who will get the Feds for me. Bring that suitcase with you — but leave Manichetti and O'Toole behind."

Brown laughed heartily. "What a thorough worker you are. I'm impressed."

"Thanks."

"I will have to call you back about the meeting, but it shouldn't be long. I don't have much time to waste, of course."

"I'll be waiting. Good luck."

"Thank you, Rally. I feel confident this will go well. Be cool, huh?" He clicked off.

Rally let out a long breath and fell back against the seat after turning off the phone. "Holy... shit." She wiped her face with the back of her hand and tried to let her body relax. Her throat felt tight and she was trembling.

"Good going, babe," said Bean. "My half-million bucks is comin' with the bastard?"

"He'll bring the money. *And* half of it is going to the FBI."

"Goddamn it, Vincent — "

"Listen to me, Bean! I could turn ALL of it over to the FBI, and there isn't a thing you could do to stop me! But I promised you half of it, and you are going to get half. I'd suggest you be content with that!"

"Nothing I could do to stop you, eh?" Bean put a hand on the wheel, let out the parking brake and slammed the car into gear. Rally lurched forward as he reversed out of the lot, and flattened against the upholstery as he stomped on the gas and barreled across three lanes to get into traffic. "You better think that one over, babe. You ain't usually given to makin' dumb cracks like that."

He punched the cigarette lighter, reached into his jacket, extracted his Marlboros, popped one up and drew it out with his teeth, then lit it and blew a cloud of malodorous smoke.

The nasty son of a bitch! Rally felt a wave of revulsion for the man next to her. Big, coarse, violent, greedy, loud, gluttonous, sullen... and jealous. Larry Sam's eloquent erudition and Brown's urbane smoothness had put Bean against an intensely unflattering background. She closed her eyes to block him out for a moment and sneered to think how Bean would have handled Brown's call.

The emotion felt poisonous, but sharp and bracing at the same time. Why had she ever thought he was attractive? What was that energy, that skill and coordination, that ferocious elemental quality? Or his black hair, his powerful arms, his intense mouth and direct touch? Nothing but physical attributes, of course, nothing to do with the fundamental man. If he ever showed his inner self to anyone, he must have shown himself to her...

Her phone rang again, and she dug it out of her purse. "Rally Vincent here."

"Who the hell have you been yapping with? I've been trying to get you for ten minutes from this damn pay phone! Turn on your call waiting, for crying out loud!"

"Oh, hi, May," said Rally with a sigh. "How do you like Buttonkettle?"

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Birds sang in the flowering trees of Golden Gate Park while children ran and laughed along the paths. Green grass speckled with tiny daisies flowed down gentle slopes to meet lines of dark cypresses, rhododendrons blooming in the glades between groups of oaks and madrones. When Rally and Bean emerged from the woods into a small open meadow, squirrels scampered away and up the oaks, chattering to each other. The afternoon sun shone bright and clear in a perfect blue sky, the breeze pleasantly cool with a hint of ocean.

"This ain't good," said Bean with a growl. "Don't like it."

"Tough." Rally drew her CZ75 and stepped off the path. She scanned the trees for movement. "It's not like we know this city. If he says this is a good spot to meet, we've got to take his word for it."

"Says you." Bean followed her. "You telling me you trust that bastard? If he told me it was Monday, I'd figure my watch calendar was busted."

"I told him to describe three different places and I'd choose one." She tucked her notebook into her jacket. "He can't have had them all staked out ahead of time — he doesn't have enough people and he can't drive a car right now. I figured this

one was the least likely to be wired. It would be hard to rig surveillance equipment in the trees and keep it working. So he won't know where we are until we call him."

"Yeah, except if the other two are staked out, he knows we're not there, hey?" Bean grinned at her when she looked around at him. "Process of elimination."

"Not for ten minutes or so. You got us here so fast he's probably thinking we're still on the road. So let's use that time to get set!" Rally considered her options. The oval meadow stretched about fifty yards to the west of where they stood under the eaves of oak woods. Brown had given her minimal directions, mentioning only a parking spot and a few turns of path to lead to the meadow. She wasn't certain from which point of the compass he would approach. Bean had dropped her off at the designated spot, then parked Buff in the bushes just off a service road and jogged back to meet her.

"You think he's planning to try to whack us?"

"Not if he's telling the truth about the hit. I wonder..." She felt for the Eight Dragon Delight card in her pocket and entered the number into the fourth program slot on her cell phone. "Maybe we can get some more information about that. If Brown knows he's scheduled for termination, probably other people do too. In the mean time, let's just be careful. Don't stand too close to me while we're talking, that kind of thing. No point in making a single target out of the two of us."

Rally looked Bean up and down, noting not for the first time that his size made him an excellent target; no wonder he always wore an armored jacket. "If you get wounded, there is not much way for me to help you, of course — you weigh too damn much. So I may have to retreat if that happens; don't think I'm abandoning you or anything."

Bean rubbed his leg at the spot she knew the .308 had gone through. "Fine with me."

"Give me a boost." She turned around to face the big oak tree they stood under and grabbed a low branch. Bean stepped forward and put his hands on her waist. He lifted her four feet into the air with a slight grunt. Rally gasped slightly; she'd meant a hand to step on, not a hoist. His easy strength reminded her a little too much of getting picked up and tossed onto a motel bed. She had to make an effort to keep her thoughts on a professional track and succeeded only partly.

She found a foothold and swung herself up into the tree, high enough to be concealed in the foliage. She worked her way out along a branch until she had a clear eight-foot drop to the ground.

“OK, this is perfect. I can see out, but no one will spot me until I jump. Where are you going to be?”

Bean scanned the area. Under the mature trees, the underbrush had been mostly cleared away. “No good spots unless I climb a tree too, and I don’t see any that look like they’ll hold me. Don’t like it.”

“You said that already. But this is the closest we’re going to get to outdoor isolation in the middle of San Francisco.” She heard traffic through the bushes that lined a nearby road, but the wilds of Golden Gate Park looked almost like countryside. No tall buildings clustered around the borders, so no rooftops showed above the trees. Only the asphalt path through the grass betrayed the urban setting.

“Yeah, I ain’t walking into any more warehouses.” Bean scratched his chin. “I’ll show up anywhere I try to hide. I’d better just stand out in the open and give the finger to Brown when he gets here.”

“Don’t spook him, for God’s sake! This isn’t a done deal by a long shot. Shall I call him now?”

“Go for it.” Bean walked off a few yards and leaned against another oak. Taking a couple of walnuts from his pocket, he cracked and ate them, dropping the shells on the ground.

Rally dialed the number Brown had given her. It rang once and was picked up. Someone laughed in the background and she could hear traffic, then Brown’s voice came on the line. “Hello, this is Sly.”

“Rally Vincent here. We picked the park, so come and talk.”

“I’ll be there with bells on,” said Brown with a chuckle. “Shall I bring a picnic?”

“Thanks, we ate.”

“Be seeing you,” said Brown and hung up. Rally put the phone in her jacket and sat back against a branch, surveying the meadow. Bean cracked another walnut in his teeth.

A gray squirrel crept down Bean’s oak in fits and starts, eventually pausing just above his head with its nose twitching and tail flicking. Bean tilted his face to look up at it and took two more walnuts from his pocket.

“Lookin’ for a handout? Get a job, ya bum.” He smiled and tossed a walnut on the ground. The squirrel leaped down the trunk and scampered for the prize. It sat up for a moment with the walnut in its paws. Another squirrel ventured near Bean’s

boots, sniffed the grass at his heels, then ran halfway to the first squirrel and back again. It sat up to look at Bean.

“Too late. I ain’t feeling generous any more.” Bean cracked his last walnut and spoke with a full mouth. “Fight him for it or go hungry.” The squirrels ran circles around each other for a few moments, then vanished up another tree together. “Wimp.”

“Which one?” asked Rally.

“Both. They ought to tussle. If they share, nobody gets enough.”

“You think winner should take all?”

“Why not? What’s the point of winning if it don’t get you what you want?”

“What about people who aren’t strong enough to fight for what they need?”

“Who the hell’s talking about people?”

“No one,” said Rally after a pause.

“You can fight, girl. So can I. We can get our cut and more besides. Who gives a damn about anybody else?”

“Bean, the whole reason I’m doing this is to help people who can’t defend themselves as easily as I can! That’s the only legitimate use of force.”

“Tell it to the guys you shoot. Ya know, Vincent, I reckon you’ve killed about eighteen, twenty people. All legitimate, of course.”

“Yes.” Rally put her teeth on edge.

“Self-defense, huh?”

“Mostly, yes. A few times, to save someone else’s life.”

“I saw you kill someone the first time I met you. My client, matter of fact. Ya shot her right in the face.”

“She had just tried to cut my throat with razor wire and was firing a shotgun at me. I didn’t have much choice!”

“Didn’t say you had.”

“So how many people have *you* killed, Bean?”

“Had to take care of a few.” He folded his arms. From her perch his face wasn’t easy to make out. “Didn’t shoot none of them.”

“You don’t touch guns. I guess you prefer to keep it hand-to-hand. You don’t even really need a knife — you could strangle someone or snap a neck as fast as I can shoot. Couldn’t you?”

His right fist balled under his elbow. “I don’t touch guns, because I don’t pick fights, babe. If they come to me, I take care of it, but that ain’t what I get paid for. I just drive.”

“You don’t care what the people who hire you are doing? Do you really believe you can take money earned from their crimes and still remain neutral? If you make it possible for someone to commit robbery or murder and escape, you’re an accessory. There’s a reason the law punishes that. It’s wrong!”

“When I decide to go straight, girl, you can be my goddamn guardian angel.” Rally made a face at him from her perch. “Keeping it legal makes everybody happy, win or lose?”

“Well... I didn’t mean to talk about *legality!* I’m trying to do what’s RIGHT!”

“You gonna be content if you don’t get your way on this job, if you can’t do it on the straight and sweet?”

“Well, no... but it’s going just fine at the moment!”

“Sure, just dandy. You got the bastard on a string and all you got to do is reel him in.” Bean’s tone wasn’t overtly sarcastic, but she could hear a deep strain of ingrown cynicism, something that expected nothing to be given that hadn’t been bought and paid for. “I s’pose Brown don’t mind losin’ a hand, long as it’s done right, hey?”

“He didn’t lose a hand! Just... well, it looked like the middle three fingers went. I was aiming at the revolver, not him.”

“And he’s gonna return the favor by givin’ you a present? All the rest of him on a platter, just like yer old pal Gray!”

“Look, he’s not a psycho like Gray! I don’t suppose he likes me for doing that to him, but he sounds like he’s capable of sense!”

At the eastern end of the meadow, a small child ran out from the woods with a balloon and pelted down the path towards them with the string trailing behind him. The balloon bobbed along in time with his strides. A woman with a stroller followed a few paces after him. The child shrieked merrily, waved his arms in

glee, then saw Bean and stopped short. The balloon caught up and hovered above the plump baby fist, trembling slightly.

“Hey, kid.” Bean chuckled and leaned against the tree with his hands in his jacket pockets.

The mother approached with a wary smile and put out a hand for the child to take. “Come on, honey. We’ll go around the other way.”

The child clasped his mother’s hand, but didn’t move, still staring at Bean. Rally could see only the rear quarter of Bean’s face and the trailing sweep of his hair. From the set of his jaw, it looked like he was smiling. The child examined him with the undivided interest of the very young, his mouth open.

“Big!” He pointed at Bean.

“Yes, honey,” said his mother with an uneasy glance. “Come with Mama, sweetheart.” The child smiled at Bean and held out his balloon.

“Thanks, man, but it looks better on you,” said Bean.

At that moment, Rally caught a movement at the western end of the meadow, about fifty yards away. A man — someone she knew. Compact, deft, a fast runner. He jumped to catch a branch and shimmied up an oak. A long black rifle was slung on his back and a balaclava covered his head.

“Bean!” she hissed. “O’Toole!”

The mother looked wide-eyed in her direction, but didn’t spot her in the tree. Bean turned his head slowly, his eyes scanning back and forth.

“To the west, in the oak with one dead branch. He’s getting out an assault rifle.”

“Got it.” Bean scanned for another moment. “Can’t see him.”

“I don’t think he’s seen you either.”

O’Toole straddled the crotch of the tree and swept the rifle and scope from side to side. He paused on the mother and stopped on the child.

The back of Rally’s neck prickled. “Oh, geez — he’s checking out your little friend.”

“Lady, get the hell out of here.” For a moment Rally thought Bean was talking to her. But he turned to the mother, who looked blankly at him.

Bean strode forward, picked up the child and thrust him into the woman's arms. "Run, goddammit." His voice had an urgency she had seldom heard. "Run!" His sharp canines gnashed.

The child drew a deep shocked breath and wailed, throwing his arms around his mother's neck. The woman spun around, knocked over the stroller and fled. Floating free from the child's grasp, the balloon vanished into the sky.

"Stupid broad," said Bean.

"That's torn it. He's spotted you." O'Toole snapped his rifle to the ready, the scope on Bean.

Bean moved back into the woods and looked up at her. "Can ya pick him off from here?"

"Right between the eyes, if it comes to that." Rally leveled her CZ75 through the foliage.

O'Toole spoke into a mic in his hand and tucked the rifle into the crook of his arm; she let out a tense breath. "Looks like he's just on guard."

Two more figures emerged from the woods near O'Toole — a slim man in a business suit and a big, stocky man in a leather coat. The slim man's blonde head shone in the sunlight: Brown and his driver, Manichetti.

"Here comes Brown. Damn! I told him to leave those two behind. Why's he brought them along?"

"Doesn't surprise me any."

"This doesn't bode well. He's expecting trouble."

"He'd be damn stupid not to." Bean cracked his knuckles as Brown and Manichetti approached.

"Bean, don't spook him!" If he made even one threatening move towards Brown, the whole negotiation might collapse in a hail of gunfire. "Keep your cool. Remember that money!"

"Shit..." growled Bean, but he folded his arms again and moved behind her tree. Rally waited until the men were a few yards past the tree before she dropped to the ground in a crouch. Brown and Manichetti stopped short and turned to look for the source of the sound. With a deep breath, she holstered her CZ75 and stood up.

"Hey, I thought you were being careful!" said Bean in a loud whisper.

“I am. If I have to be the first one to show good faith, so be it.” Rally stepped forward. “Hello, Brown.”

Manichetti made a gesture at the shoulder holster vaguely outlined under his leather car coat. Brown spread his hands, the right one encased in a plastic cast, and smiled at her from behind a fashionably small pair of sunglasses, his eyes visible through the lenses in the bright light of the meadow.

“Hello, Rally.”

“You here to talk or shoot?”

“Talk, of course.” He made a politely confused expression, holding out the maimed hand. “I’m not even able to fire a gun. This is a peaceful negotiation.”

“What are O’Toole’s orders, then?”

Brown closed his eyes with a sighing smile. “He’s only insurance. I’ve told him to hold his position and hold his fire. By the way, this is Mr. Manichetti, my driver.”

“I know.” Rally took a careful look at Manichetti, but his big jowly face was blank and he held his hands at his sides. A cordless earphone looped over his ear, half concealed in his dark curly hair. “I told you not to bring them.”

“I know, and I apologize. It’s not that I don’t trust you — as I said, I’ve obtained background information on you and I know you’re a woman of honor. It’s your current partner I’m concerned about. Where is he, by the way?”

“Right here,” said Bean.

She heard the heavy crack of a fallen branch under his boot. He moved from behind the oak to stand out to her side, twenty feet away so that the two of them flanked Brown and Manichetti. “Hey, asshole.”

Brown’s whole body tensed, but he kept his smile. “Now, is that any way to talk to someone who has half a million dollars to give you?”

“I don’t see it nowhere.”

“You didn’t expect me to stroll casually through the park with that suitcase, did you?” said Brown with a laugh. “Let’s decide terms first, and then I can fetch the money. Who knows, I might be able to scare up rather more than half a million, given a little — ”

“Stuff it! It’ll be a cold day in hell — ”

“Bean!” hissed Rally. “Will you shut up and let me handle this!” He shot her a fierce look, but said no more.

Brown raised a brow, his mouth quirking.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m willing to set aside what’s happened. So is Bean, even if he can’t resist a little trash talk. I will guarantee to deliver you safely to the FBI, even if the Dragons are watching you.”

“They are. Not directly — but they are keeping track of my movements. I can’t stay long without incurring suspicion, since I’m supposed to be heading to a meeting. But I’m as determined to work this out as you are, Rally. A great deal depends on it — not least, my life.”

Brown approached her as he spoke and took off his sunglasses when he passed into the shade.

Her eyes widened in surprise at his extraordinary good looks. The expensive Italian gray silk suit he wore fit him perfectly and set off every aspect of his clear-cut face and well-conditioned body. Slightly full, sensual lips and large eyes gave him boyish charm, but he had a strong straight nose and firm masculine chin. She hadn’t registered it when he had snarled with fear and pain in a dark warehouse, face spattered with his own blood and bone, but she had never before stood so close to such a devastatingly handsome man.

“... Of course,” she said after a pause that hung just a moment too long. She had a sense of being put off balance by the unexpected, though why a man’s face should have that effect on her she really couldn’t say. It was something like the way Bean’s presence sometimes perturbed her, but with a malignant undertone entirely different. Brown’s face concealed something; it was this hidden aspect that disturbed her, not his beauty or his poise.

The quick impression of first meeting rapidly faded, however, leaving her with only his outward brilliance to contemplate. What had that little shudder of perception been? Now she saw nothing but a graceful, slender man with high cheekbones and a pleasant smile.

“What a stroke of luck that I should have encountered you.” He came close enough to put out his left hand to shake hers. “The perfect person to solve my dilemma.”

Manichetti hung back with his gaze on Bean. Bean stared at Brown and her, then reached into his jacket. Manichetti looked at the dead-branched oak with a start, but Bean only brought out his sunglasses and put them on with a humorless smirk.

Brown seemed oblivious to the entire exchange, his quick, smiling turquoise eyes locked to hers. Rally examined his face with reluctant fascination. A nice tan, not too dark, his skin smooth with only the accent of laugh lines around his eyes. His sunstreaked dark-blonde hair swept off his high forehead in flawless waves, with just the right amount of casual disarray.

All right, maybe she could detect a few hints of plastic surgery if she looked hard, but it was beautiful plastic surgery. He seemed eerily perfect from every angle. With the obvious exception of the ruined hand. For once in her life, she felt regret for defacing a human work of art. He was in the prime of life in his late thirties. Larry Sam was an attractive young man with a promising future, but Sylvester Brown was a fully realized masterpiece. A master criminal, she reminded herself. He wasn't the best-looking businessman she'd ever seen, but a murderous drug dealer.

"Sure. Let's lay out our conditions."

"How interesting." Brown looked closely at her face while still holding her hand. "Your eyes aren't brown; they're blue. Not contact lenses."

"... No."

"Midnight blue, I'd call them. So dark it's hard to tell the shade until they catch the sun." He tilted his face with a contemplative smile, his voice gentle. "How lovely."

"Uhhh... thanks." She extracted her hand from Brown's, her pulse beating hard in her throat. For some reason, good-looking men were hitting on her today! What was up? Considering the circles she moved in back home, she knew how to fend off impolite masculine interest, but California seemed to be populated with smooth operators. Of course, a man like Brown probably tried his charm on every woman he met just on general principles. "I want your assurance that you're going to testify against the Dragons. That's my reason for doing this."

"And that is my intention, Rally. No argument there."

"Oh, and Bean wants that suitcase, of course." She shrugged. "Five hundred large, in cash."

"Of course. I don't intend to argue numbers, Rally. My conditions are also simple... but I think I had better discuss them with you alone, huh?" He made a motion of the eyes to indicate Bean, who stood behind him with a scowl visible even under his sunglasses. "Considering their nature."

"I'm not going to leave him out — "

“No, no.” Brown smiled. “Let’s just retreat a few yards into the trees out of earshot. Your partner can still keep an eye on you, if that’s what you want him to do.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Very true.” He turned to nod at Manichetti, then took her arm and began to usher her into the woods.

“Hey!” shouted Bean, and they halted. “Where the *fuck* are you going with her, dickface?”

Rally spun around. “Bean, keep a lid on it! I’m trying to TALK — ”

“Better watch your ASS, girl!”

“Ohh!” She stamped her foot. “I don’t *believe* you!”

“Mr. Bandit,” said Brown, “I get the impression you aren’t as willing to see reason as Ms. Vincent believes.”

“Shit! You trick me, you try to get me shot, you make me crash my goddamn LS-7 ‘Vette, you start smearin’ your slime all over that girl, and you want me to see REASON? Give me *one* freakin’ reason — ”

“Not to lose your temper and put a knife into my back here and now? All right, I will.” Brown turned around. “Has it occurred to you, Mr. Bandit, that I have information you would find useful? After all, the Dragons want to recruit you, by any means necessary.”

“So he finally comes out and says it, hey?” snarled Bean. “You already blew it, dickface! Why should I give a shit about the Dragons?”

“Oh, they won’t terminate their efforts just because I failed. I can tell you what tactics they are likely to use in future, and how to defend yourself against them. They have a great deal of background information on you, and as a result of independent research, I have even more that I haven’t turned over to them.”

He smiled. “Now there’s something you will find interesting, at the very least. I know *everything* about you, down to the smallest detail; I know exactly who you are, ‘Bean Bandit’.”

“So fucking what?” Bean laughed. “Here I am.”

“*Ecce homo*. Sufficient unto yourself, huh?” Brown flashed his white teeth in a smile that came very close to mockery. “Can you tell me the names of your parents?”

Bean's face fell slack; for a moment he seemed shocked into silence. He snapped off his sunglasses, his eyes as cold as Rally had ever seen them. "What's that got to do with the price of cheese in China?"

"Exactly. I know even the trivial facts of your life, the least important, most irrelevant — "

"What the hell? You think you know who my *parents* are?" Bean took a deep, angry breath. "Bullshit!"

"Ah." Brown grinned. "How would you prove me wrong?"

"How would you prove it any way at all, asshole? Quit jerking my chain, or you're gonna find there's a freakin' junkyard dog on the other end!"

"Bean," said Rally in desperation, "will you please calm — "

"Good point." Brown chuckled. "I may be the only person in the world who has amassed all this information and has put two and two together. How can anyone cross-check a unique piece of knowledge?"

"I don't give a shit." Bean's nose wrinkled, his teeth showing. "One of these days, Brown. I don't care if you hide behind the FBI, the DEA, the whole freakin' government, I'm gonna find you and I'm gonna rip that cocksucking smile off your stinkin' plastic face!"

"Bean!" Rally strode towards him, jammed her hands against his chest and pushed him backwards until he stopped against an oak. "Will you shut up for *five minutes*?" She tried to keep her voice too low for Brown and Manichetti to hear, but she was so angry it wasn't easy. "You don't like him, fine! But unless you sit on that temper, you will never get that money!"

"Rrrrr..." said Bean over her shoulder at Brown, reminding her of a growling mastiff.

"And knock off the macho-man protection racket! He's never going to get anywhere with me! It's only his way of talking to women; I can tell."

"Babe, he does it to *anyone*," said Bean. "Cocksucker."

"Oh, spare me! You telling me you want to kill him because he complimented your manly biceps or something?"

"I don't give a shit if he did." Bean curled his lip. "He ain't tryin' to get into my jeans. He's tryin' to get into my *head*."

Rally glanced over at Brown, who waited quietly with a relaxed smile, hands in trouser pockets. “Yes, you have a point. But getting angry will only let him see what pushes your buttons. You’re doing a great job of showing him!”

Bean sagged slightly, shaking his head in frustration. “Dammit... there’s just something about him.” Palms up, he gestured with a hint of confusion. “He makes me crazy!”

“I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about. He’s being a hell of a lot more civil than you are! Were you raised in a barn?”

“Shit!” He rolled an angry look up into the treetops, his lips tight.

“Boy, that’s a hot button right there! Who *were* your parents, Bean? Why would Brown be interested in them?”

“I don’t have a freakin’ clue.”

“About which?”

“Both.”

“You mean... you don’t know who your parents are?”

Bean grimaced.

“But... you didn’t just *appear*. You were a kid once. Who raised you?”

“The freakin’ state of Illinois.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure if she should feel sympathetic or simply consider his lack of civilization accounted for. “Well, that’s... um, interesting, but I can’t see why Brown should bring that up.”

“Why don’t ya ask him?” said Bean sarcastically.

Rally glared at her partner with gritted teeth. “I’m going to go talk to him, and *you* are going to stand here and keep your mouth shut, understand? Don’t make a move, don’t say a word until I tell you to! I said I would get you that money, and I’m trying to keep my promise. Don’t make me regret it so much I call the whole thing off!”

“I ain’t too worried about that, babe. You know well as I do that you ain’t gonna go back on a handshake.”

Rally made a face at him and returned to Brown. “Sorry about that. He’s got hold of himself now.”

“Really.” They walked a few yards into the woods. “How can you tell?”

“Well, I...” She tried to swallow her anger. Having to apologize for Bean when she herself stood to lose the most if he lost control? That was worse than any personal insult he had given her!

“Just how well do you know him, Rally? After this little display, I’m wondering about the solidity of your partnership and your prospects of long-term influence over him. You did make a guarantee that he’ll permanently forget his grudge. That, of course, is the primary condition under which I will give myself up.”

“That suitcase will do the trick. I think he’s angry you didn’t bring it with you to this meeting.”

“Afraid he’ll be cheated? You can assure him he won’t be. I’ve certainly learned my lesson in that regard. Security will be cheap at the price.”

“Once he’s got that money in his hands, I’m sure his disposition will improve! He already promised me he wouldn’t kill you, and I intend to enforce that promise.”

“So I will buy his forgiveness, and you will insure that it stays bought.” Brown took a deep, skeptical breath and let it out through his nostrils. “Is that *all* you have to offer me?”

“Uhh...” Rally’s mind raced, her eyes darting back and forth.

“Can you give me anything more solid?” Brown pulled in his lips and looked out towards the meadow, past the dark figures of Bean and Manichetti silhouetted against the bright scene beyond. The men smoked cigarettes and looked daggers at each other.

“Well, I can...”

“I’m disappointed. I called you because I thought you were in a unique position to help me. I will have to count on the FBI to protect me from the Dragons, of course, but I don’t think they will be a problem. Ordinary precautions should suffice. But Bandit... he’s a monster.” He looked at her, but she couldn’t muster a plausible denial. “When his guard’s up, he’s nearly invulnerable, and he’s the most determined tracker I’ve ever encountered. I *have* to know he won’t come after me. I simply can’t take any chances with my family. Perhaps I should consider refuge in Europe instead... the FBI will have to do without me.”

The blood drained from Rally’s face as she saw her plans collapsing. All this — violence, wreck, her besieged emotions, for nothing? Would it all end in failure, simply because Bean looked scary, stuck to his objectives, and had a tendency to say exactly what he thought? That last wasn’t a fault of Brown’s by a long shot —

his rotund diction sounded as if he had written out every statement ahead of time.

“Perhaps you can reassure me. How does Bean feel about you, Rally?”

“Feel about me?” The blood returned to her cheeks, hot and pulsing. “Wha — what do you mean?”

“He’s exhibiting some signs of proprietary interest in you. Is this merely because you are partners, or is there some more profound reason?” Brown’s voice was soft, encouraging.

“Um... well, I don’t know if it’s all that *profound* a reason!”

“Ah.” Brown pursed his lips slightly. “A lovely young woman working closely with such an id-driven male. It must be a chore keeping him at arm’s length.” His crinkle-eyed grin looked friendly and confidential.

“That’s putting it mildly.” She laughed a little shakily. Brown kept his pleasant smile, and Rally suddenly stopped laughing. He was fishing again... and this time she was nibbling at the bait. What did he really want to know?

“N-nothing’s happened. We’re only working together.” Admit how close she had come to disaster, flat on her back on a motel bed? Never, not even with the whole job at stake!

“Merely a professional relationship?” Brown shook his head. “I was hoping you had more of a hold on him than that. This doesn’t sound promising.”

“Oh no? He takes his professional commitments very seriously!”

“How do you know that?”

“He kept his word on a bet, Brown — he promised to do something he would never have done willingly otherwise, and he’s gone to a lot of trouble to keep faith. For no other reason than honor. He’ll keep his word about not killing you.”

“A bet?” Brown’s eyes had a veiled gleam. “With you?”

“Yes, with me. It had to do, uh, with his work.”

“How very interesting. Please clarify.”

“I.. well, I don’t think I’m at liberty — ”

Brown turned away with an annoyed sigh. “Your discretion does you credit, but I would suggest that you try to see your way clear to giving me some solid

information!” He turned his head in Manichetti’s direction, and the driver checked his watch. “I don’t have much time, Ms. Vincent, in every sense of the word.”

Rally stole a look at Bean. He kept his eyes on her as he leaned against a tree, one hand in his pocket and one knee bent, his boot sole against the trunk. To her surprise, he lifted his chin and smiled tentatively at her, then gave her a thumbs-up with his cigarette between his fingers. He trusted her to pull this off. If everything fell apart because she kept a little secret of his, he’d pay dearly for his privacy!

“All right, Brown. I’ll tell you. I demanded that he stop running drugs. He told me he would if I could stop him from doing his next run, all on my own. I won the bet.”

Brown turned around. “Please, Rally, call me Sly.” She didn’t reply, her heart pounding. Had she just made a mistake? “I see. And he’s kept his word to you on this matter?”

“Yes, ever since. This happened about nine months ago and he’s never broken his promise. That’s why he was so angry at you for tricking him.”

Brown’s lips parted, the tip of his tongue touching the even white line of his teeth. His eyes glazed over for a moment. She had the feeling that he was suppressing some strong emotion, but it looked more like joy than anything else. His voice stayed cool. “I wonder if that bet is truly indicative of his *professional* behavior.”

“Of course it is! He always keeps his contracts to the letter. You must know that, if you’ve done so much research on him!”

“But Rally, why would he make such a bet with you in the first place? Why put himself in such a vulnerable position? He threw away at least half his business as a result, if my information is correct. Wouldn’t you say that was a touch extreme?”

“He... he doesn’t like drugs either. And he said that if he won, I would have to stay out of his business for good!”

“But he transported drugs for many years before you made this demand of yours, and earned a great deal of money doing so.” Brown chuckled. “It’s difficult to avoid the conclusion... that he did all this for your sake.”

“It was a gamble! He wanted to get me out of his hair! He never thought he would lose — he can be awfully overconfident — ”

“And so he has linked himself ever more closely to you. You hold the key to him, my dear, even if you don’t realize it.” Brown gave her a slow, heavy-lidded smile. “Apparently I did call the right person.”

“Are you saying... you think that *I*...”

“Oh, no, no! I’ve developed far too high an opinion of you for that!” Brown laughed out loud and Bean straightened up, scowling. Rally didn’t think he could hear the conversation, but that laugh rang through the trees like a rifle report. “What an idea!” Brown wiped a tear of hilarity from the corner of one eye, still chuckling. “You, longing for the tender embraces of Bean Bandit? Heh, heh...”

Her face burned.

“No, of course I’m speaking of *his* attachment to *you*. I’m looking at things from Mr. Bandit’s perspective, not yours.” Brown turned to glance at Bean. “In his own way, he respects you very much and accords you special, nay unique, status. This must be far more profound than a simple desire to have you. Obviously he’s a member of the male sex, and as such, he is aware that you are a very attractive woman. I would think many women have struck him that way. But for which of them would he sacrifice several hundred thousand dollars in annual income?” Brown nodded like a sage. “The verdict is a fair one, I think.”

Rally drew a deep breath that seemed to tighten every fiber in her body. Looking at Bean again, she felt as if a strange new lens had intervened in her vision’s path, pulling him into painfully sharp focus. A hard-headed criminal who cared so much for her good opinion that he would throw away the thing he liked best: money.

All of a sudden his insistence that he owned the entire \$500,000 in Brown’s suitcase seemed less greedy, more reasonable. She wasn’t any more inclined to give him his way, but it was hard to think badly of him for persisting.

Bean caught her gaze. His face moved in a questioning tilt as she stared into his eyes from fifteen yards off.

Rally bit her lip. Frankly, she’d been treating him like crap — playing with his emotions while denying to herself that he even had them. No wonder he had exploded at her in the restaurant. His coarse vocabulary put their entire relationship in a sexual light, but he had told her much more than that whether he had intended to or not. He probably hadn’t formed the thought, and she didn’t want to. Even to herself, she could not say the word. It didn’t seem applicable to Bean. It didn’t even seem to exist in the same universe as him.

Brown’s turquoise gaze stayed fixed on her. Suddenly she realized he was waiting for an answer, for confirmation. How much of this could she tell him?

“He... well, all right, Bean has some kind of feelings for me.” That much she couldn’t deny, and under the circumstances, she didn’t want to deny it unequivocally. Brown apparently needed to hear it from her before he’d feel secure. “He told me a little while ago that he, um, that he’d wanted me ever since he met me.”

She thought about the previous night. *I’m gonna fuck you so good...* Five minutes later, he had left her cold and flat, with a peculiar warmth in his eyes.

“It’s, um, OK, it’s a little more than that because we’ve been through a lot together. He trusts me and he knows I won’t sell him out. I guess he doesn’t extend that to many people. Um, maybe not to anyone else. He’s not a man who gives his trust easily.”

A very strange smile spread across that perfect blonde face. Fierce, grimacing, triumphant at the same time. Brown gripped his hands into fists so tightly that his whole body trembled. The plastic cast buckled audibly.

“Uhhh... are you all right, um, Sly?”

“Perfectly,” he said, releasing his clenched hands with a gasp. “I’m... this is excellent news. Exactly what I hoped for. I don’t see any obstacles to an agreement now.” He put his left hand up to his face and exhaled hard. “Forgive me. The last few days have been a strain. I see the light emerging at the end of a very dark tunnel.”

“I’m glad,” said Rally with heartfelt sincerity. “Really I am. Look, why don’t we just take you to Bean’s car and deliver you to the FBI right now? You’ll be safe then and you can relax.”

“Ah, but it would be difficult to retrieve the money if I left now, wouldn’t it?” Brown smiled. “Mustn’t forget, Mr. Bandit’s priorities lie in a different realm from yours, Rally. It wouldn’t do to disappoint him.”

“No.” She realized that she hadn’t given Bean’s interests much thought yet. “Did you mean what you said about more than half a million?”

“I assume you’ve asked him to give up some of that money in return for your help.”

“That’s between the two of us.”

“Of course. I will guarantee the half million as a minimum since it’s the original amount agreed upon. Anything else I can get will be extra insurance towards your partner’s happiness, so you can be sure I will do my best.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“I have to go.” Brown put his left hand on her arm. “I’ll call you again later to work out the details of my actual defection. Five at the latest. Until then...”

He cast a covert glance at Bean. “Good luck with him, my dear. I could see right away that he entertains an attraction to you — perfectly understandable, of course, but I wasn’t sure of its extent without inquiring more closely. Although it serves my purposes, I hope he doesn’t impose it on you too energetically. Of course you can take care of yourself, as you say. But consider, Rally.”

His voice dropped to a solicitous whisper. “If I, who can afford the best protection money can buy, am not sure of my personal security where Bean Bandit is concerned, what precautions must you take? If the warmth of banked desire heats into frustrated anger, how safe will you be when his lust bursts into full flame?”

Brown certainly didn’t overestimate Bean’s sense of honor. Her eyes narrowed. “Safer than any woman you’ve met in your life, Brown.” She patted her holster through her jacket.

“Good,” he said. “Remember, my name is Sly. I’d like to give you something... a little gift of appreciation. May I?”

“Such as?”

“Information on your partner’s background. It’s burning a hole in my pocket anyway, so to speak. It can’t serve its original purpose now, so it might as well serve you.”

“... All right.”

“I’ll just give you the condensed version, since I’m pressed for time.” Manichetti made a timeout signal. Brown consulted a platinum Rolex on his left wrist and spoke rapidly.

“He was born in 1970, an illegitimate child given up for adoption at birth. Although he was placed with a married couple, he soon ended up in the custody of the Illinois child welfare department, having been abandoned in a race-track parking lot south of Marion. No one could trace his origin, and he was too young, or too stubborn, to tell the authorities who he was. Although he was three years old at the time, his age was estimated as five, based on his size and development, and so his legal birthdate is 1968.

“No one was willing to adopt him again, due to his racially mixed heritage and his rambunctious disposition. He grew up in a series of foster homes, one of which was headed by an auto mechanic with a taste for building high-performance hot

rods. At the age of twelve — legally fourteen, and already standing six foot two, he left the group home in which he was living and struck out on his own.

“He disappears from all records until 1986, when he began to gain a reputation as a drag-racer around Chicago. He won enough money in illegal street betting to set himself up in business as a courier in 1989.”

“Nineteen years old.” She had been nineteen when she had started running the gun shop with a license that claimed she was twenty-one.

“Yes, though he believed he was twenty-one. In the last ten years he has made a considerable name for himself in the Chicago underworld, and his fame as a professionally reliable, peerlessly fast freelance driver has spread to most of the organizations operating in the United States and eastern Canada. He eats like a famished wolfpack, he consumes gallons of alcohol, he smokes constantly and rampages through inexpensive warehouses with great energy. But of course you know that part. Do you have any questions I might answer?”

She didn’t know that part — the one about the warehouses. Something cold passed through her, even though the assertion didn’t seem to fit Bean.

“Racially mixed, huh? So who are his parents?”

“Ah, well, that’s a long story.” Brown grinned. “I have a file folder two inches thick. Government agency records, medical records, newspaper clippings, transcripts of interviews. I left no stone unturned, or so I thought. Somehow I missed... you.”

“Very interesting.” And highly edited with a lot of crucial points left out. “Is any of it true?”

Brown’s smile faded slightly. “You’d have to ask him that.”

“When he doesn’t even know himself?” That hadn’t come out quite right. Of course Bean knew himself — but if Brown was correct, Bean didn’t even know how old he was. The implications of such a childhood began to seep through her mind, leaving a hollow feeling in her chest. “Someone dumped him in a parking lot when he was three years old?”

Brown shrugged. “It seems he had been severely abused — he was covered with bruises — and possibly starved. The ill effects of childhood violence have a tendency to follow one through life, alas.” He shook his head in what must have been feigned sorrow. “Growing up without love or even proper care inflicts irreparable damage on the strongest of us. When there’s no foundation for attachment to other humans, what can one build on?”

“Maybe so.” But Brown had just been elated to find that Bean had an attachment to her. Was he only warning her further on the possible dangers of that? “I think I’d pay more attention to what someone’s like as an adult.”

“Exactly,” said Brown with a subtle smile. “The child is father to the man. Which is why I spent so much time learning the facts of Mr. Bandit’s early years.” He began to walk back towards Manichetti and the edge of the woods. Rally followed him.

“You’ve memorized them all?”

“In infinite detail. If I had a couple of hours, I could lay it all out for you. I’m a born raconteur.”

Or a born bullshit artist. She had never heard a voice that loved the sound of itself so damn much. Had he twisted the facts to fit his purposes or pulled the whole saga out of his well-shaped ass? Some of it fit with what she knew and with what Bean had said. The rest... was possible. She was definitely going to have to check this out somehow.

They had walked within Bean’s earshot now, so the private conversation was over. “Thanks, Sly. It sounds good. I’ll call the Feds. Will you let me give you some tactical suggestions on your defection?”

“Certainly. I’ll call later this evening, about five o’clock, but we probably shouldn’t meet again until it’s time. I’ve already pushed my window to the limit.”

They halted ten feet from Bean, who straightened up and looked at her, with an occasional flick of the eyes in Brown’s direction. “Bean, it’s all worked out except for the getaway plan. I can count on you and Buff for that?”

“Yeah,” said Bean, his voice neutral. “No problem.”

“Excellent,” said Brown. “Be seeing you.” He shook Rally’s hand and glanced at Bean.

“Go on,” she said when Bean didn’t move. “Shake on it.”

“I’m gonna have to decline,” said Bean, still in neutral. “Sorry.”

Brown waved away the beginning of her expostulation, nodded to Manichetti, and turned to go. At the edge of the green grass, where the sun took over from the shade of the trees, he looked back at Rally with a heavy-lidded glance of turquoise eyes. “Again, good luck.” He slid the glance over to Bean and smiled. “Every one of us.”

When the pair reached the oak with one dead branch, O'Toole dropped to the ground and followed them into the distant line of woods.

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"We need a hotel, Bean." Rally got into Buff's passenger seat and looked at its driver. He sat with his door open, one foot on the brake and the other on the gas pedal, revving the engine with deadly regularity. He had walked far ahead of her on the way back to the car and nearly lost her around a turn, stalking along the roadside path with rapid strides as she ran to keep up.

By the time she reached Buff, he had unlocked the car and turned on the ignition. He now sat feeding fuel to the giant powerplant and listening to the deep rumble of the idling pistons and big twin exhausts as if it were a soothing meditation. His face was still frozen in a blank scowl.

"Yeah."

"Somewhere near that pier, I think, if there are any hotels in that neighborhood."

"So we'll look." He slammed his door, let out the parking brake and backed out of the bushes, then spun Buff in a tight 180 and drove out on the main road.

Heading east, they took a left on a larger divided street and emerged from the tall eucalyptuses of the park into a neighborhood of elegant old four-story houses and apartments. Bean continued north along Park Presidio, signs pointing the way to the Golden Gate Bridge.

Rally watched his face. Obviously seeing Brown had rattled him, but she couldn't put the job off simply because her partner was in a foul mood.

"Can I ask you a question, Bean?"

"Spit it out."

"Do you know anything about having been abandoned in a parking lot at the age of three?"

He stared at her, his expression finally changing; not for the better. "Where the hell did you hear that?"

"From Brown. He told me some things about you that he said he'd dug up here and there, and I want to know if he was lying."

"Shit," said Bean, with meaning.

"He didn't tell me who your parents were, if you're wondering. I did ask."

“What the hell for?”

“Uh... I thought you might like to know...”

“Not from him, I don’t!” Bean stepped on the gas and shot Buff through a yellow light.

“Sorry!” said Rally in exasperation. “I was trying to do you a favor!”

“Oh yeah? Weren’t you just lookin’ for dirt on me?”

“Has it ever occurred to you that I might like to know who I’m dealing with? It’s not like you’ve ever told me a thing about your history.”

“You oughta be askin’ the bastard about *himself*, not about me. *He’s* the one you gotta worry about!”

“You think he would’ve answered me?”

“Nope. But it makes a lot more sense than wondering about stuff that happened a long time ago.”

“Look, Bean, I’m trying to find out if he was just spinning tales for his own purposes, or if he was telling the truth. Doesn’t that make sense?”

“Aw, shit...” Bean growled, showing his teeth. There was a long pause as he turned right off Park Presidio onto Geary, dodging bicyclists and several pink-haired teenage pedestrians. “Some cop found me in a parking lot, yeah. But I wasn’t three, I was five.”

“According to Brown, you were only three. You were so big they thought you were older. He said you were born in 1970.”

Bean gave her an odd look. “I don’t remember it anyway. Somebody used to tell me she’d take me back there if I didn’t behave. Like a freakin’ stray dog.”

“One of your foster parents?”

Bean only grunted in reply.

No one had ever wanted him... according to Brown. Could that be true? Could he have grown up without a single devoted person in his life? That might well make him ravenous for the physical equivalent of affection. But it was also likely he would never have developed much emotional capacity. Rally wondered how much he really had. The difference between callousness and habitual reserve wasn’t

always easy to tell. She'd had a brief sense of insight into his motives when Brown had claimed Bean loved her.

There — that word. It made no sense applied to Bean, but he wasn't devoid of better feeling. He responded to children at the very least. Someone had nurtured a spark of human kindness in the tough young stray, oversize for his age and spurned like a dog.

“OK, well, he said you were in foster care until you were fourteen... or twelve, if he's right about your age. Then you ran away and became a drag racer.”

“Yeah, that's about right. Damn, I was twelve?” Bean suddenly laughed. “I was a braver little snot than I thought.”

“All on your own, at twelve?”

“Aaah, I got along. Shit, that'd mean I'm only twenty-nine. I got kinda pissed about turnin' thirty, and now I got to do it all over again.”

“Consider the alternative!”

“Never turnin' thirty?” He chuckled again. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Do you know anything about the family that adopted you?”

Bean stopped laughing. “Nobody adopted me.”

“Yes, someone did right after you were born.” By now it seemed that Brown had gotten it right. “But I guess they didn't treat you well, if you ended up starving in a parking lot. You'd been beaten, too, so they must have been awful parents. If they were the ones who did it, that is.”

“Did he say that?”

“No, he didn't say a word about them. Which is strange, because he should have been able to find out everything about them. He said he had copies of all kinds of documents pertaining to you.”

Bean snarled. “Great. That's just the kinda thing I want gettin' around.” He chewed his jaw back and forth for a moment. “He say anything about what I was up to besides drag racin'?”

“No. He said you disappeared from the record for years. What were you doing?”

“Aw... stuff,” said Bean. “Long time ago now.” He fell silent for several minutes, looking out the windshield with a thoughtful expression as he drove towards downtown.

“Did... do you remember anyone who took good care of you?”

“Yeah, I guess they tried.” He seemed lost in reminiscence. “The people they sent me to, I mean. Not like I was easy to handle.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I meant, do you remember anyone who really, um, loved you...?”

Instantly she regretted that she’d asked. Bean’s expression darkened until his scar nearly disappeared in heavy scowl lines. His eyes went icy.

“What the hell do you want to know that for?”

“No... no reason. Sorry.”

“Stay outta my frickin’ head, Vincent. I don’t need shit from both ends!” He twisted away and accelerated around a left turn.

The subject had closed, probably for good. Rally kept her eyes on Bean for a little while, then turned and watched rooftops slip by against the bright sky, her vision blurring. Surely there was no reason to cry for a child who had armored himself against every kind of pain, the original bruises having vanished with the passage of twenty-six years.

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“Which one of ‘em is gonna kill the other one?” Manichetti started the engine of a long black Jaguar parked on a side street veiled by trees.

“Does it matter?” Brown laughed and flopped into the back seat as O’Toole held the door for him.

“No sir.” O’Toole grinned through the slit in his balaclava. “I can always take care of the other one for ye, sir. I’d count it a privilege to put a slug through either the wee slut or that mooncalf eejit of hers. Near broke my bleedin’ heart to see the bitch pussy-whip any man like that, be he ever so big an’ dumb!”

“Yeah, he might have the edge in a fight, hey?” said Manichetti.

“I’d say they were about evenly matched. Mr. Bandit has the edge in strength and sheer determination, and Ms. Vincent has speed and firepower.” Brown took off his suit jacket. “I imagine his skull is a hard one, but a shot at close range would penetrate it handily. It might not kill him instantaneously — he’s possessed of enough animal energy to throttle someone even when fatally wounded. I can imagine a scenario in which they might kill each other simultaneously. That has possibilities.”

O'Toole got into the front passenger seat and closed the door. Manichetti pulled away from the curb and merged smoothly into traffic. Brown lay back on the leather cushions, his left hand over his eyes and an exhausted smile on his face.

"That young woman is certainly more cautious than her age would warrant, though a tad too eager to succeed. This is proving an interesting challenge."

"Looks even hotter in the flesh," said Manichetti. "You sure he ain't screwed her yet? He was acting jealous as a pup."

"I honestly don't know, though I'm inclined to think not. It's not crucial." He held up a finger, wagging it in the air with his eyes still closed, his voice taking on a professorial tone. "The important thing is the bond of trust between them. It's not as strong on her side as it is on his, but it definitely exists. Despite surface appearances, they are acting as a unit, defending each other from behind a citadel of mutual regard. The neighbors can hear the domestic squabbles, but so far the fort is solid." Brown opened his eyes and grinned nastily. "I've planted a few mines under the wall, I think. With luck, some of them are going off right now."

"Man, that was funny, when you made that crack about her 'longin' for his embrace'!" Manichetti took the cordless receiver out of his ear. "Sure was hard to keep a straight face — that ugly bastard."

"Oh, thank you for the reminder," said Brown, removing his tie and unbuttoning his shirt. He pulled his shirttails out of his trousers, revealing a miniature transmitter and antenna wrapped around his waist and taped to his ribs. "I certainly can't go into a summit meeting equipped with a wire. My colleagues might imagine I was in the pay of the FBI."

O'Toole let out a sharp bark of a laugh and took off his balaclava.

SKRRIPP! With a sizzling rip of adhesive tape, Brown removed the transmitter. "Ouch — damn, that burns. But certainly worth it." He rubbed his skin. "I'm sure both of you learned a great deal."

"Fockin' soap opera, if ye ask me." O'Toole reached to take the equipment from Brown, who handed the whole tangled mess to him and lay back again. Pausing with the wire in his hand, the little sharpshooter looked at his employer lounging in the back seat, shirt open to reveal a tanned, muscular chest with a moderate crop of dark hair. His pale green eyes moved over Brown's figure with covert, guilty longing, but he turned and stuffed the wire into the glove compartment. "Why d'yeh have to go talk to those bloodthirsty sodomites, sir? That 426 is just gonna try to sabotage yeh again."

“I do have some allies still. My progress report will encourage them. In fact, I think I will be able to sketch a firm outline of action. Perhaps my request for backup personnel and materials will go through on the strength of it.”

“Materials?”

“Cash, mostly.”

“Oh, another — ”

“Tom, I need to think, if you don’t mind.” Brown closed his eyes and put his hands behind his head. “Manny, take me to the pier. But don’t drive too fast.”

“Yessir, Mr. Brown,” said Manichetti. “Slow and easy.”

“Nothing is slower,” murmured Brown to himself, “than a fool’s haste.”

.: CHAPTER FIVE .:

“I know, this is an unbelievable deal, Roy! But think about it — bringing down a whole Asian syndicate! God, I’m so — ”

“Overexcited?” She heard Roy draw a deep, amused snort. “OK, girl, I don’t blame you. If you can pull this off, you are going to be able to take a lot of credit. And a hundred grand! Not bad for a couple of day’s work.”

“So you’re going to contact the FBI for me? I want you to get some credit, too!”

“Thanks, kid. But you could just call the San Francisco office and let them handle it. Why should I get credit, anyway? I’m sitting on my duff in Chicago while you’ve been driving all over the West Coast!”

“Umm...” Roy had told her about the heroin deal in the first place, which had led her to look for Bean. But Bean wasn’t officially part of this. If he were to get away with his money as she had promised, she had to keep his name out of it. “It was that heroin deal, the rumor you filled me in on. That was Brown’s. It started the whole ball rolling. Um, indirectly.”

“Yeah? Say, did you ever track down your courier? Or was that a bad tip?”

“Oh, it was just some guy on the street who said he’d seen a car that sounded familiar. Seemed pretty strange to me... I mean, why would he have come all that way?” Rally grimaced, hating her duplicity. That promise was tasting worse and worse with every word she spoke. But she had made it, and she had to keep it. She could never allow a criminal to outdo her in a trial of honor.

“For money, you said. Nasty customer, I gather.”

“Oh, yeah.” Rally smiled and thought fast. “I’d just as soon not run into him again! But let’s get back to Brown.”

“Sure. I’ll call the Feds. I guess you’re right; having me do it might ensure they take this seriously. You think he’s going to call you back soon?”

“By five, he said. I’m using the hotel phone for this call — he’s got my cell phone number and I’m leaving that open. When he tells me where to meet him, I’ll go pick him up and then deliver him to the FBI.”

“What, in a taxi?”

“Uh...”

“If you wrecked your Cobra — ”

“May’s coming with the Cobra. I was lucky and only ripped some pieces off the undercarriage.”

“Lucky — that’s the word for it, all right,” said Roy. “How’d you manage not to roll it?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. I don’t even remember exactly what happened — I must have had a jolt to the brain!” She laughed. “One moment I was on the road, the next I was at the bottom. Maybe I did something to straighten myself out — if I had my wits about me, I might have steered perpendicular to the edge so I could coast down! But I kind of doubt that; I wasn’t in position for that as far as I recall, so it was just dumb luck.”

“Aw, don’t sell yourself short, kid,” said Roy affectionately.

“Well, it shouldn’t take too long to fix! Even a little shop in the middle of nowhere can handle it. But if she isn’t here in time, I’ll improvise!”

“Rally... this is starting to sound kind of dicey.”

“I’ll be OK.”

“I wonder... you know, generally the FBI like to have a liason on hand. If they’re dealing with someone like you who isn’t official. Someone in law enforcement who’s familiar with the situation — usually the local cops, of course. But if we’re talking about a drug deal that took place in my jurisdiction...”

“Roy?”

“I’m coming out there to meet you. I’ll catch the red-eye and be in San Francisco by early tomorrow morning.”

“Huh?” Her heart gave a big thump. “You don’t have to go to all that trouble! Really, there’s not much risk. I... um, I’ve got help.”

“Help? What kind?”

“Well... some muscle. And a spare car. There’s nothing to worry about!”

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Rally, this isn’t like you.”

“It’s been a weird couple of days. And I didn’t get much sleep last night! Sorry, maybe I’m getting tired...”

“Then I am definitely getting on that flight. What’s your hotel?”

“Oh, Roy!”

“There is nothing you can say that will persuade me not to come, kid. This is important, and I’m going to be there for you. Not for the damn credit, which as far as I can tell is all yours. But if something happened because I wasn’t on the scene, I’d never forgive myself.”

She could tell he had made up his mind. “It’s called the Sandpiper Inn, though it’s nowhere near the beach... it’s kind of a fleabag. But it was in the right part of the city. Near the pier.”

“This Dragon’s Lair?”

“Uh-huh. I’m going to check it out in a little while. See, I’m hedging my bets!”

“Good for you. I’ll call you later when I know what flight I’ll be on. I’ll get on the horn with the Feds right after I make my reservation. You be careful.”

“I will be, Roy. Please don’t worry.”

“The day I stop worrying about you, girl...” He chuckled. “Bye for now, Rally.”

“Bye.” Roy hung up, and Rally put the phone back by the bed. Bean had the television on in the sitting area of the one-bedroom suite; she heard a news program and a cut to a commercial. When she came to the door, Bean looked up from his seat on the closed hide-a-bed and cracked a walnut in his teeth. Around him on the carpet lay a windrow of shattered nutshells.

“You got the Feds lined up?”

“I called Roy Coleman in Chicago. He’ll talk to the FBI first, vouch for my credentials. Unfortunately, he kind of insisted on coming along. He wants to make sure everything’s all right.”

“A *Chicago* cop? You nuts?” Bean got up, spitting out a piece of walnut shell for emphasis.

“I didn’t tell him about you. Well, I had mentioned you in general terms — not by name, OK? He asked me if I’d tracked down the courier I was looking for, and I kind of walked around that one. I just said I had help on hand.”

“So why is he horning in? What happens when he sees me hanging out in yer hotel room?”

“He doesn’t know you by sight. He does know you by rep. Just tell him a different name!”

“That may not hold up long, girl. There *are* some Chicago cops that know me by sight. You tryin’ to get me nailed?”

“Bean, he trusts me. I’ll tell him you’re helping me! We won’t mention the money – that’ll just complicate things.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Bean rubbed his nose. “But it’s getting kinda crowded in here, babe. Too many factors operatin’ in a small space. Don’t like it.”

A small space? At least they had a bigger hotel room now. She still wasn’t willing to let Bean out of her sight, but she didn’t think she could have stood another night right next to him... Rally’s cell phone rang and she lunged for her purse.

“That Brown?”

“Could be.” She clicked the phone on. “Hello, Rally Vincent here.”

“I got the estimate now. You know it’s ninety-eight degrees out here? And there are NO trees.”

“Thank you, May...” Rally sighed. Bean snorted. “How much, and how long is it going to take?”

“One thousand, eight hundred and forty-nine bucks. And fifty cents. They are ordering a part from Bakersfield. They might get it by this evening. Or they might not.”

“Oh, man! I NEED that car!”

“Then come down here and DRAG IT TO FRISCO WITH YOUR TEETH!” shouted May. “I’m gonna go get in the motel pool.”

Rally flinched at May’s volume. Bean snickered and sat down to watch the TV again.

“May! I’m sorry! I’m just kind of... tense. Brown hasn’t called back yet, and Roy’s coming out here to keep an eye on me.”

“You should have brought me along in the first place! I could have tossed a couple of poppers, knocked out both Brown and Bean on the road, and we’d be doing

Magic Mountain right now! They looked at me kind of funny when I got on the play structure at the Mickey D's! I don't look THAT young!"

"I'll make it up to you! I promise! Remember that hundred grand. We'll have a lot of cash to play with, sweetie!"

"OK, OK. I'm sorry. This is just such a DUMP!"

"I know. I didn't have such a hot time there either."

Bean's back straightened and his head gave a slight jerk.

"What did they say about how long it was going to take to do the work?"

"Once they have the part, it will take a couple of hours to install. Then they say you need a lot of cosmetic work, you lost some chrome and your driver's side window is cracked."

"I'm just going to have to take care of that stuff later. As soon as it's driveable, come up here! Here's the hotel address..." Rally looked at the certificate on the back of the door and read it off to May. "And the room number is 811. But you'd better not stay here with us..."

"Us? You and Bean? In one ROOM?" May cackled wickedly. "Something you want to tell me about, Rally?"

"NO! I mean — very funny, May! Does that seem LIKELY?" Lying by evasion was getting easier and easier, if no less uncomfortable. "I am going to have to operate from here, and I want you and Junior out of harm's way, if anything goes wrong. Besides, this isn't exactly the nicest hotel in the city! You should stay somewhere downtown or near the beach." Rally moved into the bedroom again, conscious of Bean's ears.

"God, anywhere'd be better than a Motel 6 in no man's land! You know your Cobra is the biggest story in town?"

"What?"

"Oh, some guys were looking at it when I finished up in the office. One of 'em was just gushing about it, he thought it was so cool! But you know what he drove off in?"

"No, what? Some old junker?"

"Not a chance! A Mercedes. Hardly the kind of thing a guy who freaks over old American muscle cars would drive, you'd think!"

Rally laughed. “Oh, you’d be surprised! Plenty of people wish they could drive something wilder than what they have.” She opened the bedroom curtains and looked out at the jagged skyline, the sun declining behind it but still high, skyscrapers sparkling shards of light into her eyes. This would have been a nice afternoon for a drive, if she had her beautiful baby GT-500!

“Not me! I’m dreading taking that thing out on the freeway! I’m going to do 55 the whole way.”

“Aaack! May, it’ll take you forever!”

“You want it to go in the ditch again? I’m doing it my way, or not at all!”

“All right, all right. Just please come as fast as you can — I don’t want to have to depend on... Buff for transportation. Not one moment longer than I have to.”

“Oooh! How are you two getting along? Is he being an asshole?”

“You said it,” muttered Rally. “God, the man’s an utter barbarian! I will be SO glad when this is over...”

“Me too! God, it’s hot and buggy out here — and I can smell the cow poop on the fields, I think!”

“Go get in that pool, then! Call me when there’s an update.” Rally clicked off and turned to see Bean leaning against the door jamb. His eyes were directed straight into hers and he had a heavy frown on his face. The TV still jangled in the background. She felt her expression sink.

“I was gonna apologize to you for what I said about the money.” Bean’s frown didn’t change. “You know, doing somethin’ to stop you and all that shit. I know you’re gonna keep yer word even if we got our differences. I had no business talkin’ to you like that.” He rolled his gaze away from her and scowled up at the corner of the ceiling. Rally bit her lips, waiting for the rest. “But give me some respect, girl! *Barbarian?*”

Rally sat down on her bed and put her head in one hand. “I’m sorry, Bean. I didn’t realize you were close enough to hear and I shouldn’t have called you that. Even though ever since we got to that restaurant, you’ve been acting like a bear with a sore tooth.”

For several minutes, both of them fell silent. Eventually Bean shifted his stance, and Rally glanced up.

“Aw, hell. I know you wouldn’t’ve picked me for this gig, if you’d had your druthers. It was all an accident. All of it.” He had his back against the door jamb, neither in nor out of the bedroom, and his thumbs hooked in his jeans pockets.

An accident? He was perfectly right about that. She'd kept her eyes so focused on him that it didn't surprise her any more that their bodies had collided in Buttonkettle. Except that he should have been able to avoid her. He was a better driver than she was, after all: more experienced, less perturbable. Why hadn't he steered away when she'd recklessly careened towards him?

"I felt pretty crazy last night even though I hadn't been drinkin'." Bean scratched the back of his neck with a rueful air.

"Oh."

"You know, almost gettin' killed two or three times... I... got kind of overheated."

"Uh-huh."

He looked at her with an uncomfortable snarl, scruffing his fingers through his hair and standing it on end. "You go throwin' sparks in gasoline, girl, you're going to get some flames."

"I know."

"Do ya?" Bean turned and put a hand on the door frame. "I might've learned my lesson last night, but I ain't so sure about you."

"Lesson? When you went and threw the whole thing in my FACE?! You want to apologize to me about running off your mouth? Try washing it out with SOAP first!"

"Aw, shit." Bean shook his head slowly. "Grow up, kid. You were beggin' for it and you'd better admit it!"

"You dirty — !"

"This YOUR best shot, Rally Vincent?"

She stopped abruptly, a hand over her mouth.

"What's the score, girl? You going to tell me what that was all about? Long as we're roomies, I need to know what's gonna happen in the wee hours. Don't much like big surprises in the middle of a job."

She had to clear the air about this. They were about to walk into something too big to blow. But what could she say? 'Sorry I got so hot from that firefight I'd even screw a man like you?' God, no. And that wasn't quite the truth, anyway. What was the truth? Even if she knew, it would probably be impossible to admit. Rally buried her face deeper in her hands.

“Aw, shit. You cryin’?”

“Hell, no!” Rally sat upright, her face hot.

“Good. Didn’t think you were that kind.”

“I’m not. And... I am not the kind to... do what I did to you last night, or at least I didn’t think I was. I’m not sure why it happened. But it did, and yes, it was my fault, but I was not begging for it! I didn’t set out with any intention — ”

“Yeah, I got the picture.” Bean waved a hand in dismissal. Something like disappointment or chagrin passed briefly over his features, but he extinguished it with an ironic grin. “You just wanted to keep an eye on me, and hell, I tried to split as soon as I could. Guess you had me pegged, girl. So that makes it kinda my fault too, huh?”

“Oh, well... thanks for saying so. You say you were feeling overheated — well, so was I. Sometimes... well, firefights get me kind of worked up. I’m sorry.”

Bean looked at her for a minute, his face now unreadable. “If I learned anything about ya last night, I know you don’t give it away easy. That’s what’s confusin’ me.”

“Join the club.”

He laughed, not very mirthfully. “You’d belong to a club that’d have Road Buster Bean for a member?”

Rally laughed harder and flung her head back, putting her hands on the bedspread. “For the kind of thing we’ve been up to? Can’t think of a better roster.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” said Bean with a sigh. “Partners.”

“Partners,” said Rally with more conviction, and put out her hand. Bean came into the room and took it. She stood up and gave him a firm handshake, her hand almost disappearing in his. “We aren’t ever going to do things the same way, and we aren’t ever going to have the same priorities. But we CAN work together, or at least die trying.”

Bean raised a brow. “Die? Not me, babe.” She smiled in return. He gave her a grin, looked at her hand still in his and opened his fingers to let her go. Suddenly he seemed to realize he was in her bedroom, glanced around, cleared his throat and retreated to the sitting room.

The TV buzzed and squawked. Rally peered through the door. Bean stood next to the TV, flipping from one channel to the next so rapidly she could hardly tell one image from another. He wasn't even looking at the screen, but through the window at the sky. For a moment he seemed like an animal pacing a cage. Perhaps he was thinking the same thing she had been thinking a few minutes before. *Nice afternoon for a drive, if I was on my own...*

Breep.

Breep.

Breep.

"Isn't that your phone?" said Bean, turning to look at her, and Rally startled out of her reverie.

"Oh, God. That has to be..." She turned and went back into the bedroom where she had left it.

Breep.

Click.

"Hello, Rally Vincent here."

"Hello, Rally. Good to hear your voice again." Brown sounded friendly and smug at the same time. "Have you found a comfortable place to stay?"

"Doing just fine, Sly." She scuffed her foot against a worn spot on the carpet.

"I'm glad to hear it. You should rest and keep your mind clear before our operation. I have a plan, and I'd like to get your approval."

"Sure thing. What's the score?"

"Tomorrow night will be ideal, about eleven. I'll have access to the money — I'll be working late, something everyone expects me to do at the moment anyway. The surveillance is tighter now and closing down my options — I can move between home and office, but that's about it. If I seem to be attempting escape, I'll be killed immediately. I won't be able to stray outside my usual sphere, with one exception."

"Which is?"

"I've already dropped a few hints to my superiors. I'm supposedly tense and worried — well, not so supposedly. In need of relaxation and feminine

companionship. My wife isn't available at the moment, being down south with our daughter." He cleared his throat. "That's your part. The companion."

"You mean... you want me to impersonate a... a prostitute?"

She heard Bean let out a harsh breath and turned to see him standing in the doorway. She moved closer and leaned against the wall next to him. Holding her phone a few inches away from her ear, she put her finger to her lips.

Bean stooped and put his ear near the phone so he could pick up both sides of the conversation. He closed his eyes and held his breath, then let it out quietly. After a moment, she realized he was synchronizing his breathing with hers so Brown wouldn't hear him.

"No, no." Brown sounded apologetic. "A girlfriend, as if you and I had an arrangement of longer standing. I won't be ambushed or stopped if they think I'm occupied with a woman — they wouldn't want witnesses to the hit, and I believe they're not eager to kill American civilians, for fear of investigation. This scheme has the additional advantage of allowing us to meet again before the actual escape."

He paused for the space of a breath. "Alone, of course."

"That would make it hard for Bean to come along, yes."

"Ah... is he listening to this conversation?"

She met Bean's eyes, his face inches from hers. "I went into another room to pick up the phone."

"I must tell you, Rally, I think it would be better for all concerned if Mr. Bandit did not directly participate in this operation. You have all the necessary skills, and far more emotional detachment than your partner has. Naturally he's entitled to his fair share, and naturally you will give it to him. In the cause of harmony, would it be possible for you to keep him in the background?"

"Keep him in the background? Don't you mean keep him in the dark?"

"I didn't like to use the phrase. Of course the decision is yours. I find it unlikely that you will be able to keep him off the scene if he knows the details, and if he is present, an unstable element inserts itself into all our calculations."

Bean gave a sardonic smile while Brown's soft, reasonable voice continued. "Wouldn't it be better to complete the operation and confer on him a *fait accompli*? And a large amount of cash, of course."

Ten minutes before, she would have agreed with Brown. She was almost glad she had called Bean names. Funny how an argument could wash away the crap. “Well, ah, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. I’ll tell him I’m going to pursue my own leads tonight.”

“Certainly.” His voice betrayed little, but Rally could almost feel Brown’s smile. “This part of the operation is yours; in fact, you’ll be able to carry out the entire scheme on your own. To outline the remainder of my ideas — I propose that you should meet me at my office with your car tomorrow night and drive me to your hotel as if for a tryst. The FBI can station agents at the hotel. I will surrender myself to them and leave in their custody. Even if we are followed, it will avail the Dragons nothing. Very simple.”

“That does sound simple, so I’d better probe for loopholes. Do the Dragons know who I am?”

“Their intelligence wing could certainly find out, if someone becomes suspicious. I didn’t go through them to obtain my background information on you. If you play the role well... and look the part, suspicion shouldn’t be a factor. I have no doubt you’ll be able to pull it off, having seen you.” He chuckled gently. “I don’t settle for the run of the mill in any area, and everyone knows it. If you’ll pardon the implications of such a compliment, you are easily attractive enough, and distinctive enough, to be my mistress.”

Rally felt her face grow pink. Bean stared at her and her stomach did flip-flops. From most gangsters she had ever met, a comment like that wouldn’t have made much impression. Their sallies were usually guileless and crude, something she could laugh off or take some offense at if necessary.

This one set off alarms. Did Brown have actual designs on her? If he did, was it for strategic reasons or simply because he liked her looks? Was he that much of a ladies’ man?

“Uhh... thanks. Um... I’m going to need to know more about your office. Location, layout, security and so forth. I’m sure there will be some danger spots and I’d prefer to plan ahead.”

“Ah, the woman of business. Of course, I will have a map prepared. I’d like to deliver it in person so we can discuss the plan. Tonight, if possible. Have you eaten yet?”

“No, it’s only four-thirty!”

“May I have the pleasure of your company at dinner?”

“Uh... sure. Where?”

“I’ll choose a safe place and pick you up with Mr. Manichetti. It’s important that this be staged correctly, to jibe with the story I’ve already given to my colleagues. You, or your alter ego, are a resident of Los Angeles, and have been my mistress for about a month. You’ve flown up to San Francisco at my request and will be staying for a few days. I’m putting you up in the Mandarin Oriental near Union Square — naturally, this is one of the better hotels in the city. Many visiting members of the Dragons use it, which is advantageous, as their agents are frequently in the vicinity. We should therefore meet in the lobby after you’ve taken a cab there and checked in. When the observers see that nothing untoward happens, and that I return to my home after the evening is over, your subsequent appearance at my office will raise no suspicions. I’ve had a room reserved for you under my name and you’re welcome to stay there... on your own.”

“Really.” Oh, he definitely had designs on her. Bean’s scowling face told her that even if her own instincts had not.

“Will that do? Eight PM?”

“Sure. How should I dress, to fit this story of yours?”

“Mmm... an excellent point. Your professional attire suits you well, but wouldn’t suit the occasion. Buy something new — no mistress of mine would wear anything from a department store.” His smooth voice took on a hint of sneer. “Visit the designer boutiques on Post Street, near the hotel. You should mention my name in Versace or Fendi and have them put your purchases on my account. Don’t spare expense. I’d recommend a short evening dress, something simple, and a minimum of accessories. But please feel free to come armed.”

“Oh, I will. I realize you need your driver, but listen to me, Sly. Seriously. If I see hide or hair of your pet terrorist, or anyone like him, I’m going to turn around and walk away.”

“I understand. With Mr. Bandit absent, I won’t feel the need to bring Mr. O’Toole in any case. I trust you, Rally.”

She had no reason to doubt his sincerity in that. “Good. I’ll go shopping now.”

“Excellent. I will see you at eight.”

“See you.” She clicked off and lowered the phone. She and Bean still leaned against the wall, face to face.

“You really gonna meet him *alone*?” Bean looked as if all the possible proceedings subsequent to a man and woman together in a hotel room were flashing before his eyes.

“That’s what *he* thinks,” said Rally.

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“You know more than that, Larry,” Rally cooed into her phone while striding up Post Street with several rope-handled shopping bags. “You’ve been studying them for months? Mr. Stanford MBA? You do know more than where their warehouse is.”

She emerged into Union Square and sunshine burst down over her head. The temperature was warm although the afternoon grew late, and the pedestrians wore brief summer clothing. A cable car clanged along the opposite end of the square, packed with riders.

“Well...” said Larry after a pause.

“Hey, lady,” said a young female panhandler. “Any spare change left over from the shoppin’ trip?”

“I charged it all to Daddy,” said Rally sarcastically, but dug in her purse for a dollar bill. “Here you go.”

“What?” said Larry.

“Oh, nothing,” replied Rally, continuing on her way. “I just gave her a buck.”

“You’ve got to be careful about encouraging those people.”

“What, encouraging them to be poor?” she snorted. “I don’t know about you, but I do not have the balls to turn someone down when I’m toting this many shopping bags.” She looked at her load: Versace, Manolo Blahnik, and Gucci. “It’s not every day I get to stock up on — well, I’ve been busy this afternoon.”

Mentioning her appointment with Brown seemed incautious, so she continued in a coaxing tone. “I really need more information before this evening. Could be dangerous if I don’t confirm some important points. Can’t you help me, Larry?”

“Well...” said Larry again. “It’s not what I... well, ask me a few questions. I may have answers... or I may not. Don’t ask me for corroboration on anything I may tell you, because I can’t give it.”

Rally narrowed her eyes as she passed Gump’s. Larry’s choice of words implied some kind of under-the-table dealings. Did he have a secret informant he didn’t want to compromise? She could understand that, but if he kept his information too closely guarded, it would be of no use to anyone. “I’m not going to pass this on to anyone else, you know. You can tell me, whatever it is.”

“Not to Bean?”

“Uh... well, I might need to tell him some things, yes. He is my partner.”

“I think you can appreciate my need for caution, Rally.”

“Sure I can. They’ve already threatened you, and you’re a visible target. But how would anyone connect you to me? I only got here today and it was just coincidence I ate lunch at your place.”

“You’re forgetting that big scene on the sidewalk. Plenty of people saw us talking, not to mention those two thugs. Did you know they’re already out on bail?”

“Really.”

“It was paid an hour ago. I know a clerk in the SFPD, and I made sure to check on them.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m all that surprised. You think they’re going to hit you again?”

“Uh... no. They’re not the ones I’m worried about. Frankly, I shouldn’t be discussing this over the phone.”

“Don’t hang up. Would you prefer it if I came over?”

“Can you?”

“Not right this moment, now that I think about it.” Rally had taken a cab from the Sandpiper Inn to the shopping district, and the Mandarin Oriental was only two blocks away now. She could not dash off to a small Chinese restaurant in the Sunset district if the Eight Dragon Triad had an agent watching her. A thought struck her, and she turned to look back the way she had come. The panhandling woman had vanished. Well, that had been a waste of a perfectly good charitable contribution.

“No,” she said aloud, “I shouldn’t leave this part of town for now. I guess I’ll have to make do with what I have tonight. No matter what might...”

“OK, OK,” said Larry with a groan. “Ask me a question.”

“Thank you. I told you about the man I’m interested in. Do you have any news on him?”

“Well...”

“Have you asked anyone about him?”

Larry let out a short, surprised laugh. “No.”

“Then how do you get your — ”

“I can’t go into that.”

“Never mind, then. Brown?”

“I don’t have anything solid... just rumors.”

“That’ll do for now.”

“He’s in trouble, all right. They have him under surveillance, and he doesn’t have long. One week.”

“Ha. That’s going around in *rumors*?”

“That’s all I know,” Larry said shortly. “Is it any use?”

“Yes, thank you, it is.” Rally nodded her head and stopped at a corner, waiting for the Walk sign to come on. A cable car clanged by and stopped in front of the St. Francis Hotel, tourists piling off and on. “That’s exactly the kind of thing I need to confirm.”

“So you’ve heard it already?” His voice had a note of shock. “Who have you been talking to?”

Rally’s eyes opened wide, but she kept her voice casual. “I can’t go into that, Larry, any more than you can. Thank you so much. I really appreciate this.”

“Rally...” said Larry in a pleading tone. “I really do want to help you. I just can’t — will you come by tomorrow, then? Lunchtime? I promise I’ll have something better. And a menu planned for you.”

“Sounds good.”

“I want to see you again, Rally.”

“Yeah?” she murmured, smiling to herself. “I want to see you, too.” She clicked off. Oh, she really did want to see him — and find out exactly what his sources were. How could anyone know what he had just told her, outside the inner circle of the Eight Dragon Triad?

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Where the hell was he?

In the back seat of a wine-red Bugatti limo, Rally glanced at the rear-view mirror. She sat next to Brown, the handsome drug dealer pointing out various sights of the city as Manichetti drove.

They'd made a loop through Chinatown, gone down Taylor to Market and up the waterfront, past glittering office buildings and hotels and shops, all lit up and bustling with activity. This elegant city and its beautiful setting between bay and ocean provided ample material for Brown's long-winded, consciously over-informed tour guide routine. She could only listen halfway, for she was anxiously looking for Bean. So far, she hadn't spotted him.

Could he have gotten *lost*? San Francisco wasn't familiar to either of them, though she'd been studying Bean's map whenever he wasn't monopolizing it. By now, she had a good picture of the basic layout: a rough square ten miles on a side, rounded on the northern end because of the natural curve of the peninsula. Most of the downtown streets ran in a strict north-south grid, but Market slashed an angle through the southeast quarter and changed the orientation of every street south of it. Part of that district was yuppified lofts and art galleries, but as it moved towards the city limits it got grimier and uglier. The Sandpiper Inn sat halfway between the tony area and the worst parts of town, a wasteland of housing projects and derelict cars worthy of Chicago's South Side.

Rally and Bean had taken a tour earlier that day while finding the pier and the hotel, an entirely different experience from the red-carpet uptown treatment Brown was giving her now. Buff had drawn a lot of attention in the Mission District and Hunter's Point, not much of it innocent.

Most of the visible inhabitants were the worst elements, people who terrorized their own neighborhoods. Gangbangers in baggy athletic clothing and semi-shaved haircuts hung out on street corners and watched them pass with sullen menace. She had felt almost at home.

Every time Bean had slowed at a stoplight, someone had approached the car and tried to get him to roll down the window. Obviously the only expensive vehicles that routinely ventured there were driven by the people who ultimately paid for Brown's lifestyle...

Drug users. She hated drugs so much it was difficult for her to list rational reasons why — she'd been forcibly drugged more than once, she'd seen innocents with ruined lives, she'd seen the dreadful violence inspired by the huge sums of money the narcotics trade generated. Here she sat in an overpriced car, next to a man wearing a three-thousand dollar suit and a face that might well have cost him ten times that. The cushiony leather seat under her made her skin crawl.

Where the *hell* was Bean?

Manichetti had taken a roundabout route and kept pulling into short side streets and out again, obviously to shake pursuit. Maybe he'd been too good a dry-cleaner even for the Roadbuster.

"To your left, up the hill — that's the Transamerica Pyramid." Brown leaned over to point and slid his left hand along the top of the seat, very close to her shoulder.

"Yeah, I saw that before." Rally moved back to avoid him. He'd been invading her space since the moment he'd walked up to her in the lobby of the Mandarin Oriental. Which, incidentally, had to be the most expensive hotel in a hundred-mile radius. The suite he'd reserved for her cost fifteen hundred and fifty bucks a night, and the room service menu made her eyes bug out.

Even wearing the little black dress she'd chosen in Versace, which had cost as much as Brown's suit, she felt like an interloper. This wasn't her world. She didn't know anyone who could throw cash around like this. Bean didn't spend his money on luxuries — just on cars, which she could understand. She liked cars... but not big Bugattis bought with blood.

Rally stole another look at the rear-view mirror. What might Bean have picked up for a tailing operation, to substitute for his conspicuous custom ride? He'd said he would rent something, but he was equally capable of 'borrowing' a car. Would he have gone for a new sports car or an old muscle machine? The only car she'd seen repeatedly was a little white Honda Civic. Assuming it was even the same one — every third car was Japanese. Mustangs of all vintages were fairly common, but so were new Beetles and BMWs, and she saw more 3000 ZXs than she could shake a stick at. Californians didn't have the same loyalty to American makes as Bean did, apparently.

The Honda approached a little closer as the Bugatti halted in traffic. Street lights illuminated the driver's face for a moment.

Rally had to suppress a wriggle of joy. Bean! Driving a foreign slushbox with less than a hundred horsepower! Caution had won the struggle with pride, then. He'd combed his hair back and tied a bandanna over his head, changing his silhouette enough to retard recognition, at least at night.

No one else in the Bugatti seemed to have noticed him yet, so apparently the ruse was working. A light changed to green and traffic moved forward again, leaving the Honda behind but still following. He'd been there all the time, keeping an eye on the situation as they'd arranged. Bean was just as good as he had claimed, to her intense relief.

"Can we assume we've shaken the Dragons by now?" she said to Brown. "I think I've seen enough of the Financial District to last me the rest of my life." She rolled up the map they had been studying and put it into her purse.

“Shaken the Dragons? No, that’s not the idea,” chuckled Brown. “I want them to observe us, so it’s obvious that nothing untoward is going on.”

“Besides adultery.”

He let out a ringing laugh. “The appearance of adultery, I suppose. We are only play-acting tonight, huh?” He caught her right hand in his left and kissed her fingertips, to her mild disgust. “I’ve always thought I’d make a fine movie actor. Why, Charlie Sheen told me...” He went off into an anecdote filled with authentic-sounding Hollywood name-dropping, which made it obvious he supplied drugs to an all-star clientele.

Rally’s opinion of him began to improve slightly — he was a vain, overdressed, overspending ninny, but peddling nose candy to people just like himself wasn’t the worst kind of dealing she’d encountered by a long shot. She began to wonder just what the FBI wanted with him in the first place.

“So the Dragons are following us?” she interrupted when Brown drew breath in the middle of his story. “I haven’t seen anyone tailing us.”

“Nah,” said Manichetti, speaking for the first time since Rally had entered the car. “I ain’t spotted any pricey cars following.” He caught her eye in the rear-view mirror. “Either 426’s boys are better than I think they are, or they’re driving junkers instead.” He smiled, and a chill went through her; she was positive he had noticed Bean at the same time she had. Manichetti made a little twitch of the eyelids that might have been a wink, and her stomach turned over. Why hadn’t he said anything to Brown?

“Now, Manny,” said Brown with a sudden acid tinge to his smooth voice. “Let’s not bore Ms. Vincent with irrelevancies. Let’s go to L’Marinee. Our reservation is for nine o’clock sharp — I don’t want to keep Henri waiting after giving him such short notice for a table.” He turned to Rally. “There’s nothing more unmanageable than a miffed maitre d’.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she replied.

“I hope you didn’t have seafood for lunch, because I will insist that you have the Dungeness crab appetizer. You simply can’t leave San Francisco without sampling it.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Rally shrugged. “I had Chinese anyway.” Brown took a quick sharp glance at her, but she looked blandly back at him. “I like Chinese.”

“Ah,” said Brown. “I must admit I’ve lost my taste for it.”

“Really.”

His face lost some of its attractiveness, a hint of meanness developing in the line of his perfect lips. “I’ve... there’s been a threat against my family. Don’t worry, they’re perfectly safe.” She saw Manichetti’s head move. “After the events of the past few months, I’m not too charitable towards the Orient. I’d advise you to avoid anything to do with it.”

“What, you’re going to hate everything Chinese for the rest of your life? Not all of them are gangsters, you know! Why, the guy I met — ”

The meanness grew more pronounced. “Rally, I believe I’ve had more experience with them than you have.”

She stared at him for a moment, realizing he meant exactly what he said — he hated everything to do with China, at least at that moment, and pressing her point would only precipitate an argument. Brown wasn’t used to being contradicted, obviously, and had a low tolerance for it. Rally rolled her eyes slightly and looked out the window. “Sure, whatever.”

She glanced up at Manichetti again and saw him watching her in the rear-view mirror. Something was definitely wrong when a man’s own employee said not a word about enemies on his track, after taking such pains to shake pursuit. But perhaps he was reserving comment until he and Brown had a private talk.

“Well,” said Brown after a pause. “I don’t believe I’ve complimented you sufficiently on your choice of attire. My faith in your good taste is magnificently vindicated.” He looked her up and down for the fifth or sixth time. “I shall have to send you shopping again, huh? Do you prefer Versace or Fendi?”

Actually, she’d preferred a small local designer’s boutique she’d found tucked away on a side street, something with elegant classic pieces and prices only twice what she was accustomed to pay, but since he had hinted, she had bought her dress in the flashier Italian place. It was spare and asymmetric and loaded with Spandex, and she couldn’t imagine wearing it in Chicago — in Los Angeles, perhaps, but not at home. Certainly it flattered her figure, but it also made her look like a different person; not a skilled bounty hunter, but a sleek little tootsie with a society drug-dealer boyfriend.

“Oh, Versace had a lot of stuff,” she said vaguely.

“Oh, certainly, a great many pieces in that line would suit...” He rambled on about Italian designers and Rally tuned out again, staring past his well-cut jaw and out at the city lights slipping by.

Brown didn’t seem to need a lot of feedback to keep running, and obviously would rather she didn’t state any opinions of her own, so she kept her mouth closed and her thoughts to herself. She wore the dress he’d paid for, she rode in his car along the route he designated, she would eat what he ordered for her on

his timetable — but once she got home, she was going to change into the sweatsuit she'd bought at Macys and have some peanut butter crackers out of the vending machine in the hotel bar. All this pretension was wearing thin, and she hadn't even spent an hour in Brown's company yet.

Poor Bean — on the road to New York and back he'd had to listen to this drivel for nearly twenty-four hours! It was enough to drive anyone to homicide. Well, maybe not everyone. Some women wouldn't have minded Brown's manner one bit, and would have gazed awestruck into those turquoise eyes and at that fat wallet. It was an effort for her, but getting along with Brown seemed to require that she accept some of his not-so-subtle dictatorial tendencies. She'd content herself with a few mild jabs and cooperate otherwise, since she wanted to encourage Brown to open up a little, talk to her about his career in the Triad and his plans to testify against his colleagues. None of the information she had on him was specific about his function or his standing... and what or who the hell was 426, anyway?

"Here we are," said Brown with an air of pride. The car stopped under a portecochere and Manichetti opened his door, then got out and opened the rear passenger door next to the sidewalk. He stepped aside as Brown disembarked, but offered Rally his arm. She put two fingers lightly on it and leaped out of the car with her purse and jacket. "I'll call when we're ready to go," Brown tossed over his shoulder, taking Rally's hand and tucking into the crook of his elbow. "And I'll expect you right away, Manny. Don't go too far."

"Nossir," the driver replied, giving a slight salute as Brown and Rally went into the restaurant. "And I'll say the frickin' same to you, boss," he muttered as he got back into the Bugatti and threw it into gear.

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"Have you ever considered a change of careers?" said Brown. "Your talents qualify you for much more lucrative employment, my dear. Bounty hunting can't be a very consistent source of income." The sommelier approached with a bottle of champagne, cradling it in a linen napkin, and showed Brown the label. "Yes, the 1977. Huh?"

"No, it's not." Rally considered the dessert menu, feeling close to full, but licked her lips at the descriptions.

"You must have to spend a great deal of time in unpleasant surroundings, with discreditable people. That must be wearisome by now — especially when you've had a taste of a better style of life, huh?" The sommelier poured champagne and departed.

“What, this?” Rally laughed, tinging the crystal flute with a polished fingernail. “I’m on vacation. I don’t expect to eat this kind of dinner every damn night! I’d be a blimp!”

“Oh, I don’t eat here every night — I have an excellent cook at home. He’s a native of Italy, French-trained, and so is expert in both great traditions. The best of both worlds.”

“Jesus, servants and everything!” Rally took a sip of wine. “I don’t think I’m ever going to live like that, no matter how much money I make!”

“The lack of privacy, perhaps? You may have a point there.”

Whoa, he thought she had a point? Wonders would never cease. “Gee,” she said, “you having trouble with somebody?”

“Alas, yes.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Mr. O’Toole... has become... something of a liability.” Brown grimaced with a sense of regret. “He’s a heavy drinker and has unpleasant personal habits. He has to live in close proximity to me in order to do his job, of course, so there’s no escaping him. He left his native land because of legal trouble...”

“The kind that qualified him to work as a bodyguard? Uh-huh.”

“I’ve had to spend a considerable amount of money to shield him both from the consequences of that conduct and from his extracurricular activities since he came to the United States. Especially since I married, his personality has undergone a change for the worse. I’m afraid I will soon have to let him go.”

“You’re in the market for a new bodyguard, you mean.” Oh, goodie.

“Yes, I am. A younger person, I think, but someone with security experience and excellent weapons skills.” He smiled at her. “I haven’t said anything to him yet, of course. I will have to find a good prospect first and ease O’Toole out as quickly as I can. Naturally I will give him an ample settlement, for many years of loyal service.”

“But you’re going into the witness protection program. Wouldn’t a bodyguard blow your cover?”

“Well... I’ve reconsidered that. I intend to testify, of course, but I think retiring to Europe would make more sense than attempting to change my lifestyle so drastically. I’ve even bought a house in the Alps. O’Toole will not be able to enter the E.U., since he is wanted in the U.K. and the Republic of Ireland. Interpol will

flag him the moment he applies for a visa. He'll be much safer in the United States.”

“That’s considerate of you,” said Rally with with a touch of irony. Their waiter came and inquired about their dessert selections, and she ordered a complicated item involving chocolate, raspberries, filo pastry and various garnishes she had barely heard of. Brown ordered chocolate decadence and a bottle of Sauternes.

Rally mentally ticked off the amount of alcohol they had consumed; cocktails before dinner, Graves with the appetizer, Beaujolais with the entree, Champagne as a palate cleanser and now sweet wine with dessert. He’d been reasonably subtle about his intention to get her tipsy, but Rally had been careful not to let the luxury of such a dinner overwhelm her. She had not gone so far as to pour glasses of hundred-dollar wine into the flower vases, but she had used every trick she knew to disguise how little she was actually drinking. The Sauternes, however, something she had never had before, was so delicious that she couldn’t pass up a second glass, and a third.

Only when her head began to whirl did she peek at the label and discover that the alcohol percentage was higher that she had realized. She ate her dessert slowly, hoping she would recover before they had to leave. Brown finished his quickly and called for the check. Rally stood up and reached for her purse and jacket, which she had declined to check at the door.

“Ready?” said Brown, rising a little too eagerly. “I’ll call the car.”

“No, I want to finish that,” said Rally, bobbing her chin at the rest of her dessert. “I’m just going to hit the can — where is it?”

“Ah — through the bar.” She saw him raise a brow slightly at her deliberate gaucherie, but she also had the impression that he rather liked it.

What did he intend once they got back to the Mandarin Oriental? The plan called for them to enter her room together and spend some time there to convince the watchers that she was indeed his visiting girlfriend, but Rally intended to slip out after a decent interval and head down the back stairs. She had scouted all the exits and told Bean where to wait for her — where was he now? She had seen him last two blocks before the restaurant. He might have gone straight to the hotel, or he might be lurking nearby. At any rate, he must have his cell phone with him.

When Rally had locked the bathroom door behind her, she got her own phone out of her purse and sat down on the toilet seat, pressing the second program button.

“Yeah?” said Bean’s voice, and she let out a little sigh. A warm emotion — maybe relief, maybe just familiarity. She had spent so much time with him over the previous twenty-four hours, and now after three hours out of his company, she was genuinely glad to speak to him again. “Who’s callin’?”

“It’s me.”

“Hey, girl. How’s it goin’?”

“Not bad. I just ate a dinner like I’ll never be able to afford again as long as I live, and he’s been trying to hire me for a bodyguard before he splits the country. How’s it going with you?”

She heard him chuckle. “Yeah, right.”

“I kid you not. What an opportunist, huh? I had to cut up his meat for him, so maybe he figures it he can guilt-trip me into hiring on to be one of his damn servants.”

“Serious?”

“As far as I can tell. But he’s been a perfect gentleman — mostly.”

“Yeah?”

“Nothing you could convict him on. He ordered nearly all my food for me, he told me what subjects to discuss, and he complimented me on the dress he told me to buy. What the hell — he’s paying.”

“You want me to come get you?”

“No, not yet. I’m still in the restaurant. We have to do the whole thing at the hotel first.”

“Do what, exactly?”

“I don’t know. Sit and play pinochle for an hour?” She giggled, then hiccupped.

“Rally...”

“You are going to warn me again, I know. Don’t bother, Bean. I can handle him, and frankly I doubt he’s going to try anything beyond extravagant compliments, unless he’s even vainer than I think he is.”

“OK, I won’t repeat everything I’m thinkin’ right now. It’d take too long anyhow.”

“Good. Where are you?”

“Cruisin’ the downtown in my limousine.”

“I saw that. It was hard not to laugh. Where’d you get it?”

“Bought it.”

“*Bought* it? To add to your car collection?” They both snickered.

“Ha, ha. I’m gonna dump it when I don’t need it no more, of course. I got it off a guy with a want ad for six hundred bucks.”

“I’d better get back to the dining room,” said Rally. “He’s going to think I escaped out the window. I don’t feel so drunk now...”

“Hey! You OK?”

“Just fine. I’ll call you again when I’m heading out.”

“You do that.”

Rally put the phone back in her purse and got out the item she had gone to the bathroom to arrange, strapping it to her forearm. Over it she pulled her jacket and slung her purse on her shoulder.

Back at the table, she dawdled over dessert while Brown signed the check and excused himself to make his phone call. Brown was waiting in the lobby when she emerged, and they walked out just as Manichetti pulled up in the Bugatti.

On the way to the Mandarin Oriental Rally pretended more intoxication than she actually felt and babbled away, asking Brown some personal questions. He answered none of them, but deftly turned the subject to her and mentioned his need for a new bodyguard again. Rally in turn deflected that and tried another tack.

“You know, Sly... I’m actually pretty green at this. I never helped anyone escape from a syndicate before. We really do have to go into more detail on tomorrow night.”

His expression, which was warm and smiling, changed a little. “You have the map of the pier. You can rent a car, which makes sense for our cover story, then come to my office; we’ll leave with the suitcase. Nothing simpler.”

“Really. How many guards are there going to be?”

“Oh, not many. I’ve arranged that. There’s not much business going on at that location right now, anyway. You’ll be frisked when you come in, I’m afraid, so if you bring a firearm — ”

“*If* I bring a firearm?” laughed Rally. “I wouldn’t get within half a mile of a gang hideout without a *firearm!*”

“Gracious, what vehemence.” Brown smirked. “I can’t imagine how you are going to be able to conceal it.”

“No problem,” said Rally. “I have a garter magazine holster — I can use that for my little .25, and just get it up close between my — um. Well, I mean, not many people actually put their hands there, searching.”

“I understand,” said Brown. “Most resourceful.” His eyes had gone heavy-lidded and the temperature of his smile shot up several degrees. “Do you usually keep an, *ahem*, gun in that spot?” His question had more than a double meaning, and Rally felt her face flush.

“No, I don’t,” she said bluntly.

“Surely you don’t mean...”

“I told you, I’m not sleeping with Bean.”

“Oh, him! But you must be besieged with opportunities, Rally. From men far more well-endowed by nature and circumstance.” That had a double meaning too. “You’ve certainly had the means to compare the cream of the crop.”

“No! I never — ” she blurted out, and put a hand to her lips.

“Rally? Oh, I’m sorry. That remark did have an unfortunate implication — I apologize. I didn’t mean to say I thought you might be promiscuous. Please accept it as a compliment to your lovely face and figure.”

Oh, he was a master. Here she was, telling him all about her sex life! Something about the very subject rattled her. “Um — I just meant to say...”

“Is there someone?” said Brown in a soothing, avuncular tone. “What a contented young man he must be.”

“I... no.”

“Dear me. I don’t know whether to be pleased, or the contrary.”

Her face was burning by now. “Can we drop this? I wanted to plan the operation, not talk about me!”

“You *are* very young, aren’t you?” said Brown almost to himself. Manichetti shifted gears abruptly.

“I’m not a kid!”

“No, of course not. A young woman of... parts.”

“I can handle this! Even if it turns into a firefight, I’m going to get you out of there alive and well.”

“I am endlessly reassured, my dear.”

Again Rally felt an edge of panic, hoping he wouldn’t back out of the arrangement at the last minute. Especially after the way she had been biting her tongue all evening to keep from retorting sharply to some of Brown’s remarks, she wanted to be sure she got a reward for her trouble! “Aren’t you happy with the way things have gone so far? Is there something bothering you about the way I’m handling it?”

“Not in the least. As a matter of fact, I have a proposition in mind...”

“... Oh?”

“But I believe I will leave that for later. Time enough, huh?”

Manichetti pulled up to the front of the Mandarin Oriental, and a doorman came out to open the Bugatti’s passenger door. They disembarked and Manichetti drove off, this time without instructions from Brown. Apparently Brown didn’t expect to need his services any time soon. Rally raised a brow.

The doorman ushered them into the lobby and handed them over to the bellman, who in turn left them in the care of the elevator operator. Brown tipped every single one of them, keeping Rally’s arm in his the entire time.

As the elevator doors opened on their floor, Brown guided her out, and before the doors closed again, turned to her and bent to kiss her.

Recoiling without thinking, she turned her face. His lips touched only her cheek. Quickly recovering, she pressed her mouth to his for the elevator operator’s benefit. The moment they were unobserved, she wriggled out of Brown’s embrace and stood back. The kiss had been quick and closed-mouthed, but she felt as if she had just received an electric shock; her skin tingled unpleasantly and her face twitched.

Brown drew a forefinger along his lower lip and smiled slightly, mouth a little open and his brows arching. “The play’s the thing, is it not? And you have missed your vocation, my dear.”

“I don’t think so.” Rally headed down the hall towards the room. She unlocked the door and threw it open, then clicked on the light. “Come on in, I guess. How long do you have to stay, anyway?”

“That is entirely up to you, Rally.” She groaned inwardly and walked in, throwing her purse on a chair. The carpet was so thick that her high heels dug in, so she kicked off her shoes. “Please make yourself comfortable,” said Brown, who removed his suit jacket and hung it carefully in the closet. His tie followed, and he unbuttoned his shirt at the neck. “Won’t you take off your jacket? Here, I’ll hang it up for you.”

“No, thanks. I’m chilly,” muttered Rally. She pulled the heavy satin draperies aside and looked out at the street. Was Bean out there waiting for her call, or was he still cruising the city?

“I’ll turn down the air conditioning,” said Brown, doing so. He sauntered over to where she stood and looked over her shoulder. “Unfortunately, there isn’t much of a view.” Closing the curtains, he brushed her hair with one arm.

Rally’s stomach began to feel a little queasy. She ducked under his descending elbow, grabbed her purse, retreated to the bathroom and closed the door. The bathroom was nearly as large by itself as the motel room in Buttonkettle. Marble, glass, rows of little lights and more thick carpet.

She thought about taking a shower, or a bath in the big oval jacuzzi tub, but it occurred to her that Brown was exactly the sort of man to come join her, invited or not. She contented herself with scrubbing her face with a washcloth and removing all her makeup. Her hair had been done at the hotel salon, so she wet her comb and worked out some of the mousse, then de-pouffed it with her palms. While the water ran on full, she took out her cell phone and called Bean.

“How’s it goin’ in there?”

“You follow us here?”

“Yep. Saw the light turn on just now.”

“It’s OK so far. Where are you parked?”

“Service alley out back.”

“Good. Stay there.”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, babe.”

Now if she’d only had an old bathrobe, or those new sweats... and then she could turn on the TV to a loud game show or something and... pick her nose in front of him? Maybe that would discourage him, but then again it might not. Although it was obvious Brown hoped to interest her in some physical activity, she had the feeling that he intended rather more than that. What he meant by a proposition wasn’t sex, she felt sure.

After making faces at herself in the mirror and thinking the question over for a little while, she returned to the sitting room.

Brown was nowhere to be seen. Rally did a double-take and felt paradoxically let down for a moment — all that mussing up for nothing? But she heard a sound from the bedroom and realized where he was.

Through the open door, she saw him side-reclining on the king-size bed, left elbow on the spread and the hand supporting his head. His gaze wasn't at her; it was directed at the wall opposite — where hung a huge mirror.

After a moment, he sat up and took something out of his pants pocket, turning away from her line of sight to put a small flat item on the nightstand. He then produced a little glass vial and tapped some of the white powder it contained out onto the object on the nightstand; she realized that it was a small mirror that probably served him for more than one purpose.

As she watched, he went through the whole ritual — chopping the powder and raking it into two lines, using a short straw to snort it, one line into each nostril. He was a little clumsy with the left hand, but seemed to manage very well for all that. Rolling her eyes, she sat on the cushy sofa and picked up the evening paper that lay on the coffee table.

After a few minutes, Brown wandered in with his sleeves rolled up over tanned forearms and sat opposite her. When he crossed his legs, she saw that he had taken off his shoes and socks and somehow managed to disarrange his hair. He looked just as casual as she did — perhaps more so, since she still wore the Versace dress and her jacket. Rally pursed her lips to suppress her expression. Did he really have her number yet? Eyes bright and face a little flushed, Brown caught her eye and smiled.

“Would you care for a little after-dinner pick-me-up?”

“You mean some of that coke? No, thanks,” Rally said crisply. Brown seemed to suppress annoyance.

Again she had the little shock of recognition she had experienced at their meeting in Golden Gate Park earlier that day. Something under the friendliness, the well-made exterior, the just-too-taut jawline and smooth forehead. It was like seeing the skull beneath the skin, just for a moment. And again the impression faded almost at once.

The light of the reading lamp next to his seat glowed on his hair as he picked up the sports section and opened it. Rally applied herself to the paper, then realized she was attentively reading the classifieds. Putting the section down, she reached

for another and glanced up. Brown had the paper on his lap, his elbow on the arm of the chair, and his eyes on her.

“I believe I’m ready to make that proposition now, my dear.”

“Oh, really.”

“You seem to enjoy being treated as you deserve. I believe you could come to be a very sophisticated world citizen. Your conformity with my wishes impresses me. How would you like to live in surroundings like this from now on?”

“What do you mean?” She had a very good idea of what he meant.

“In Europe — Paris, Monte Carlo, Zurich. All expenses paid.”

“As your bodyguard, you mean.”

Brown made a gratified smile. “As my bodyguard.”

“Look, I don’t think you — ”

“A generous salary, an expense account... travel, wardrobe, lodging... and weapons.” Brown made a gesture like a pistol with his left hand. “Any guns, any facilities you need for the job, or just to gratify your whims.”

“Yeah? What kind of job description are we talking about? Watch your back, day and night? Or *be* on my back, day and night?”

Brown laughed with a ringing sound, apparently genuinely amused. “How refreshingly blunt you are! I’ve so rarely encountered such a sense of humor in a woman so attractive.”

“Wow, I’m flattered. But I’m going to have to decline that offer, Brown — Sly. I’m an all-American girl. And it occurs to me that the first task I would have as your head of security would be to do something about Bean.”

“For which you are uniquely qualified, as I’ve said.”

“No thanks. Bean may be all you think he is, but he’s my partner — for now. I’m not the kind to go back on a partnership, once established.”

“I understand perfectly. An established partnership... of one day’s standing.” He looked up at her, his turquoise eyes veiling under his lashes. The expression in them had changed. Rally got up, slowly, and moved behind the sofa. Brown stood and let the paper fall to the carpet. “Rally...”

“What?” said Rally, backing up and looking for her shoes.

“I’ve spent the whole evening,” said Brown, “wishing that this weren’t a charade. With such a lovely companion, the time has flown by.” He moved closer. Expensive smell, underlain with male musk. He looked so handsome in the soft light that she couldn’t stop looking at him, but his beauty had a creepy quality, like a cast from someone else’s face. “May I express my admiration?”

“That depends.”

He smiled, a faintly corrupt sensuality crawling over his face. The hair on the back of her neck and her arms began to prickle. “Young as you are, you have the assurance of a woman far older. That’s a very attractive combination.”

“To some people, maybe.” Rally stuck her feet into her shoes.

“Oh, you underestimate your appeal, my dear. I’m sure most people would agree with me, though perhaps few men have experienced the ultimate delights of youth. You must have acquired that mature air years ago. I wish I’d made your acquaintance sooner. But I’ll settle for this, tonight.”

He moved even closer, and in stepping back Rally bumped the wall next to the door. She fumbled for the handle, but Brown caught her hand in his left.

“Don’t be in such a hurry.” His tone was cajoling, but with a hard vein in the softness. He brought her hand to his lips. “Having clapped up a... partnership... with that man out of immediate necessity, you may regret passing up a far more enticing alternative. Seize the moment.”

“I don’t want to seize anything, Brown.” She plucked her hand out of his.

He leaned back, seeming to give her room, and when she relaxed and turned to the door, he put his right hand on the wall and curled his left arm round her waist. Her forward momentum carried her into his arms and before she knew it he was kissing her on the throat, his full lips soft on her skin.

Rally froze, Brown’s hot breath stroking her neck and shoulder. He put a great deal of meaning into that devouring caress, something like a vampire’s bite. It told her about a darker kind of lust than she’d ever encountered before, something that made her squirm at the very hint.

She wriggled and pushed against his chest. Maimed hand or not, Brown wasn’t a weakling. His strength wasn’t half Bean’s, but she couldn’t immediately break his grip.

“Let me go,” she said, trying to keep her voice even and reasonable. “I’m going to leave, and I am asking you — ”

He kissed her collarbone and the pit of her throat, then enveloped the swell of her voicebox in his lips, pressing down hard enough to render her mute. His mouth moved to the underside of her chin, but for a moment she still couldn't speak. Why, when she had been able to get away from Bean in a similar situation, could she not make Brown release her? Because, she realized, Bean had never considered forcing her into sex.

"Let it happen," Brown murmured. "I want you."

"N-not a chance! Let me go!"

"Don't fight. Please," he said in her ear. "Submit and let me take — "

"No!"

"I'm filled with desire just looking at you — I'm burning with it." Brown tilted Rally's face and tried to kiss her mouth, but she turned her head. "Please, relieve my torment. Just once, my lovely little bounty hunter!"

"I said, NO!" Rally put an elbow into Brown's stomach and wrenched out of his embrace, but he slammed his back against the door, his face red and sweating. He looked far less casual and friendly now.

"You'll screw Bandit, and you tell ME no? I have to wonder about your sanity!"

"I have NOT screwed him! And even if I had — "

"If you don't want to fuck, let me come in your mouth." He fumbled with the fly of his trousers. "Damn, I'm so stiff it almost hurts. This won't take long." He unzipped and reached inside his silk briefs, grabbed her right hand, yanked it towards him and tried to put it on his rigid penis. "Kneel."

"I think you've forgotten something," said Rally.

"Huh?"

Shh-KLICK! The wrist slide shot forward. In her hand sat her cocked .25, her finger on the trigger. The muzzle hovered two inches from his testicles. "There's only so much I'll do for money, Brown, or even for justice. Get your filthy hands off me."

He let go and stepped aside, his hands held out and his face twitching in anger. "And if this destroys our agreement?"

"Well, that'll be just too damn bad." Rally tilted the .25's muzzle slightly upwards. "You and Bean will have to work it out all on your own."

Brown's red face went white. "I'm sorry. Rally, I apologize." He zipped hastily. "I wasn't... I didn't mean to do that. It was... a crazy impulse. You're very beautiful, you know."

"And very young, but I get the impression you'd like it if I was even younger — much younger. That's beyond disgusting."

That corrupt sensuality slithered across his features again. "I'm a man of rarefied tastes."

"Wow, that's a fancy way to put it. *Pervert!*"

"That's uncalled for, Rally. I was overcome. I couldn't control myself."

"Bullshit. You're the most controlled man I've ever met. You knew damn well what you were doing and you didn't give a shit if I didn't want it. Even Bean had the basic courtesy to *ask!* And you're *married?*"

"The best of us... see our plans go awry once in a while. I swear to you, I didn't come up here with the intention —"

"Of forcing yourself on me?"

"Good God, no —"

"Oh, of course. You thought I'd spread my legs automatically, considering you must have spent about seven grand on this evening. Guess what. I'm not that *fucking cheap.*" She picked up her purse and opened the door. "If you've got anything to say about that agreement, call me. I'm not doing any more face-to-face negotiation without Bean Bandit standing right behind me."

"But... he's not part of this any more, is he?" Brown looked panicky. "You didn't tell him about meeting me tonight. Don't leave — I'll go. You can stay here without him. I've arranged it so you don't need his help. Just pay him off afterwards —"

"I had him listen to the call, Brown. He followed us all over town tonight at my suggestion. He's waiting outside the hotel now to pick me up. The next time you try to break up a partnership, I'd suggest you rely a little less on your *personal charm.*" She slammed the door behind her and took the stairs down.

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"Shit," said Brown, low and furious. "God damned fucking *idiot...*" He got into the Bugatti, slammed its passenger door and began to bite the manicured fingernails on his left hand.

“Boss?” said Manichetti, peering in the rear-view mirror.

“That would be me,” said Brown. “I just blew it. She’s not interested. I’m going to have to go with Plan B.” Out of an inner pocket of his suit coat, he yanked an airline folder and threw it petulantly into the front. Two airline tickets fluttered out and came to rest in the seat well.

“Kinda gathered that,” said Manichetti. “Considerin’ that you came outta there fifteen minutes after you went in.” He pulled away from the curb.

“I don’t believe it. I left it a hint in the air... fertilized her imagination and let it work on her all night. Then when payoff time came, she went cold as ice on me. I got a little too... imperative.”

“Uh-oh.”

“I barely touched her and she’s in a rage. Even pulled a gun on me.”

“She gonna back out?”

“Jesus.” Brown let his head fall backwards. “I’d better pull out all the stops to make sure she doesn’t. What a woman. God in heaven, I never thought I’d envy Bean Bandit.”

“I thought you said he wasn’t screwing her.” Manichetti looked down at the tickets and frowned.

“What other explanation could there be? She must be his lover, and of recent vintage if she’s still blind to anyone but him. But turning ME down? It makes no sense. What the hell has he got that I haven’t got? I beat him all hollow; brains, looks, manners, AND wallet!”

“Well...”

Brown looked up sharply, teeth engaged with nail. “You have some word of advice?”

“Aah, well, take it for whatever it’s worth, boss. She wasn’t gonna go for it no matter what.”

“What? You think she’s a dyke?” Brown’s expression lightened. “Now that makes me feel a little better — ”

“Not exactly.” Manichetti made a quick grimace. “She ain’t the kind that lets a man get under her skin, and she ain’t interested in fancy trimmings. I was watchin’ her in the mirror all night. Makin’ polite, but that’s all. She wasn’t one damn bit impressed.”

Brown's face began to grow red. "Not impressed? Not *impressed*? When I take a woman out on the town, I know DAMN WELL HOW TO FUCKING IMPRESS HER!"

"Have it your way, boss," said Manichetti. "You don't pay me for my blindin' insight."

"You son of a bitch. I didn't ransom you from the Gambinos to be told I don't know how to deal with women, or anyone else, for that matter. What's the last time YOU got laid, lard-ass? Too much fucking lasagne on your gut and too much time sitting behind a wheel! You fucking DRIVERS! The next time you feel inspired to give me advice, you ugly wop, stuff it up your ass!"

Manichetti lowered his eyes, avoiding the rear-view mirror, but out of Brown's sight his face stiffened, his lips clamping tight. His tension quickly relieved itself with an ironic smile, but his mouth still twitched. "Consider it stuffed, boss," he said after a moment. "Home?"

"Home. I'm going to give my wife a call on the secure line... maybe I can get through this time. My little Tiffany will be asleep, but she'll wake up to talk to her daddy."

"Kid loves her daddy," said Manichetti, looking out at the night.

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Rally opened the car door and slipped quickly inside the little Honda, but when the dome light went on Bean looked at her, his sharp eyes taking in her expensive outfit and disordered hairdo, and lingered on her face until the door shut and the light turned off again. She knew her expression would give him some idea of what had happened. His brows went down.

"What the hell did he do to you?"

"Not a thing." She took off her jacket.

"OK, what the hell did he try to do?"

"Just about what you'd expect." Bean unlatched his door with a thunderous expression, starting to roll out, and Rally stopped him with a hand on his arm. "For once I'd almost tell you to go ahead and break his skull. But you'll never find him anyway, and we only have to put up with him for another twenty-four hours. I'm perfectly all right. Let it be."

Bean let out a long breath of disgust and settled back in his seat. "OK, fine."

“Let’s just go home.”

“Home sweet home,” snorted Bean. He pulled the car out into traffic and turned on the heater.

“I’m going to have to apologize to you,” said Rally.

“What for?”

“For wondering why he rubs you the wrong way. I get the picture now.”

“Yeah?” said Bean with an ironic smile.

It wasn’t a long drive back to the Sandpiper Inn, and soon they entered their hotel room, Bean jamming the sticky door shut behind them. The worn carpet and dingy upholstery seemed honestly shabby, at least; here she felt perfectly comfortable in a psychic sense. Rally smiled at her fleeting regret for thick plush carpet and silk wallpaper — at that price, nothing was cheap.

She kicked off her shoes. “I’m going to take a shower, because I can still smell his cologne.” She wiped her neck where Brown had kissed her. “I feel slimed.”

Bean gave her an *I-told-you-so* grin, and she stuck her tongue out at him and went into the bathroom with her new sweats. Stripping the Versace dress off, she dropped it in a heap on the floor and stepped on it. “Hey, Bean?” she called.

“What?”

“Lend me your knife.”

“Which one?”

“Doesn’t matter as long as it’s sharp.” She heard him chuckle, then the switchblade skidded under the door. She caught it up and pressed the button. The blade shot out of the handle, long and razor-thin. “Perfect. I’m going to flush three grand down the toilet.”

“Huh?”

“Brown paid for the dress.”

“Heh heh heh...”

Rally held the hem down with one foot and ripped the dress lengthwise with one satisfying stroke and not a moment’s regret. In a minute she had it in ribbons. Thinking better of clogging the toilet with Spandex, she picked the strips up in

handfuls and dumped them into the garbage. “Good riddance to bad rubbish,” she muttered.

“Rally?” called Bean through the door. “What’s up with him now? He gonna go through with it?”

“I don’t CARE — ” She bethought herself of Bean’s money again. “Yeah, I think so. I mean, what alternative has he got?”

“With me around? Not much.”

“Thanks for the reminder, Bean...” She stepped into the shower and let the water rinse away every lingering trace of Brown.

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“This is she?” said 426, examining a photograph taken from a security camera tape. “What is her name, Huang?”

“I do not know yet,” replied the young man who had handed it to him. “I am attempting to find out, but none of our databases has a match. They are only complete for the West Coast and Asia. But I am certain that it is the same woman, from the description.” The two men spoke Cantonese as they sorted through a pile of photographs showing a dark-red Bugatti and its occupants. Several views of Rally and Brown in the lobby of the Mandarin Oriental sat on top, and one shot was a close-up of the two awkwardly kissing outside the elevator.

“Incredible,” said 426. “It is obvious that even his simplest action is fraught with deceit.” He threw down the photograph in disgust. “Where is her car at present?”

“It is still in Buttonkettle. The location readout has shifted only slightly since the transmitter was installed, so I assume that the mechanic has merely put it in another part of the garage.”

“That may have been a wasted effort,” said 426, “but I wish to be informed at once if there is any change.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And her young friend is still in Buttonkettle as well?”

“Yes, sir. I talked with her for a few moments, and she intends to stay until the repairs are complete.”

“Is she this woman’s lover?”

“The girl? I don’t know, sir, but I had considered the possibility.”

426 briefly covered his mouth with his hand, his eyes warming as if the thought of smiling had entered his head. He seemed about to speak, but a knock sounded on the door of the office, and Huang rose to open it. Two Chinese men in flashy suits haltingly entered and bowed deeply. "I am told that you have made a spectacle of yourselves," said 426. "Again."

"Sir," replied one, who had a gold tooth and a bad perm, "we had no intention — "

"I will not listen to your ridiculous excuses, you son of a diseased whore. You are demoted two ranks. 81, come here." The other man, his head hanging, stepped forward and bowed so low he nearly hit his nose on his kneecaps. His right hand hung bandaged in a sling, and he wore a gold stud in one ear. 426 went on in English. "I am ashamed to be related to you, 81. What have you to say?"

"Nothing, honored uncle."

"That is as it should be. Dog!" 426 struck the man across the face. "Are you possessed with demons? I am informed that you drew a gun on the street in a petty dispute. Is this the behavior of a Triad?"

"No, sir."

426 struck him again. "Your father's spirit is groaning in shame, 81. It charges me to beat this foolishness out of you!" The man took the blows silently, only grunting when 426 chopped him in the stomach. The gold-toothed man watched with blinking grimaces while Huang tapped on a computer. "I am finished," said 426 at length, rubbing the edge of his hand. "Be grateful that I still think you worth the trouble."

"Sir," said 81, bowed, and turned to go. He saw one of the discarded photographs and let out a small sound of anger.

"What was that?" snapped 426.

"Sir, I ask permission to speak."

"What is it?"

"That's the bitch." He pointed at the photograph.

"Excuse me?"

"The one with the big dude. The one that shot — " He indicated his shoulder. "The bitch with the gun."

"She is the one who arrested you?"

“Yes, honored uncle.”

“In company with a man of large stature?”

“Yes, sir; big as shit, with a weird red car. They started talking to Sam.”

426 almost smiled. “Did she happen to introduce herself?”

::: END OF VOLUME TWO :::

CONTINUED IN VOLUME THREE